

## “Resistance is our Culture.” An Archival Exploration of Oromo Diaspora Organising

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### Abstract

The Oromo people of the Horn of Africa have been engaged in a struggle for liberation and justice since their colonization by the Abyssinian Empire in the 1880s. Despite, beyond, and against this discursive violence, Oromo people have been creating liberatory spaces and alternative stories of Oromo life. In this article I explore resistance writing and organizational materials created by members of the Oromo diaspora in the 1970s and 1980s. This archival collection, housed in Berlin, Germany, shares a story of transnational solidarity. It also demonstrates the power of the archive itself as an active participant in documenting, remembering, and supporting the Oromo struggle.

### Article

As a historian or archivist, you may find Oromia on a map, but only if you know how to look, what pejorative to search for, which nation-state boundaries and blockades cage it in. The Oromo history has been erased, misnamed, and displaced from the Ethiopian archives for centuries. The lifeways and freedom of the Oromo people have been under attack since the Abyssinian colonial incursion of the 1880s, and the implementation of a feudal-land system by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie (the King of Kings, the Owner of Slaves, the part-time Genocidaire)<sup>2</sup>. For those born and bred on imperial histories and the narrative regime of the Abyssinian Empire, the Oromo are described as newcomers, ungrateful heirs to the empire of the King of Kings. But what Haile Selassie didn't know in the 1960s, what Mengistu and the fascist Dergue regime chose to ignore until they were overthrown in 1991, and what Ethiopia's current leader and ruling regime do not seem to comprehend, is that the Oromo archives have remained attentive, alive, witnessing, writing, and sharing their struggle. Generations worth of Oromo stories can be found in the interstices of Abyssinia's imperial stories, the gaps in the maps, the translations of oral histories stored away on shelves, and in the hearts, minds, and words of the Oromo people at home and in the diaspora<sup>3</sup>. The Oromo struggle is not of the flesh, it is not a political or legal squabble, it is of the roots<sup>4</sup> and the bones<sup>5</sup>. The roots run under water, over bridges, and across borderlands. In these archives they wrap around the foundation of resistance and build it up.

Though the Oromo struggle began in the Oromo homeland in the Horn of Africa, movement against, despite, and because of Ethiopian governance has built a strong, global Oromo diaspora. This diaspora founded the Oromo Horn von Afrika Zentrum<sup>6</sup> (as is its proper German name) in 1985, becoming a staple for the international community in Wedding, Berlin. It is a local safe space, an anti-racism activist hub, it provides services to immigrants and refugees from all across the globe, and in a quiet back room, with a window facing the courtyard, are its archives. There are copies of Mao Tse Tung’s greatest hits, Julius Nyerere’s Crusade for Liberation, cookbooks, translation guides, and best of all, an archive of the Oromo struggle of the last 50 years. These archives continue to witness, remember, and take notice, bringing the shadows into the light. It takes a particular labour of love to collect and archive the experiences of a people living across oceans and continents; sending and receiving documents, organizing, scanning, and classifying histories. You can feel this love in each carefully bound book.

There are copies of *Oromtitti*, the women’s voice, the Oromo Liberation Front’s publication *Oromia Speaks*, literacy guides published when the Qubee, the Oromo script was in its infancy, records of the Eritrean liberation movement, and journals like *STORM: the Somali, Tigray, Oromo Resistance Monitor*. In self-published pamphlets and carefully photocopied packets there is a story of a liberation fight that for many has not yet ended. In this way the archive bears witness, and keeps an eye on these movements. The Journal of the Union of Oromo Students in North America shares a letter written by the Oromo Liberation Front General Chairman in support of their first council. It reminds the diaspora to share their stories, to remember “that the Oromo nation has something in the past, does something in the present, and also has something to do in the future for the well-being of humanity” (1978:15). The archives are not static documentarians or note-keepers, they carry the weight of those who remember and record, and the worlds they inhabit.

The archive is patient, attentive, a trustworthy source. The archive takes notes, tracks correspondence, patches together a scrapbook of international movement. In 1983 *Sagalee Oromo*, the voice of the Oromo, shared solidarity letters written by members of Oromo organizations in the diaspora from across the globe, coordinating messages from discordant places. The North Americans remind readers “that resistance is our culture,” and the Saudi Arabian Workers place this resistance back home, remembering how “the woods and valleys of Oromia has always been the barracks of our patriots.” From these home-grown barracks to a

transnational resistance movement that continues to fight, it is with the archives permissibility and care that we can read this story. Empires and their bureaucratically enforced nation-state counterparts love documentation, they function and govern life and death through paperwork. The archive knows this, and follows its protocol; it records, documents, graphs, and lists each crime of the state, and each new hope for Oromo futures. You may follow Audre Lorde, and ask if the master's tools will truly be able to dismantle the master's house<sup>7</sup>. How are these paper battles a force against the powers of the Ethiopian state? Oromo resistance writers know that the master's tools carry the stench of death, and the master's house was "ensnared" together by "force and violence" (*Waldaansso* 1978). Thus the Oromo archive alone may not destroy the imperial house but it is the foundation for a new one, each journal a brick, each poem cement.

The Oromo archives bear witness and they bleed; their stories are connected to a network that is larger than its life, than the lives of the thousands of *Gootota Oromo*, Oromo martyrs. "On the one hand suffering and pain on the other, resistance and struggle are the legacy of an Oromo woman to her children." (*Oromtitti* 1979). The Oromo aren't my mother's people; I am not their child. I read the legacy but I will never live it. And yet it speaks to me, and I hear it. The walls do not need to talk, because they are humming, and buzzing, and alive with this history. The writers of *Kara Walabumma* feel this life-giving power and refuse to be silenced: "Arrests may continue, tortures may get worsened; yet, no force can hinder our people's determined will for freedom" (1984:17). It is because of the archive that we can revisit these words 35 years later, while arrests continue, and torture gets worse.<sup>8</sup> It is because of this archive that it is known, despite the continued struggle, that "every rising sun over the horizon of [Oromia] comes with new hope" (*Sagalee Oromo* 1977:12).

Even after the fall of the fascist regime in 1991 and the rise of the modern republic, the Oromo liberation struggle is far from over. The news coming out of the region is shady, shadowy, buried in the margins, a sub-point and footnote in the story of the new Prime Minister and his peace prize<sup>9</sup>. But the archive has always been a skilled reporter, she has spent generations watching and bearing witness, singing before she was writing and remembering (and re-remembering<sup>10</sup>) when others forgot. The archives are ever-evolving in this way. So I gently scan these pages, offer my meagre technological skills as thanks, a small contribution to the shared struggle. As a Black American, I have my own erasures and ignorances to contend with, and my life history has also been mapped out by empires and violence

outside of my control. I come to this Zentrum, to the archive, humble and ready to learn, and I walk away each time more humbled, with much more to learn. The force and violence that ensnared the empire together and allowed for its oppressive tactics has also created a transnational, diasporic, rooted, and routed<sup>11</sup> culture of resistance. Engaging with the struggle’s most patient witness and listening to the stories she tells carries this culture on into the future.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> M. Jaye Bass (she/her) is a Migration Studies doctoral student, currently studying at the Free University Berlin. For more information about the work of the Oromo Horn von Afrika Zentrum, see their website: <http://www.oromo-deutsch.de/>

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct overview of the Oromo struggle under different Ethiopian governments see Mohammed Hassen, “Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Conditions in Ethiopia, ca. 1880s-2002”

<sup>3</sup> I understand the archive to include oral sources, memories, and lived experiences as much as formal documents and written sources.

<sup>4</sup> The Oromo word for root is the same as the word for vein (hiddi). When I describe the Oromo as rooted in their lands, you can understand this quite literally. It is their lifeblood

<sup>5</sup> During the Oromo Protest movement the slogan “Lafti keenya, lafee keenya hin buqqanu” – “Our land is our bones, we will not be dislocated” was used

<sup>6</sup> The Oromo Center for the Horn of Africa, in English. For more information, see their website: <http://www.oromo-deutsch.de/>

<sup>7</sup> Lorde, Audre. 1984, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.”

<sup>8</sup> See recent Amnesty International report:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/ethiopia-vendor-killed-musician-injured-after-police-attack-opposition-supporters-in-omoria/>

While many reports of violence are disputed by the government, they continue to engage in oppressive tactics, like the latest communication shutdown:

<https://www.voanews.com/africa/rights-group-condemns-internet-shutdown-ethiopia-points-threats-coronavirus-spread>

<sup>9</sup> See the open letter written by current Oromo Studies Association President Dr. Begna Dugassa: <https://www.oromostudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OSA-March-Letter-to-PM.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The notion of re-memembering, follows Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012)

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the notion of roots and routes from Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, and Fred Moten’s discussion of the same theme in *Stolen Life* (2018).