

Liberation Movements in Urban Environments: A Case Study of the Oromo Liberation Movement in Finfinnee and the Twin Cities

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Abstract: Oromos are the one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa and the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, yet are quite unknown across the world, primarily due to the decades of genocide, ethnocide, and academic repression experienced as a result of Ethiopian colonization. This paper analyzes the formation and shaping of the Oromo liberation movement in urban environments, namely Finfinnee – the capital city of the Oromia region of Ethiopia – and within the local region of the Twin Cities, Minnesota.

Academic papers, books, newspaper articles, political statements and manifestos, and interviews were utilized to develop the research question and acted as essential primary information throughout this paper. As the daughter of two Oromo immigrants, oral history passed down from my parents was also used to guide this research. The analysis of this information shows that while the movement has become stronger and more united in Finfinnee in recent years, deliberate tactics against the movement by the current Ethiopian government have fractured and weakened the movement throughout the diaspora, including the Twin Cities.

Introduction

This paper analyzes liberation movements in urban environments on a local and global level. I look specifically at the Oromo liberation movement in the city of Finfinnee, Oromia and within the local region of the Twin Cities, Minnesota. Oromos are the one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa and the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, yet are quite unknown across the world, primarily due to the decades of genocide, ethnocide, and academic repression

experienced because of Ethiopian colonization. Academic scholars that have fled from Oromia have begun to contribute knowledge in regards to Oromo studies in more recent years, but there is an incredible amount of information that is left to be recorded.

The primary question addressed in this research is “How have urban environments and communities shaped and been shaped by liberation movements in the Twin Cities and Oromia?” The overall intent of this paper is to

analyze the relationships between urban Oromo communities and their struggle for self-determination. The paper will look at how different urban landscapes have shaped the way the Oromo liberation movement operates. Finfinnee and the Twin Cities were selected as a case study due to the deep connection and influence that exists between the two regions as Finfinnee – and Oromia as a whole – is the homeland for the large number of Oromos living in the Twin Cities.

Methods

The paper discusses the history of Oromia and the Oromo diaspora before delving into the material related to the liberation movement in Finfinnee and the Twin Cities. Appendix A has a glossary of important terms.

The oral history passed down from my parents was used to develop the research question and background information as well as guide my research for this paper. My parents were both born and raised in Dire Dawa, a charter city in Eastern Ethiopia. While the city is technically a part of the Eastern Hararghe region of Oromia, it was not included in the government's establishment of the Oromia regional state. My father and mother spent several years of their adolescence displaced in the Horn of Africa before immigrating to the United States in 1992 and 1998, respectively. Additionally, an interview was conducted with Professor Bula Wayessa at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Wayessa is from western Oromia, born into a farmer family, and has contributed knowledge regarding anthropology and social identity to the field of Oromo Studies. Dr. Wayessa's interview was conducted in-person on the University of Minnesota campus. This interview

provided undocumented insight into the Oromo Liberation Movement in Finfinnee and the Twin Cities as well as the overall history of Oromo struggle. The information collected from the interview helped to form the overall discussion of the similarities and differences of the movement in a local and global context.

From there, I used academic papers and political statements and manifestos to better understand the development of the Oromo Liberation Movement and how that traveled with Oromo immigrants to Minnesota in the late 1980s to 2000s. Political statements and manifestos were specifically used for their information regarding the history and missions of political organizations in Oromia.

Background

Brief history of Oromia

The Oromo people are a Cushitic ethnic group indigenous to the Oromia region of Ethiopia (also written as Oromiyaa), though the current borders of the regional state do not include all the Oromos' native lands, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. They speak Oromo, also known as Afaan Oromo or Oromiffa in their native language.

Over 40 million Oromos live in Ethiopia, making them the largest ethnic group in the country. Recent population estimates place them as the third-largest ethnic group in the entirety of Africa, though the fourth-largest group – the Yoruba people – present similar population estimates (Leykun & Gari, 2020).

Before colonization of Oromo land, the Oromo way of life was influenced by their indigenous religious and governance systems. The Oromo indigenous religion is known as Waaqeffanna

and is based on the belief in Waaqa. Waaqa is the Oromo concept of God or the Creator (Ta'a, 2012). The followers of this religion – known as Waaqeffataa – place a great importance on the natural world, as Waaqa is seen as a part of the land and nature as well as a spiritual being. This belief relates to the way Oromos interact with agriculture – developing sustainable land use practices – as well as plants and animals. The Oromo had, and still have, a unique appreciation and relationship to their land and their treatment of it (Ta'a, 2012).

Finfinnee is the indigenous name of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia and Oromia. Finfinnee is an Oromo word meaning “fountain of hot mineral water.” As a means of resistance against Ethiopian colonization of their lands and culture, many Oromos continue to call the city Finfinnee and that is how it will be referenced in this paper.

Before colonization, the Oromo were governed by an indigenous democratic governance system known as the gadaa system. While this system still exists, it has been fractured and suppressed under Ethiopian colonization. The gadaa system is one of the most prominent elements of Oromo culture as it regulates political, economic, social and religious activities of their community. It is also used for conflict resolution and enforcement of moral conduct while truly emphasizing the importance of community. Within the gadaa system, the Oromo population is divided into 11 age categories based on an eight-year cycle, as seen in Table 1. Every age category – also known as a luba – is raised among their peers and is assisted by another luba, as seen in Figure 3. Each age category plays a specific role in Oromo communities to

educate younger generations about Oromo history, military, and governance as they develop (Hinew, 2012).

The previously mentioned connection to the natural world through religious beliefs is also reflected in the gadaa system. In this system, meetings and elections are held under the odaa tree (sycamore tree). Subsequently, the odaa tree has become one of the most politicized and recognizable elements of Oromo culture and resistance. It is featured on the regional state flag (Figure 4) as well as the flag of the Oromo Liberation Front/Army (Figure 5).

The history of Oromia is extensive, dating back to the mid-19th century and numerous ruling powers. Refer to Tables 2, 3, and 4 for a brief timeline of prominent events and their impacts within Oromia's history.

Oromo Diaspora and the Making of Little Oromia in Minnesota

After Ethiopia and Kenya, Minnesota has the largest population of Oromos. 2016 survey data from the Oromo Cultural Institute and Wilder Research places the Oromo population in Minnesota at 40,000 (Tigue, 2016). The first two Oromos to settle in the Twin Cities arrived in 1972 seeking higher education opportunities that they could not access in Ethiopia. At the time, Haile Selassie – the Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974 – had placed limits on the number of Oromos that could be educated and how much education they could receive (Fufa, 2021). Three more Oromo refugees arrived in Minnesota a couple of years later after the 1974 military coup d'etat that ousted Haile Selassie and brought the violent Derg regime into power in Ethiopia. The

continued violence under the Derg regime pushed thousands of Oromo refugees out of their homes and into neighboring countries – including Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan – which eventually became a major international humanitarian crisis (Fufa, 2021).

In 1981, the Oromo Relief Association of North America (ORANA) was founded in the Twin Cities to help Oromos who were living in refugee camps in the countries neighboring Ethiopia (Fufa, 2021). ORANA assisted with finding American families that could sponsor these refugees and help them resettle in Minnesota. They received help from resettlement agencies like Lutheran Social Service, Lutheran World Relief, and the International Institute of Minnesota to transfer these individuals. This allowed for the first wave of Oromo refugees to make their way to Minnesota, and by the mid-80s, over 200 Oromos were living in the Twin Cities. The second wave of refugees arrived in Minnesota after the collapse of the Derg regime in 1991. Members and supporters of the Oromo Liberation Front faced severe political persecution under the newly established Tigrayan control, including imprisonment and mass killings (Fufa, 2021). This wave of refugees fled to neighboring countries – namely Kenya – and eventually found their way to the Twin Cities. By the mid-90s, the Oromo population in the Twin Cities had grown exponentially. It is estimated that tens of thousands ended up in the Twin Cities during this time, though there is no census to provide an accurate representation of the Oromo population (Fufa, 2021). The significant population of Oromos in the Twin Cities and the involvement of Oromos in their

communities has earned the Twin Cities the nickname of “Little Oromia” (Fufa, 2021).

Liberation Movement in Finfinnee and Twin Cities

Development of Oromo Political Organizations

There are a number of political parties related to the Oromo Liberation Movement. Some of the most prominent – and the most relevant to this paper – include the OLF, OLA, OPDO/ODP, and the recently formed Prosperity Party.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) – known as Adda Bilisummaa Oromoo (ABO) in Oromo – was established as an Oromo political party in 1973 (Oromo Liberation Front, n.d.). The OLF was established after the banning, imprisonments, and executions of former Oromo organizations. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) – known as Waraana Bilisummaa Oromoo (WBO) in Oromo – was established as OLF’s military wing in 1974 (Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army, n.d.). The most prominent of these former Oromo resistance organizations was the Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association (MTSHA), also known as Waldaa Wal-gargaarsa Maccaa fi Tuulamaa in Oromo (Jalata, 2002). Formed in 1963 by educated Oromos in Finfinnee, the organization sought to solve educational, economic, and social issues in Oromo communities. The Ethiopian government – under the rule of Haile Selassie – believed that the MTSHA had a subversive political agenda, so after four years, the MTSHA was banned. Some of the organization’s leaders were executed by the government while others were imprisoned. As a result, the movement had to go underground where remaining leaders and supporters –

including students, farmers, professionals, and soldiers – operated for years (Jalata, 2002). This underground movement continued to grow, and after the establishment of the Derg regime, leaders came together to form the OLF and the OLA (Jalata, 2002).

The OLF and OLA were established as a response to decades of violence, oppression, and marginalization of Oromos by the Ethiopian government. They seek to lead the national liberation struggle against the Ethiopian government with the goal of “freedom, democracy, and self-rule for the Oromo people and her neighbors” (Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army, n.d.). Throughout the organizations’ histories, many leaders and supporters – as well as suspected supporters – have been killed or imprisoned by the Ethiopian government, yet they remain steadfast in their fight for liberation.

OLF was declared a terrorist organization by Ethiopia in 2011 (Ethiopia: The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), 2015). After Abiy Ahmed came into power in 2018, the organization was removed from the list and exiled leaders of the OLF returned to the country to sign a peace deal with the government. Later that year, the OLF began to disarm the OLA as part of the peace deal, known as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) (Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army, n.d.). However, OLA members found that the Ethiopian government was not holding up their end of the deal regarding reintegration of its combatants. Instead, combatants looking to reintegrate into society were harshly mistreated by Ethiopian forces. Continued incrimination and incitement

against the OLA became commonplace. As a result, the OLF and OLA severed relations. The OLF maintained a peaceful strategy towards liberation as a legally registered political party while OLA continued operating as an armed opposition to the Ethiopian government. OLA established a High Command to direct the organization and adopted a new name, OLF-OLA, to “signify the unification of the political and military leadership in the same body” (Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army, n.d.). Kumsa Diriba – most known by his nom de guerre Jaal Marroo – is the current commander-in-chief of the OLF-OLA and has quickly become a prominent face in the liberation movement. In 2021, OLF-OLA was once again declared a terrorist organization.

The Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) – also known as Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) or Paartii Demokraatawaa Oromoo in Oromo – was created by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) during the Transitional Government of 1991 to 1995 (refer to Table 3). The EPRDF was a political coalition between four parties: the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (Allo, 2019). The coalition was meant to represent the dominant ethnic groups within the country.

Oromos saw the establishment of the OPDO as a means of undermining Oromo political power. In most cases, early members of the OPDO were forced or manipulated into membership as the government threatened to

take away their jobs and/or property if they did not join (Hassen, 2007). For instance, four Federal Supreme Court judges and 24 Oromia Supreme Court and regional high court judges – all of whom were Oromo – lost their jobs after refusing to join in 1996 (Hassen, 2007). This brought about the effective destruction of several independent Oromo organizations as well as a great loss to genuine political representation for Oromos.

When Abiy Ahmed came into power, he became the leader of the EPRDF and subsequently the OPDO/ODP as well. In 2019, seeking to rebuild the EPRDF's fractured image in the public eye, Abiy decided to dissolve the four parties within the coalition to create “a single pan-Ethiopian national party” (Allo, 2019). The OPDO, ANDM, and SEPDM – as well as other ethnic-based parties – voted to join this new party, known as the Prosperity Party. This new party aims to represent, and speak for, all Ethiopians, which has undoubtedly created even more tension between the ethnic groups in the country as this new political power has undermined the power and voices of individual ethnic-based organizations.

Urban Growth in Finfinnee and Addis Ababa Master Plan

Finfinnee – the “historical heartland of Oromia” – is deeply symbolic and a politically and culturally relevant place for Oromos (Sirna, 2020). Settlement in the Oromo village of Finfinnee began in 1886. The village quickly grew, becoming the capital of Menelik's kingdom Shewa and being renamed Addis Ababa (meaning “new flower”) (Fathollahzadeh, 2020). In 1938, Finfinnee reported a population of 90,000. By 1965, the population grew by over

520% to 560,000. By 1971, the population was reported to be over 640,000 (Benti, 2017). In the decades since, the city has grown exponentially and has become known as a highly developed, urbanized area. The city is currently the capital city of Ethiopia as well as the Oromia Regional State and Special Oromia Zone Surrounding Finfinnee (OSZSF), as seen in Figure 6.

The development of Finfinnee by Ethiopia saw the introduction of Oromo de-urbanization through urban policies and structures (Benti, 2007). Oromos did not have the power to participate in this urban growth and no longer had control over their native lands. Before 1991, many Oromos were forcefully displaced through evictions and exiles to other Oromo regions. Those who remained in Finfinnee had to succumb to the pressure of assimilating to Amharic culture. Under Tigrayan rule after 1991, false promises were made to Oromos regarding the recognition and respect of Oromo interests in Finfinnee as a means of gaining Oromo support for the Tigrayan government.

Once they gained control, TPLF – with the help of OPDO – went back on the promises that they made to Oromos living in Finfinnee. Oromos continued to face mass evictions and disenfranchisement to make way for a new demographic – primarily Amharas – in this new urban landscape (Benti, 2007). In 2014, the Ethiopian government proposed the Addis Ababa Master Plan, which was a turning point in the Oromo Liberation Movement, especially in Finfinnee. The Master Plan sought to deepen this disenfranchisement and displacement of Oromos and Oromo culture, forcefully dispossessing them of their ancestral homelands

and enacting ethnocide against Oromos living in or around Finfinnee (Benti, 2007). This plan proposed the annexation of “1.1 million hectares of land from the Special Oromia Zone Surrounding Finfinnee” (Abate, 2019). This expansion would bring the city to twenty times its current size. It would also result in the division of the Oromia Regional State into two regions (East and West), turning settlements on Oromo land into physical barriers between the Oromo population. The plan would take over land within a 40-100 km radius from the city, primarily impacting Oromos living in the Special Oromia Zone Surrounding Finfinnee. This would lead to mass evictions of almost 1.5 million Oromos, mainly Oromo farmers (Benti, 2007). These farmers already experienced poor socioeconomic conditions due to the expanding urbanization of Finfinnee and the instability of agricultural systems in the country (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023).

In April 2014, the Ethiopian government made their first attempts in implementing the Addis Ababa Master Plan. However, what they didn't expect was the firm resistance from Oromos across the country to this deliberate act of violence against their people and culture. This resistance lasted for 2 years and became known as the 2014-2016 Oromo Protests (Abate, 2019). These protests progressed in three phases. The first phase lasted five months (April to August 2014) and was primarily based on college campuses in the cities of Ambo, Jimma, and Haramaya. Students engaged in peaceful protests and demonstrations demanding a renunciation of the Addis Ababa Master Plan due to its effects on Oromo peasants in and around the city. Unfortunately, these efforts quickly turned

dangerous and even fatal as the Ethiopian government employed violent methods in response to these student protests. Armed forces were deployed on college campuses and small towns, where they beat and shot at protestors. Dozens were killed and many more were injured and/or detained. Students who were detained were charged as terrorists (Abate, 2019).

These violent actions against peaceful protestors triggered the second phase of the Oromo Protests. This phase lasted 2 months (November 2015 to January 2016) and started in Ginchi, a small town about 60 km west of Finfinnee (Abate, 2019). The demands of this wave of protests were larger in scale, instead demanding the inclusion of “Oromo as a federal language, exercise of the Oromo ownership of Finfinnee, internal autonomy and genuine representation of the Oromo in the federal state according to its population and resource contribution to the federation, and the release of political prisoners” (Abate, 2019). These protests centered on all parts of Oromia, including the three large cities of Finfinnee, Dire Dawa, and Harar. They also included a large variety of lifestyles, expanding beyond the large cities and towns into rural areas, granting Oromo farmers the opportunity to lead and organize. Qeerroo and Qarree – the Oromo youth movement – played a significant role in this phase of protests, bringing together rural and urban protests as well as on-the-ground work and online work through social media (Murrey, 2023). Oromos from more isolated parts of the country, as well as those living in different countries, were able to stay involved with the protests (Abate, 2019).

Once again, the second phase of protests were met with violence from the Ethiopian government. Hundreds of Oromos were killed while another thousand were injured and tens of thousands were detained (Abate, 2019). Despite this, Oromos refused to back down and continued protesting across the country. Eventually, on January 13, 2016, the Ethiopian government renounced the Addis Ababa Master Plan in response to the Oromo Protests (Abate, 2019). Unfortunately for the government, this renunciation of the Master Plan came too late, and the protests began to enter their third phase.

The third phase of the 2014-2016 Oromo Protests started on January 14, 2016, one day after the government's renunciation of the Master Plan (Abate, 2019). This phase lasted for nine months and triggered a declaration of a state of emergency by the Ethiopian parliament in October 2016. The protests resumed in February 2018. Forms of civil disobedience were employed during this time, including market embargoes and road blockages. The Ethiopian government continued to use violent tactics – including brute force by security personnel – in response to this civil disobedience, resulting in the injuries and deaths of hundreds as well as the detainment of thousands (Abate, 2019).

There are three features that set this third phase of the Oromo Protests apart from the others: size, internationalization, and the Irreechaa massacre in 2016 (Abate, 2019). Demonstrations erupted in hundreds of towns and cities all over the country. More than 250 towns – including the major cities of Finfinnee, Dire Dawa, and Harar – participated in one of the largest Oromo protests in the country's contemporary history on August 26, 2016. On

this day, over 1,200 protestors were imprisoned. They were taken to a federal military detention center where they were physically abused and forced to undergo military training. The protests also became internationalized, especially after Feyisa Lelisa crossed his hands over his head – a symbol of the Oromo protests – as he won the silver medal as a marathon runner during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. The display of this symbol on such a large international platform not only emboldened Oromos across the diaspora to continue their efforts, but it also pushed the Oromo struggle under the Ethiopian government into international media (Abate, 2019). Feyisa's story and the story of the Oromo protests were published in the New York Times, CNN, Washington Post, BBC, and ESPN, among others.

However, the most prominent turning point in the Oromos' fight for bilisummaa – for liberation – was the Irreechaa massacre in October 2016 (Abate, 2019). Irreechaa (meaning “green and fresh grass”) is a biannual celebration, known as an Oromo thanksgiving festival. It originated in the Waaqeffanna religion to thank Waaqa for the blessings received throughout the last year (What is Irreechaa?, 2022). However, as time passed, the celebration has become a prominent aspect of Oromo culture, transcending the boundaries of religion. Irreechaa Malkaa/Birraa (“river” / “spring”) is celebrated in the spring season near a river while Irreechaa Tuulluu/Bonaa (“mountain” / “autumn”) is celebrated on a mountain in the autumn, dry season (What is Irreechaa?, 2022). Irreechaa Birraa is the most popular of the two and, in Oromia, it is celebrated at Hora Arsadi (“Lake Horsadi”) in Bishoftu, located about 50km southeast from

Finfinnee and a sacred site for Waaqeffataa. The annual Irreechaa festival in Hora Arsadi is visited by millions of Oromos (What is Irreechaa?, 2022).

On October 2, 2016, over 4 million Oromos – clad in their cultural attire – were in Hora Arsadi for the Irreechaa festival (Abate, 2019). Unfortunately, the joyous occasion quickly turned deadly as the Ethiopian security forces fired teargas and bullets into the crowd of millions. Leading up to the 2016 festival, Oromos across the country were already expressing their anxieties as tensions in Oromia were high. Additionally, the security forces that were expected to be present – in even larger numbers than previous years – only added to their nervousness as these were the same brutal forces that killed or detained many Oromos during previous protests.

On the day of the event, tensions were high, and anger and restlessness were brewing among the crowd of Oromos due to the heightened presence of security forces and OPDO. Government officials from OPDO eventually went on stage to speak to the audience. Many Oromos saw this as the government trying to co-opt this cultural festival for political means, and they were emboldened to take back the microphone and started engaging the crowd in anti-government chants. Security officials quickly responded with brutal tactics, leading to this unprecedented massacre on one of the most sacred days and geographical sites to the Oromos. Those who died were either trampled in the stampede triggered by this sudden act of violence, suffocated in a deep trench that confused attendees fell into, drowned in the lake while trying to flee (Figure

7), or shot to death by the security forces (Abate, 2019).

In the aftermath, the Ethiopian government failed to properly investigate or take accountability for this disastrous day. Though the government has strongly resisted international investigations, Human Rights Watch released a lengthy report on this tragedy one year after the festival, which detailed the events prior to and during this Irreechaa festival. Among other things, the HRW report pointed out that there is no accurate death toll; the Ethiopian government reported a death toll of 55 people while Oromo organizations have measured the death toll to be almost 700 (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The report found that health workers employed in the hospital where the victims were taken admitted that they had “been instructed by Ethiopian security forces or government cadres not to speak to journalists or anyone about the numbers of people killed or how people had been killed” (Human Rights Watch, 2017). HRW also documents that the government stated weapons were not shot at the crowd, despite video footage documenting the sounds of rifle shots and the firing of tear gas. Instead, they stated that the stampede was the only cause of these deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In response to this massacre, protests erupted all over the country. Fueled by anger, government institutions and state industries were targeted by mobs, and buildings were looted and destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The Irreechaa massacre truly shifted the course and attitude of the movement, igniting a fire underneath many Oromos and emboldening them beyond peaceful tactics. One

man that participated in the mobs after the massacre stated: “We knew that the only way we would gain support from the world is if we spoke about issues in a peaceful manner. But every time we would go out, we face bullets, we face arrests and beatings. After a while, we started to debate the limits of our nonviolent action. When you are bereft of options and the government and the world ignores your concerns, it is inevitable there would be violence. The fire was already there, it was smoldering, killing us at Irreechaa poured fuel on the fire. The violence started sooner than any of us thought” (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

A few days after the massacre, a state of emergency was declared by Hailemariam Desalegn, the prime minister of Ethiopia from 2012 to 2018. This declaration transitioned the country into a military state (Abate, 2019). The state of emergency was initially declared for 6 months but was extended until August 2017. Despite the government’s efforts, this did not weaken the movement, as the Oromo protests continued in early February 2018, resulting in a halt of the Master Plan and the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn (Abate, 2019).

The Rise and Fall of Abiy Ahmed

After the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn in 2018, Abiy Ahmed rose as the new leader of Ethiopia. He was appointed as the Prime Minister in early April. Identifying as Oromo from his paternal side, Abiy’s establishment in power was met with great support from Oromos – especially with his promises of peace – as they would finally be heard and represented in the political realm.

Within his first year of leadership, Abiy took on several unprecedented changes and governmental actions (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2019). Some of these changes and actions include lifting the state of emergency, freeing thousands of political prisoners, removing certain opposition groups from the country’s list of terrorist organizations, as well as firing corrupt military and civil leaders. However, his most prominent accomplishment during his first year was the development of a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The agreement brought an end to an almost two-decade long border conflict between the two countries following the Ethiopia-Eritrea War in 1998-2000. This action earned Abiy Ahmed the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2019).

Unfortunately, after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Abiy and his government quickly went downhill, and the country left behind its days of stability (Mackintosh, 2021). His push for the establishment of the Prosperity Party worried and angered many, who stated that this new party would deny autonomy to ethnically defined states. Oromos began to revive their fight for liberation and the right to self-rule which unfortunately led to the revival of the government’s violent tactics against Oromos. No sooner had he assumed position and promised Oromos a greater existence on their lands did Abiy resort to the same authoritarian practices from previous regimes, including the imprisonment of journalists and opposition leaders, violence against protestors, and the postponement of elections (Mackintosh, 2021). Oromos no longer felt safe under Abiy’s rule, despite his rise to power as one of their own. Many Oromos have turned their backs on

him, stating that while he aligned himself with Oromos to gain political power, someone who can enact such violence against their own cannot be Oromo (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023).

However, the true tipping point for Oromos against the current government was the murder of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa – one of the most prominent Oromo musicians and activists – in 2020, pushing Oromos into the throes of revolution and the fight for liberation from Ethiopian control. On the night of June 29th, Haacaaluu was shot and killed in his car in the capital city of Finfinnee (Gardner, 2020). Oromos were already angry with the way they were being treated under Abiy's rule with anti-government protests being planned even before this fateful night. Losing such an important figure – an artist whose music became the soundtrack to the liberation movement – only pushed that anger further. Protests broke out across the region, as seen in Figure 8, which were met with strong, violent opposition from government forces. The internet was shut down across the country, leaving people completely cut off from news about violence, killings, and government movements. Hundreds were killed – including Haacaaluu's uncle – and thousands were detained and imprisoned. Among those who were imprisoned include Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba – another prominent Oromo leader – as well as many other protest and political leaders. Others went into hiding to escape detainment by the government (Gardner, 2020).

Protests – known as the #OromoProtests – quickly spread beyond Oromia as Haacaaluu's death was felt heavily across the diaspora.

Demonstrations occurred throughout the United States and Canada as well as across the world, including cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and Perth. Oromos were mourning and angry, turning to various tactics to shed light on this loss and violence going on in their homelands. For example, in Aurora, Colorado, Oromo protestors blocked traffic while marching down a major street (CBS News, 2020). In London, protestors destroyed a statue of Haile Selassie (BBC News, 2020). Eyes turned to Ethiopia and Abiy as they were called out internationally for their incitement of violence and treatment of ethnic groups in the country, including Oromos and Tigrayans. As quickly as he had earned his Nobel Peace Prize, calls from across the globe poured in for the revocation of this honor.

Development of Oromo Resistance in the Twin Cities

It is important to note that Oromo resistance to the Ethiopian government in the Twin Cities has existed for some time, though it didn't always look like it does today. Much of the earlier work done by the Oromo community involved raising awareness to the Oromo struggle. Oromo activism has been present in Minnesota since the 1980s through the Union of Oromo in North America, an organization that followed and documented events from Oromia (Fufa, 2021). This organization had a strong chapter in Minnesota. Eventually, the work done through the Union led to the development of the Oromo Studies Association – an academic group committed to Oromo scholarship – in 1990.

In 1982, Oromos were able to bring their culture to the International Institute's Festival of

Nations, a recently defunct large multicultural, four-day event in Saint Paul. ORANA, with the help of the Oromo community as well as non-Oromos through the Oromo Support Committee, set up a cultural exhibit booth, served Oromo food, and performed a cultural show (Fufa, 2021). Unlike many other nationalities represented at the festival who were there to raise funds, Oromos used the festival to spread awareness and publicize their existence as Oromos. This goal proved to be successful as the Twin Cities Black Journalists (TCBJ) reached out to the group in hopes of bringing the members to a KSTP-TV show. ORANA agreed and appeared on the NAACP Forum – a show on KSTP – three times (Fufa, 2021).

Eventually, Oromo activism began to branch out to become more politically focused. Oromos approached elected officials in hopes of educating them about the violence committed against Oromos by the Ethiopian government and push them to support US policies regarding Ethiopia's role in human suffering in the country. Their tactics were successful as a number of elected officials – including Senators Rudy Boschwitz, David Durenberger, Al Franken, Amy Klobuchar, and Tina Smith – spoke about the struggles experienced by Oromos in the State Senate (Fufa, 2021). One of the most prominent results of this politicization was the hearing on H.R. 128 held by Keith Ellison. This resolution from the US House would call on the Ethiopian government to respect human rights. The hearing in 2016 brought in over a thousand Oromos from the Twin Cities and across the U.S. and Canada, which contributed to the eventual resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn (Fufa, 2021).

Use of Social Media in Mobilization Across the Diaspora

Social media has played a significant role in spreading and strengthening the liberation movement across the diaspora. In recent years, it has been heavily utilized by the youth in the diaspora to organize and mobilize people for the movement as well as bring awareness to the struggle of Oromos under the Ethiopian government. The social media platforms used in the movement include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Hassan, 2022). Though TikTok has become quite popular, it hasn't been utilized in a significant way in regard to the Oromo liberation movement, though there are many videos on the platform of Oromo dances and fashion.

Before the Oromo youth of today were old enough to develop a presence on social media, a prominent force in online spaces was the Oromia Media Network (OMN). OMN was launched in 2013 by Jawar Mohammed, one of the most recognizable faces and voices among Oromos (Atoma, 2020). Jawar was exiled in the United States in 2013 due to his opposition to the Ethiopian government. While in exile, he conducted an interview with Al-Jazeera and stated that "I am an Oromo first" in response to his treatment by the Ethiopian government (Atoma, 2020). This statement began the development of a political campaign with the goal of rallying the diaspora to join the fight towards liberation. He then launched OMN – based in Minneapolis with offices around the world – as a satellite television station, creating social media accounts for the station as well. The station and social media accounts allowed

for the diaspora to stay up to date on news in Oromia and Ethiopia.

OMN and Jawar Mohammed's work mobilized the youth as they grew up, turning them into a powerful voice. These Oromo youth were known as Qeerroo/Qarree ("young unmarried man or woman"), a "term first popularized in the 1990s by the then banned Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) rebel group in its bid to attract recruits" (Atoma, 2020). As the youth grew older, their presence in online spaces also grew. In recent years, youth across the globe have connected with each other and the liberation movement in ways that were not possible before, creating a global network of Qeerroo/Qarree. One significant example of this is the establishment of Oromo Youth Associations (OYAs) which has social media accounts in cities and states around the world. These cities and states include Oslo, Melbourne, Adelaide, Manchester, Edmonton, and many American locations like Minnesota, the Bay Area, Seattle, and Washington D.C. (Hassan, 2022). The goal of these OYAs is not only to organize and bring awareness to the Oromo fight for liberation, but also to develop and nurture Oromo communities in the diaspora, especially since they are disconnected from their homeland.

Looking specifically at the Twin Cities, there are Oromo youth organizations on social media. The Oromo Youth Association of Minnesota has a strong presence in the community as well as Qeerroo MN, the Minnesota branch of the Qeerroo/Qarree movement. While OYA is well-connected in the community and plays an important role in connecting Oromos in Minnesota, Qeerroo MN

is more heavily focused on mobilization for the liberation movement. In 2020, after the murder of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa and the subsequent imprisonment of prominent Oromo politicians (including Jawar Mohammed), Qeerroo MN mobilized the community to protest and eventually stage a sit-in at the Ethiopian Consulate in Saint Paul to demand the release of all Oromo political prisoners. They have planned and helped to connect the community to numerous protests and demonstrations, including #OromoProtests rally in Washington D.C. in 2020. They have also fundraised to support the freedom fighters in OLA (Qeerroo MN, n.d.).

There has also been a recent presence of Oromo-related podcasts available on streaming platforms, namely the Free Oromia podcast. This podcast is dedicated to amplifying Oromo voices and the struggle for bilisummaa. They have discussed a wide range of topics related to Oromia and have interviewed important figures in the liberation movement including Abbaa Caalaa Lataa, a founding member of the Oromo Liberation Front, and Jaal Dr Baaroo Keno Dheressa, a medical doctor and freedom fighter in the Oromo Liberation Army. This podcast has allowed for the movement to be accessible to all, whenever and wherever (Maroo, Aangoo, & Leelloo, 2020-2023).

Discussion

Though connected by the same struggle for bilisummaa, the Oromo Liberation Movement is manifested differently in Finfinnee versus the Twin Cities. The varying lived experiences have greatly influenced the way Oromos have connected to the movement. Oromos back home in Finfinnee and Oromia

continuously live under the oppressive and violent rule of the Ethiopian government. However, Oromos in Minnesota are fortunate enough to be physically removed from the atrocities committed to their people back home. This does not automatically mean that their participation and belief in the movement and bilisummaa is weaker than those who live in Oromia. There is, however, a greater presence of disagreement and division between Oromos in the Twin Cities.

Finfinnee is truly the epicenter and place of development of the Oromo liberation movement. The city holds a great deal of significance for Oromos back home, so it is no surprise that many are called to the movement through this city. The fight and belief in bilisummaa are extremely strong in Finfinnee as well as the surrounding towns and rural areas. It is a city plagued by endless tragedy at the hands of the Ethiopian government which – while it has claimed the lives of thousands and led to the imprisonment of thousands more – has only ignited and fueled the fight for liberation and self-determination. Recent years have seen the growth of OLA and the freedom fighters. Highly educated Oromos from around the world have traveled back to Oromia to join the armed forces to strategically fight for the liberation of Oromia through the reclamation of Oromo land (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023). As Jaal Marroo – the current commander-in-chief of the OLA – has stated in regard to the fighters’ progress towards the capital, “all roads lead to Finfinnee” (Free Oromia Podcast, 2021).

Oromos in the Twin Cities are truly the core of the diaspora as the largest population of

Oromos outside of Africa. However, recent years have seen a fracturing and division of the liberation movement in the Twin Cities. There are a large range of Oromo beliefs present in Minnesota. This is partly due to a general lack of agreement and trust within organizations and communities as a result of infiltration into Oromo spaces – both successful and unsuccessful – by Ethiopian government officials and individuals’ affiliations with Ethiopia (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023). Others have been influenced by money, living a comfortable, almost luxurious life in the West at the expense of their own morals and belief in their people. This weakening in the unification of the liberation movement has become apparent for many. One prominent example of this is the inactivity of Oromo youth groups in the time since the 2020 protests. In comparison to the heightened mobilization on social media during the 2020 protests, Oromo youth groups’ social media accounts have posted significantly less content in recent months.

However, one of the greatest influences on the fracturing of this movement comes almost entirely from outside of the Twin Cities. A true indication of how deeply influenced the movement in the Twin Cities is by the movement back home – and vice versa – is the role that Abiy’s politics and time in office in Ethiopia has played on the movement across the diaspora, including the Twin Cities. Abiy grew to prominence and power due to his identity and alignment with the Oromo community, traveling the world and making promises of peace, unity, and equality for Oromos living back home. Once in power, his quick return to the authoritarian practices adopted by previous

regimes — all of which enabled decades of violence and Oromo oppression and cost countless lives — left the Oromo community feeling betrayed and angered.

Abiy's abandonment of his promised political agenda as the prime minister threw the diaspora into a state of confusion. What once was a unified front quickly became disheveled as Oromos found themselves split between their desires for their homeland. While an overwhelming majority turned to the OLF and OLA's freedom fighters in their opposition against Abiy and his government, others continued to stay faithful to the Prosperity Party. Oromos seemed to be pulled in different directions much to the satisfaction of the Ethiopian government. Abiy has been pitting Oromos against each other for years, so this disarray among the diaspora and inability to build a truly united front may be exactly what he had hoped for. In his time as prime minister, he has continuously belittled Oromos – accusing them of not being Oromo and threatening to “take them back 1000 years” if they do not support him – and continued to push the Prosperity Party as the only legitimate political party for Oromos (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023). While this has not worked well for Oromos back home, those who live in the diaspora – including Minnesota – who are removed from truly living under that regime have been swayed. The Twin Cities has always been one of the strongest fronts to the movement outside of Oromia and their influence is undeniable, so Abiy's infiltration into the heart of the movement in this specific diaspora community could very well be a tactical move to successfully suppress the liberation movement back home.

On the flip side, for many Oromos living in Oromia – especially those residing in Finfinnee – it was not difficult to quickly see through Abiy's facade and identify him as a threat to the movement. Many have realized that Ethiopians will never want Oromos to be with them. They have realized that they will not benefit from aligning with the government and instead have turned to the movement as a place of comfort. The movement became more pronounced and quickly grew, especially as the presence of the freedom fighters increased. In fact, Oromos who are not aligned with the movement and instead support Abiy or OPDO are looked down upon and generally not accepted in Oromo spaces (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023). Though the exact number of freedom fighters is not known, it is known that this is the largest armed movement in Oromia's history.

Though the presence and strength of the movement in the Twin Cities has considerably weakened in recent years, Oromos in the cities still provide support to the movement back home. In fact, the largest amount of money donated to the freedom fighters in the OLA is from Minnesota (B. Wayessa, personal communication, November 7, 2023). The survival of the movement is truly dependent on the diaspora, so while they may not be as unified as those back home, they provide an essential service and network to keep the movement strong and alive.

Conclusion

The history of Oromo struggle and the Oromo Liberation Movement are deeply embedded in Ethiopia's history, whether welcome and recognized or not. Under the

influence of the country's numerous leaders, Oromos have continued to suffer under senseless and widespread violence and cultural suppression at the hands of governmental forces. Recent years have seen the rise of the liberation movement across the diaspora as well as armed opposition in and around Finfinnee, especially following the aftermath of the Addis Ababa Master Plan protests and Abiy Ahmed's

disastrous rule. The liberation movement has found its way through the diaspora with the Twin Cities as its hotspot outside of the homeland. While Abiy's rule has hindered the unification and strength of the movement in the Twin Cities and across the diaspora, it is evident that the movement is stronger than ever in Finfinnee.

Gadaa Grade (Luba)	Age	Responsibilities
Dabballee	0-8	No responsibilities; play age
Gaammee Xixiqo (Junior Gaammee)	9-16	Naming ceremony; perform light work; student
Gaammee Gurguddoo (Senior Gamme)	17-24	Perform heavier work; military trainee
Kuusaa	25-32	Military; current Gadaa class nominates future Gadaa leaders among Kuusaa, nominees installed in office but do not take full authority
Raabaa Doorii	33-40	Warrior; preparing for full authority as Gaada; men can marry
Gadaa (Luba)	41-48	Leader; Gaada assume full authority with leadership ceremony; travels across regions, settles disputes, and holds meetings; most important stage
Yuuba I	49-56	Retirement from leadership; adopts advisory role; repositories of law; highly respected
Yuuba II	57-64	Retirement from leadership; adopts advisory role; repositories of law; highly respected

Yuuba III	65-72	Retirement from leadership; adopts advisory role; repositories of law; highly respected
Gadaamojji	73-80	Conducts rites; senior advisor
Jaarsa	>80	Stage of old age; to be cared for; no responsibility

Table 1. Table of gadaa grade (luba) breakdown, including age and responsibilities for each stage. The table was made by the author with assistance from her Oromo father.

Ruling Power	Event	Impact on Oromos
Menelik	Armed raids by Abyssinian empire for slaves, cattle, and land in Oromia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Decades-long conquests of Oromia and subsequent occupation during Menelik’s reign (1865 - 1913) ➤ 1886: Strong resistance from Arsi Oromos; subsequent massacre of 12,000 Anole and mutilated limbs and breasts of thousands in the Arsi region of Oromia ➤ 1870 - 1900: Approximately 5 million Oromos (50% of the Oromo population) died from direct violence during the conquests or the natural calamities that followed
Haile Selassie	Aggressive pursuit of “Amharization” of Oromos, dominance of Amharic culture and Amhara elites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Destruction of Oromo cultural shrines and places of worship ➤ Eradication of Oromo language in all institutions through a ban on the language for 50 years (1941 - 1991) ➤ Amharization infiltrated the educational system, cultural institutions, and government, using these state resources as tools to further diminish Oromos and their culture, history, and way of life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School books produced with revisionist history, painting Oromos as a culture-less, history-less, uncivilized people ○ Oromo language became a measure of illiteracy
Derg	Ethiopia Revolution in 1974 which placed the country under military dictatorship control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Derg established under the promise of a bloodless revolution but subsequently became known as one of the most violent and bloodiest regimes in the region’s history ➤ Oromos were emboldened to regain their lands, culture, and rights under the guise of a bloodless revolution

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Derg developed the land redistribution proclamation of 1975 to prevent an Oromo uprising ➤ 1974: Political awakening was strong among Oromos and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) – as well as its military wing, Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) – was established <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Military power was sent to Oromo provinces on the pretext of fighting OLF guerilla fighters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Burning alive and massacring thousands of unarmed and defenseless Oromo peasants and major Oromo leaders
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Table 2. Brief timeline of the history of Oromia, part 1 (Hassen, 2007) (Bass, 2019).

Ruling Power	Event	Impact on Oromos
Derg	Somali occupation of the Ethiopian town Jijiga after the Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977, Derg blamed their loss on Oromo farmers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Scorched-earth policy was adopted by the regime and thousands were falsely imprisoned and killed, others fled ➤ Amharas were emboldened across the region, resulting in even more Oromo deaths ➤ 1978: thousands of Oromo peasants were murdered in Eastern Oromia; hundreds of thousands ended up in refugee camps in neighboring countries while another 6 million were internally displaced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Those who were internally displaced were relocated by the government into “new villages” that were essentially concentration camps to continue the exploitation of Oromo labor and resources under the control of the regime ➤ Mid-1980s: Resettlement program was established with the goal of bringing 3 million northerners into the South, mainly Oromia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intended to alter the demographics of Oromia and control the movements of Oromo farmers
TGE	Derg overthrown in 1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Development of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) with OLF, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Seen as coalition government with the goal of representing Oromo interests, Amhara interests, and Tigrayan interests ○ Hope for a transition to a democratic government from authoritarian rule

TGE	Creation of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) by the EPRDF, anchored by the TPLF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ OPDO was established as a means of undermining Oromo political power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Saw the effective destruction of independent Oromo organizations and the loss of genuine representation for Oromos as many were forced into joining OPDO by EPRDF ➤ Electoral process was manipulated as the democratic election approached <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Closed over 200 OLF campaign offices, imprisoned, murdered, and tortured hundreds of OLF leaders and supporters, and harassed Oromos ○ Eventually, OLF and other independent Oromo organizations pulled out of the election and the TGE as a whole
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Table 3. Brief timeline of the history of Oromia, part 2 (Hassen, 2007) (Bass, 2019).

Ruling Power	Event	Impact on Oromos
FDRE - Meles	Growing political power of the TPLF in Ethiopia; used the atrocities of the Derg regime to push anti-Amhara dominance alongside former EPRDF leaders while continuing to suppress Oromo political power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 1995: Zenawi gained control of Ethiopia under the newly established Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ TPLF pushed Meles Zenawi – a Tigrayan man born to an Ethiopian father and Eritrean mother – as “the face of the emerging nation” ➤ Under his rule, Oromos continued to face ethnic oppression and violence as they were pushed out of their homes, killed or imprisoned by state powers, exploited for coffee and tea, denied international aid, and had their indigenous lands commercialized for state profit
FDRE - Desalegn	Hailemariam Desalegn becomes prime minister in an acting capacity after Meles Zenawi's death in 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Desalegn's time in office saw the massive growth in the Oromo Liberation Movement that set the stage for the movement's current status and unification
FDRE -	In 2014, the Addis Ababa Master Plan –	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Master Plan would have resulted in mass evictions of over 1 million Oromo farmers and the

Desalegn	a plan to expand Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) by 1.1 million hectares – was planned to be implemented	<p>physical separation of the eastern and western regions of Oromia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 2014-2016: In response to the Master Plan, Oromos began to utilize their identity as a means of resistance and soon, mass protests and the development of a digital resistance front took hold; the movement began to grow ➤ 2016: Hundreds of Oromos massacred at annual Irreecha festival in Bishoftu, 40 km southeast of Finfinnee
FDRE - Ahmed	Oromo protests pushed Hailemariam Desalegn to resign in 2018; Abiy Ahmed is elected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Abiy Ahmed comes into power with the assistance of Oromo organizations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Many Oromos saw this as a turning point in their fight for liberation and things in the country were peaceful for a brief period of time
FDRE - Ahmed	Abiy Ahmed wins Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts in resolving the border conflict with Eritrea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Things in the country quickly became unstable once again ➤ Violence against Oromos grew in frequency and size and many no longer felt safe under Abiy's rule
FDRE - Ahmed	Murder of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa – one of the most prominent Oromo musicians and activists – in 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The 2020 murder of Haacaaluu Hundeessaa became the tipping point against the current government, pushing Oromos into the throes of revolution and the fight for liberation from Ethiopian control ➤ Ignited the #OromoProtests movement on a global scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grew through social media and organizing efforts from youth organizations across the world

Table 4. Brief timeline of the history of Oromia, part 3 (Hassen, 2007) (Bass, 2019).

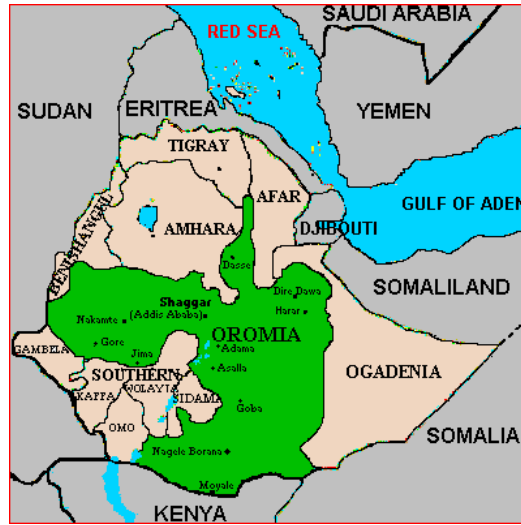


Figure 1. Map of Oromia (green) before Abyssinian conquests (Oromo Liberation Front, n.d.).

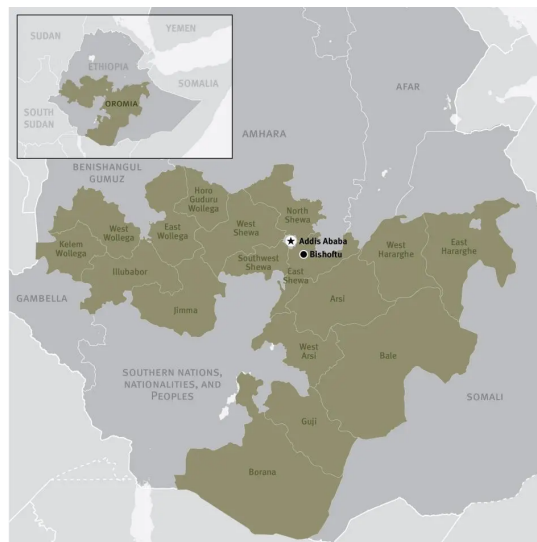


Figure 2. Current map of Oromia regional state (green) in Ethiopia (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

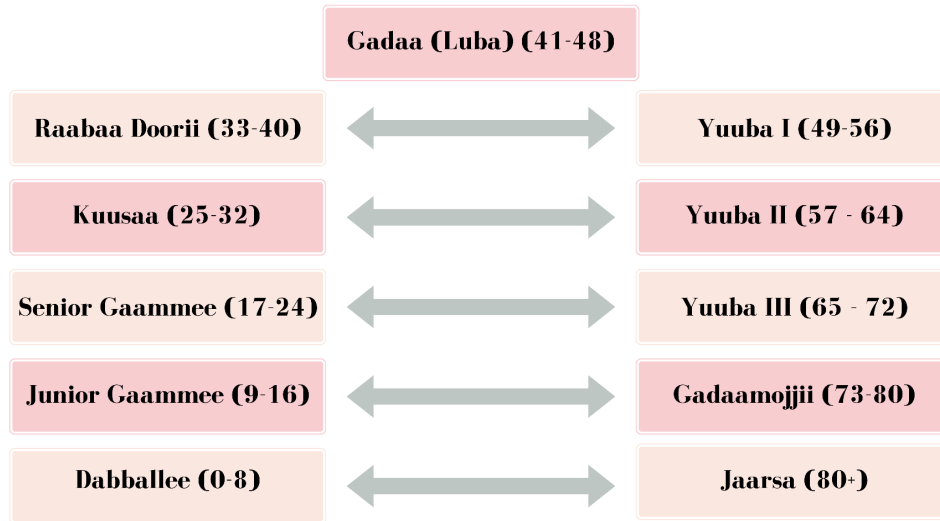


Figure 3. Diagram of Gadaa grades (Lubas) with arrows between the connected grades. The older grades provide guidance and assistance to the younger grades they are connected to. This graphic was made by the author.



Figure 4. Oromia regional state flag.



Figure 5. OLF/OLA flag.

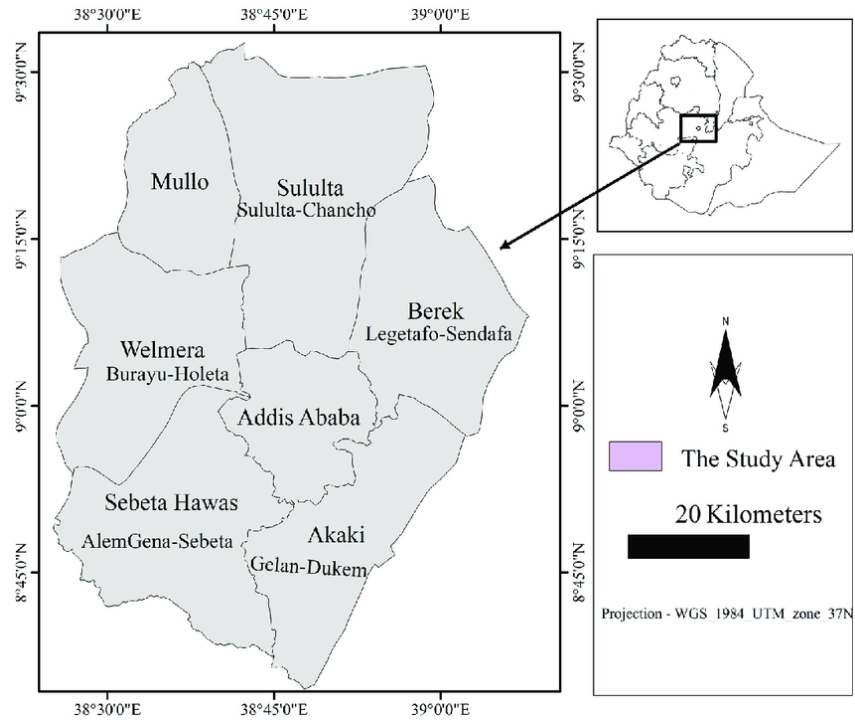


Figure 6. Map of the Oromia Regional State and Special Oromia Zone Surrounding Finfinnee (Mohamed & Worku, 2019).



Figure 7. Aerial image of Hora Arsadi in Bishoftu and the site of the Irreecha festival (Human Rights Watch, 2017).



Figure 8. Map of Oromia region, indicating what towns experienced violence after Haacaaluu's murder (Gardner, 2020).

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