Haacaaluu Hundeessaa: The Icon Who Transformed the Narrative of the Oromo National Struggle in Ethiopia



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Abstract

From Ali Birra's cultural renaissance to Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's revolutionary music, Oromo artists have done more than entertain a people. They have preserved historical memory, challenged political marginalization, awakened collective consciousness, and helped transform the Oromo struggle from a movement of resistance into a demand for political leadership and ownership of the state. ***This article examines the role of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa in redefining the Oromo people's place in the ongoing effort to reconcile the Oromo national struggle with Ethiopian national unity***. For generations, Oromo artistic expression served as a vital sanctuary against cultural erasure and political exclusion. Pioneers like the legendary Dr. Ali Birra laid the foundational stones of this tradition, elevating *Afaan Oromoo* in modern music and instilling cultural pride during eras when Oromo identity faced severe state suppression. Building upon that cultural foundation, Haacaaluu Hundeessaa (1986–2020) transformed Oromo music from a medium of cultural preservation into an unstoppable engine of mass political mobilization and ideological renewal. Born in Ambo; a historic epicenter of Oromo resistance and imprisoned at age 17 for five years without charge, Haacaaluu emerged from incarceration not merely as a singer, but as an ethnographer of Oromo history and an architect of a new political consciousness. His enduring legacy lies in guiding a generation from the pain of exclusion (*Maalan Jira?*) to the

confidence of collective assertion (*Jirra!*), and ultimately laying the ideological groundwork for "***Progressive Patriotism"***: the conviction that the Oromo must move from resisting the Ethiopian state at its margins to claiming rightful ownership (*Arat kiiloof situ Aaane*!), historical recognition (*Gootota Adawaa*), and democratic leadership at its center (*Biyya Ijaarra!*). During the last two years of his life after 2018, Haacaaluu championed a narrative of transformation. Through assertive songs such as *'Oromoon biyya hin diigu, biyya ijaara malee,'* he reclaimed the Oromo contribution to Ethiopian nation-building, called for the revival of a failing state, and fostered reconciliation among neighboring communities alienated by the former regime.

Introduction

The history of the Oromo national struggle cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the extraordinary contributions of Oromo artists, musicians, poets, and cultural intellectuals. While political organizations mobilized the people through ideological platforms, organized resistance, and political movements, Oromo artists mobilized the collective imagination through music, poetry, storytelling, and cultural expression. They gave emotional expression to historical grievances, preserved a cultural identity that had long faced marginalization, challenged imposed historical narratives, and inspired generations to recognize their collective political agency and historical significance.

For decades, Oromo resistance took different forms, including armed struggle, student movements, intellectual activism, cultural preservation, and political mobilization. Among these instruments of resistance, however, music possessed a unique and far-reaching power. It transcended geographical, educational, generational, and social boundaries, reaching rural communities, urban populations, intellectuals, young people, and the diaspora alike. A song could communicate what political speeches could not, preserve memories that official historical narratives overlooked, and inspire courage where political repression had cultivated fear. In this way, Oromo music became more than an expression of cultural identity; it evolved into a powerful instrument of political awakening, collective mobilization, and national consciousness (Lenjiso Horro, 2013, Kullani Jalata, 2015).

Any serious discussion of modern Oromo music and its contribution to the national struggle must begin with the legendary Ali Mohammed Birra, whose pioneering artistic career elevated Afaan Oromoo and helped establish a foundation for subsequent generations of Oromo musicians. Building on this cultural legacy, later generations increasingly transformed music from an expression of cultural celebration and romantic storytelling into a platform for confronting historical injustice, political exclusion, land dispossession, identity, freedom, and self-determination. Artists and cultural figures such as Eebbisaa Addunyaa, Usmaayyoo Muusaa, Marame Harqa, Umar Suleiman, Elfinesh Qanno, Zerihun Wedajo, Qamer Yusuf, Tadele Gamechu, Caalaa Bultume, Galana Garomsa, Keekiyyaa Badhaadhaa, Yosef Getahun, Saliya Sami, Sona Takele, and many others contributed to this evolving artistic and political tradition in

different ways. I sincerely apologize to the many talented Oromo artists whose names I have not mentioned here; their contributions to this collective journey deserve equal recognition.

1.1 The spectrum of Oromo artists spans from resistance to democratization

Across every chapter of the five historical and political phases of the Oromo struggle Jawar Muhammed called it ***Boqonnaalee Qabsoo*****,** Oromo artists have served as the cultural heartbeat and voice of the people. During Boqonnaa Dadammaqiinsaa (**Revival**), pioneers like Dr. Ali Birra, Ayyuub Abubakar, and Halloo Daawwee defied censorship to awaken national consciousness and pride through public recordings in *Afaan Oromoo*. As the movement entered Boqonnaa Ijaaramiinsaa (**Reconstruction**), cultural troupes such as the *Afran Qallo* band and *Guddattuu Wallaggaa*, featuring icons like Ilfinash Qannoo and Shantam Shubissa, transformed music and theater into unifying civic institutions. In Boqonnaa Biyyoomsuu (**State Formation**), voices like Ebbisa Addunyaa, Usmayyoo Muussaa, and visual artist Lemma Guya helped solidify Oromia's distinct cultural, linguistic, and territorial identity following the adoption of the *Qubee* script. When the struggle surged into Boqonnaa Aangoo Qabachuu (**Ascendancy to Power**), Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's electrifying *geerarsaa* anthems became the rallying slogan of the *Qeerroo* generation, propelling mass mobilization and political change. Today, in Boqonnaa Sirna Dimokraatawaa Ijaaruu (**Democratization**), many contemporary artists continue to use their platforms to advocate for justice, unity, and an inclusive democratic future. Obviously, the diverse political spectrum of Oromo artists, which is beyond the scope of this article, still exists. Briefly, it includes those who are determined to realize independent Oromia to those who are pro-Ethiopianist, ethno-nationalist, and federalist, as well as those more focused on Oromo national pride as a human being craving for democracy. All of this reflects the pre-existing and co-existing wider ideological spectrum of Oromo nationalism and Ethiopian nationalism, whose differences have been bridged much better by Oromo artists than by Oromo politicians (Sultan Neja, 2026).

I want to acknowledge that in Early foundation of Ethiopia, not only the Oromo people, but also Oromo artists, were struggled to identify themselves as Ethiopian because successive Ethiopian leaders suppressed the rights of the Oromo nation for decades. Ali Birra serves as a prime example of this nuance: he sang for Oromia, declaring, 'Biyyi too Oromiyaa, Biyya Biyya Caaltuu' ('My country is Oromia, a country above all countries'), while also singing for Ethiopia, declaring, 'Itoophiyaan biyya teenya, fiiwdalizimiin diina keenya' ('Ethiopia is our country; feudalism is our enemy'). This illustrates how he was willing to embrace Ethiopia as his country, while recognizing that it was ruled by imperialists, and calling for that regime and system to change. Therefore, the greatness of Oromo artist, their greater achievement lies in how they helped transform collective consciousness, from a condition shaped by historical marginalization and resistance into an increasingly confident assertion of cultural dignity, historical ownership, political agency, and the capacity to exercise leadership. This transformation represents an

important bridge between cultural resistance and political participation, and between the struggle for recognition and the aspiration to shape the institutions governing both Oromia and Ethiopia.

This historical journey is particularly evident in the transition from the pioneering cultural influence of Ali Birra to the revolutionary artistic and political influence of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa. While Ali Birra helped establish the cultural foundations upon which modern Oromo music flourished, Haacaaluu carried that tradition into a new era of mass political mobilization. His music galvanized the Qeerroo generation, gave a powerful voice to the Oromo resistance movement, and increasingly articulated a vision that extended beyond resistance toward political ownership, historical recognition, and participation in governing the Ethiopian state. Understanding this transformation is essential to appreciating Haacaaluu's contribution to redefining the Oromo people's place in Ethiopian nationalism and the emergence of the political outlook that can be understood through the concept of *Progressive Patriotism*.

2. Haacaaluu Hundeessaa: The central figure who transformed the narrative of Oromo struggle



Born in Ambo in 1986, Haacaaluu experienced political repression from an early age. His imprisonment as a teenager profoundly shaped his intellectual and artistic development. During his five years in prison, he read, composed songs, and developed the political and cultural consciousness that would later define his musical career.

The three photographs above represent three distinct phases of Haacaaluu's political and artistic journey: first, resistance and the awakening of national consciousness, as he transformed land dispossession and historical marginalization into issues of collective political concern; second, the assertion of Oromo political ownership and leadership, calling for a transition from resistance to participation in the center of Ethiopian state power; and finally, the reconciliation of Oromo national aspirations with Ethiopian national unity, through the reclamation and recognition of the Oromo people's historical contributions to Ethiopia's nation-building and sovereignty (Phipps A, 2022).

2.1 Galvanizing the Oromo Resistance: *Maalan Jira?* and *Waa'ee Keenya*

Long before he challenged the seat of executive power, Haacaaluu unified the Oromo youth (*Qeerroo* and *Qarree*) by giving visceral, poetic voice to centuries of structural marginalization. Following his 2009 debut album *Sanyii Mootii* (*Race of the King*), composed largely behind prison walls, his 2013 track *"Waa'ee Keenya"* (*Our Struggle*) diagnosed internal divisions and historical repetition, warning against "sabotaging and waylaying each other" while state oppression persisted. Through songs such as *Sanyii Mootii* and *Waa'ee Keenya*, he engaged with Oromo historical consciousness, dignity, collective identity, and the experiences of previous generations.

His music encouraged listeners to reconsider how Oromo history had been represented and whose experiences had been included in the national historical narrative. He helped challenge the idea that the Oromo were merely a population to be governed, assimilated, or politically managed. Instead, his songs communicated that the Oromo were a historical people with their own political institutions, cultural traditions, intellectual heritage, and contributions to the wider region. This was a critical ideological transformation: from being represented as subjects of history to recognizing themselves as makers of history.

That awakening exploded into a nationwide revolt in June 2015 with the release of *"Maalan Jira?"* (*What Existence Is Mine?*). Released in direct response to the Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan, which threatened to evict hundreds of thousands of Oromo farmers around the capital, the song turned localized land dispossession into an existential national question. Singing *"My beloved Galoo Gullaallee was Tufaa's / The mountains were Abbichuu's / The Galaan surrounded Finfinnee... They tore us apart,"* Haacaaluu transformed grief into defiance. By weaving together Oromo clans and geographies across Wallagga, Arsi, Borana, Hararghe, and Shawa, his music dissolved regional divides and became the undisputed soundtrack of the 2014–2018 Oromo protests (Phipps A, 2022, Jawar Mohammed 2024).

2.2 The Turning Point: *"Araat Kiiloof Situ Aane"* at Millennium Hall

While *"Maalan Jira?"* articulated the trauma of exclusion, Haacaaluu's historic **December 9, 2017** performance at Addis Ababa's Millennium Hall marked a decisive ideological pivot from street protest to claiming state power. Organized as a televised benefit concert for over a million Oromos forcibly displaced from the Somali Regional State, the event was attended by top-ranking officials of the ruling EPRDF regime. Stepping onto the stage just kilometers from the national palace, Haacaaluu subverted a state-monitored space into a prophetic political reckoning.

Delivered as an electrifying live *geerarsa* (traditional Oromo heroic chant entitled *Maasaan gamaa lafa hin baatuu*), his performance introduced two radical shifts in Oromo political thought:

- **Self-Reliance Over External Salvation:** Rejecting passive reliance on exiled opposition groups or foreign intervention, Haacaaluu sang: *"Alaa eegaa hin abjootiin / Hin abjootiin abjuu hin taane"* (*"Do not dream while waiting for help from outside / Do not dream an impossible dream"*), placing the responsibility for emancipation directly on the domestic generation.

- **Geographic Proximity as Political Right:** In Ethiopian political geography, **Arat Kilo** home to the Menelik Palace and the Prime Minister's office represents the pinnacle of state sovereignty. By chanting *"Kaafadhu farda keen loli... Araat Kiilootti situ aane"* (*"Saddle your horse and fight... You are the one closest to Arat Kilo"*), Haacaaluu exposed the absurdity of the Oromo living in and around *Finfinnee* while remaining barred from governing it.

Just four months later, in April 2018, the ruling coalition fractured under the weight of the protests and PM Abiy Ahmed was sworn in at Arat Kilo as Ethiopia's first Oromo Prime Minister, cementing the Millennium Hall concert as the symbolic catalyst of that transition. The political changes of 2018, including the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister, emerged from a complex combination of popular mobilization, internal political developments, and changes within the governing coalition. Oromo protests were a major factor in that transformation, although no single artist or movement alone explains the outcome. Occupying Arat Kilo is not simply about having an Oromo prime minister; it is about ensuring that Oromos have an equal and consequential role in determining how Ethiopia is governed. This created a transformative narrative of Oromo political empowerment along with multinational leaders of the country. Following Haacaaluu several Oromo artist song in Millenium during the reception of Jawar Mohammed as well as Irrechaa Event consolidated his narrative of transition from resistance to governance. Haacaaluu made exclusive transformational optimists providing request for PM Abiy Amhed duting his recept of Prezant Esayas Afeworki by saying(*dhiigni qeerroo inni jeige biyya jigde kaasekaa, Ethiopia fi Ertiraa walitti araarse kaa!*), indicating the transition to better governance is the way forward. and other events, he re-enforced the narrative that Oromo national struggle can evolve from a politics primarily defined by resistance into a politics defined by democratic leadership and national transformation.

2.3 Reclaiming Ethiopian History and the Victory of Adwa

Crucially, Haacaaluu's vision of political ownership was anchored in historical reclamation. For decades, dominant state historiography framed Ethiopia's foundational triumph, the **1896 Battle of Adwa** against Italian colonialism, almost exclusively as the achievement of Emperor Menelik II and northern elites, erasing the decisive sacrifices of Oromo cavalry and military commanders such as Ras Gobana Dacche, Fitawrari Habte Giyorgis Dinagde, and Balcha Safo (Raymond Jonas, 2011). Following his foot-steps many Oromo Artists including the legend Caalaa Bultumee and Saliya Sami released a song advocating that Oromos were key player in the Adwa victory to defend Ethiopia.

Haacaaluu dismantled this historical gatekeeping both on and off stage. Appearing at Adwa Victory Day celebrations dressed in traditional Oromo warrior regalia (*gaachana* shield, *eeboo* spear, and lion-mane headdress) and addressing the era in songs like *"Alamaayyoo,"* he asserted that Oromo blood, horsemanship, and leadership were central to defending Ethiopia's sovereignty against European imperialism. By reclaiming Adwa as an Oromo victory as much as an Ethiopian

one, he demonstrated that the Oromo were never mere subjects or outsiders to the Ethiopian state, they were among its principal defenders and legitimate stakeholders. This was a big turning points for Oromo politics because Haacaaluu completely reversed the previous narrative that Adwa victory was often celebrated only by those who claim to be Ethiopian nationalists. Although the ultimate cause of his political assassination is yet to be confirmed by independent investigation, Jawar Mohammed in his interview on Caffaa Hooffalee suspected that one of the potential reason he was targeted in 2020 was his potential in changing the narrative of Oromo struggle transforming from resistance to redefining Ethiopian nationalism.

2.4 Conceptualizing "Progressive Patriotism": From *Jirra!* to *Biyya Ijaarra!*

Through his music and public commentary, Haacaaluu's artistic legacy points directly toward **Progressive Patriotism**, a framework that reconciles proud Oromo nationalism with equal, democratic ownership of Ethiopia. Describing Ethiopia in 2018 as *"a beautiful mosaic of 80 flowers,"* Haacaaluu rejected both forced assimilation into a monolithic identity and permanent retreat to the political periphery.

In this progression, his October 2017 anthem *"Jirra!"* (*We Are Here!*) answered the existential despair of *"Maalan Jira?"* with a roar of survival and ascendancy. Yet, as the tragic aftermath of Haacaaluu's assassination on June 29, 2020, and the ongoing conflicts and unfulfilled demands for justice in Oromia, demonstrated, merely placing an Oromo individual inside Arat Kilo does not automatically secure freedom, constitutional rights, or democratic governance.

The true fulfillment of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's legacy requires advancing to the next stage of his political trajectory: ***Oromoon Biyya Ijaarra***, ***Bulchuu Dandeenya!*** (*We Can Govern!*). Haacaaluu's stance in this aspect foresaw the concept of **'Progressive Patriotism'** introduced by Jawar Mohammed in 2024, which insists that Oromos need not abandon their identity or right to self-determination in order to lead Ethiopia; rather, having proven their capacity to resist tyranny and defend the nation's sovereignty, they bear the historic responsibility to build accountable institutions, uphold human rights, and transform the Ethiopian state into a truly democratic home for all its peoples.

2.5 The impact of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa in defining the future narrative of the Oromo struggle in Ethiopia

Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's greatest contribution to the Oromo national struggle was his ability to transform its political narrative from one defined primarily by resistance, historical suffering, and exclusion into one of collective confidence, historical ownership, and the aspiration to govern. Through songs such as *Maalan Jira?* and *Jirra!*, he awakened a generation to the importance of defending its identity, reclaiming its ancestral land, and asserting its rightful place in Ethiopian political life. His historic performance of *Araat Kiiloof Situ Aanee* at Millennium Hall in December

2017 went a step further, challenging the perception of the Oromo as outsiders to the Ethiopian state and affirming their right to occupy its highest political institutions. By invoking the Oromo contribution to the Battle of Adwa and Ethiopia's sovereignty, he also challenged historical narratives that overlooked the Oromo's role in building and defending the country. In doing so, Haacaaluu helped advance a transformative political vision: the Oromo should no longer see themselves merely as a people resisting an Ethiopian state that excludes them, but also as one of its principal historical contributors, legitimate stakeholders, and rightful leaders. This is the deeper significance of his legacy and the foundation of **Progressive Patriotism**: reconciling a strong Oromo national identity with equal ownership of, and responsibility for, building a democratic and inclusive Ethiopia. The quite telling singles like "Utubaa" by Tadele Gemechu "Galaanoo" released by Artist Yosef Getahun and Kemer Yusuf, Artist Sona Takele "Yaa Warra Boolee" and Afrika as well as Galaanaa Gaaromsa Duraanu, Galmee Seenaa, and many other clips released by Oromo Artist continued to keep grounding the narrative of Oromos owning the Ethiopia.

The impact of Haacaaluu's vision extended beyond music and cultural expression. By reshaping the political imagination of a generation, he helped inspire other Oromo artists to advance a narrative of reclaiming Ethiopia as a shared national project while affirming the Oromo people's leadership in determining the future of both Oromia and Ethiopia. Doe to his effort the newly made **Adwa Victory Memorial Museum (also commonly referred to as the Adwa 00KM Museum)** included many Oromo hero who paid ultimate price during the battle of Adwa. His influence also strengthened the confidence of Oromo nationalist political organizations to move beyond resistance politics, pursue democratic transformation, demand equitable participation in state power, and take an active role in determining Ethiopia's political destiny. His impact extended to Oromo activist and artists to stand for Ethiopian national unity by supporting Ethiopian national defense to keep the unity of Ethiopia as state regardless of political difference with the leading government. Ultimately, one of the most profound yet often overlooked dimensions of Haacaaluu's legacy is that he helped redefine not only how the Oromo understood their struggle, but also how they could envision their future: *from resisting exclusion to claiming ownership, from demanding recognition to exercising leadership, and from challenging the state to participating in its democratic transformation (Sultan Neja 2026).*

Conclusion

In conclusion, Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's greatest legacy was his ability to transform the Oromo struggle from resistance against exclusion into a vision of political ownership, leadership, and democratic transformation in Ethiopia. Through his music and political messages, he inspired a generation to recognize that the Oromo are not outsiders to Ethiopia but historical contributors and legitimate stakeholders in shaping its future. His legacy calls upon the Oromo to preserve their national identity and hard-won achievements while taking greater responsibility for building a democratic, inclusive, and prosperous Ethiopia. From Maalan Jira? to Jirra!, and ultimately to Biyya Ijaarra, Bulchuu Dandeenya!, Haacaaluu's message represents the spirit of Progressive

Patriotism: moving from resistance to ownership, from exclusion to leadership, and from demanding change to taking responsibility for transforming the state.

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