Oromo struggle and the Macha-Tulama Association (1963-1967)

—The establishment of the Macha-Tulama Association as an ingenious civic institution was an event of great drama, creativity and accomplishment that captured the imagination of the Oromo public in 1963 and continues to fascinate.

Its banning in 1967, only four years later, serves as a devastating contrast highlighting the depth and extent of Oromo powerlessness in the Ethiopian Empire. The history of modern Ethiopia includes many instances of injustice and open discrimination, but few equal the impact of the public banning of the first Oromo peaceful civic organization. The profound disgrace represented in the destruction of an institution that carried the hope of peaceful development and Oromo pride has come to symbolize the condition of the Oromo nation under successive Ethiopian regimes. Most recently in 2014, the Oromo, who constitute the single largest national group in Ethiopia, were not allowed even to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of that association in the Oromia, Ethiopia.

The formation of the Macha-Tulama Association in Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) in 1963 was a major landmark both in modern Oromo as well as Ethiopian history. It
was a landmark in Oromo history because since the conquest and occupation of
Oromia during the 1880s the Oromo had not had their own independent
leadership. It was with the formation of the Macha-Tulama Association that the
Oromo since their colonization first developed a single leadership that 1) marshaled
their human, material and spiritual resources, 2) harmonized their activities, 3)
channeled their creative energy and innovations for defending Oromo identity, 4)
improved their economic, educational, health, cultural development and spiritual
wellbeing and 5) established political equality of the Oromo with other peoples in
Ethiopia. The Mach-Tulama Association galvanized the Oromo to speak with one
voice and to unite behind their leaders who were committed to saving Oromo
culture and national identity, both of which were targeted for destruction, and to
developing written literature in Afaan Oromo in the face of its being officially
condemned to remain an oral language.

**Background**

Very few in the general public are aware of the saddest period of Oromo history –
from the 1850s to the 1890s – when a large proportion of the Oromo people
together with their leaders were decimated. This massive destruction was carried
out by three successive Ethiopian rulers, i.e., Emperors Tewodros (1855-1867),
Yohannes IV (1872-1889) and Menelik (who was the king of Shawa from 1865-1889
and then became the Emperor of Ethiopia, 1889-1913). The result of these
campaigns is that the foundation of modern Ethiopian empire-state was built upon
the demise of Oromo power and the destruction of their lives and
property. Deprived of a leadership with meaningful power and prevented from
leading a free social existence, the Oromo were subjected to long-term
dehumanization and oppression, which assumed a multi-dimensional impact. It
attacked simultaneously Oromo national identity, cultural heritage, religious and
political institutions. In the land of their birth the Oromo were transformed into
landless *gabar* (serfs) who were exploited economically, oppressed and alienated
politically, dehumanized psychologically and subjugated culturally.

The Macha-Tulama Association was formed to lift the Oromo out of the depths this
kind of humiliation. Thanks to the inspiring leadership of the Association, the
Oromo were no longer afraid to struggle for their freedom and human dignity.
Macha Tulama was a game-changer. It became a nearly impossible challenge for
Ethiopian regimes to continue subjugating people who were no longer afraid of
fighting for their liberation and democratic rights.

The formation of the Macha-Tulama Association was also a landmark in modern
Ethiopian history because it was the first organization peacefully and strategically
to oppose the Ethiopian government's multi-faceted attack on culture, Oromo identity and language. The Association accomplished this feat by politically mobilizing the Oromo. Political mobilization, i.e., introducing national slogans and national ideology, is the product of a hard and long struggle by nationally conscious leadership. That leadership developed highly successful strategies to counter the Ethiopian government's attempt to break the Oromo in body, soul and spirit in order to dehumanize and reduce them to the condition of helplessness and dejection. This approach characterized Amharization policy that lasted from the 1880s-1991. That policy was intensified during the long reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974). Amharization involved uprooting and abandoning the very name “Oromo,” as well as the Oromo language, culture, way of life and world-view, in order to superimpose Christian names, Amharic language, Amhara culture, religion, way of life and world-view, all of which were alien to the Oromo and had to be imposed initially through violent means. This means successive Ethiopian regimes, particularly that of Haile Selassie's government sought to destroy the Oromo people's pride in their cultural heritage. This had the effect of keeping the people paralyzed with no faith in themselves or their history. A significant proportion of the Oromo population had developed an outlook of personal inferiority, identifying as victims ashamed of their national identity, language and cultural heritage.

The leaders of the Macha-Tulama Association inspired the Oromo to be proud citizens who respected themselves and their people's cultural heritage. The Oromo quickly realized that all over the world those who would respect themselves were respected by others, and those who perceived themselves as inferior were despised by others. The leaders of the association ignited an Oromo political consciousness, enabling their people to recast and thus grasp the reality of the system that had effectively crushed the self-respect and self-confidence of the largest national group in Ethiopia. The leaders of the association made it clear to the Oromo that
The system that killed the spirit of human dignity and pride was crude, brutal and oppressive and that it had to be resisted by a variety of means.

The Oromo, who had collectively endured the pain and sorrow of conquest and domination, quickly understood how precious was the human spirit of freedom, pride, self-respect and dignity. This awareness and response saved the Oromo identity and prevented the Oromo language from being replaced by the Amharic language and identity. On that ground alone, the importance the timing of the Macha-Tulama Association in modern Oromo history is beyond measure. While the Ethiopian government endlessly churned out negative propaganda about Oromo disunity, the leaders of the Macha-Tulama association countered it by emphasizing the various virtues and commonalities such as language, culture, the Gadaa system, historical experience, and political ideals. Where the Ethiopian government had asserted and worked to create disunity among Oromo, the impact of Macha-Tulama was to minimize and to place in context the local, regional or religious differences among the Oromo. In short, the leaders of the association articulated Oromo determination to be treated as equal citizens in Ethiopia and contributed immensely to the birth of Oromo political consciousness. Within few short years this association and its very effective approach changed the course of Ethiopian history.

The formation of the Macha-Tulama Association marked the genesis of a coordinated Oromo resistance against the Amhara ruling elites political, economic and cultural domination of the Ethiopian state. Its strategies gave birth to Oromo nationalism. It is not possible to understand the course of Oromo history since the 1960s without reference to the Macha-Tulama Association. Understanding the emergence and the impact of the Macha-Tulama Association is indispensable for understanding the direction and character of Oromo nationalism in the modern era, particularly because it became active during the crucial period of the 1960s, during which the concept of a future development of Oromia was crystallizing in the minds of key elements of the Oromo society. The powerful idea of Oromia as a homeland of an indigenous people appeared on the horizon responding to a burning desire across the population for Oromo freedom. The leaders of the association ignited the Oromo imagination and challenged formerly victimized people to become agents of social change. Macha-Tulama became highly effective in serving as the voice of the formerly voiceless Oromo people within the larger arena of Ethiopian politics.
The formotion of the Macha-Tulama Association

The Macha-Tulama Association was built on the tireless efforts of Colonel Alemu Kittessa and Haile Mariam Gamada. These two men and their colleagues managed to merge three earlier self-help associations in the region of Shawa in Central Oromia. The Macha-Tulama Association (hereafter MTA), was incorporated in Finfinnee on January 24, 1963. It was legally constituted in accordance with Article 45 of his Imperial Majesty's 1955-revised Constitution and Article 14, Number 505 of the Civil Code of the Ethiopian Empire as a civilian self-help association. According to Article 5 of the statute of the association, its aims and objectives, among others, were to build schools, clinics, roads, churches, mosques, to help the weak and the disabled, to organize Ethiopian civilian and national rights and to spread literacy and basic knowledge about health care. Although it was a self help organization in the region of Shawa, it became a platform for political mobilization all over Oromia. Thus the objectives of the leaders of the Association was much more broader than what was stated in the statue. The framers of the statute were highly educated, well informed and politically conscious individuals, who knew how to organize the people and mobilize their resources for solving their own problems. Article 20 of the statute provided that all Ethiopians would be accepted as members without regard to "Ethnic, tribal, regional, religious affiliation or sex of the applicant, in accordance with the internal regulations of the Association."[2] The association had its headquarters in Finfinnee or Addis Ababa with branch offices all over Oromia.

Men and women from all walks of life, all levels of wealth, Christians, Muslims and believers in indigenous Oromo religion, elders and youth from all regions of Oromia became members. They included peasants, livestock herders, teachers, students, civil servants, lawyers, and men in uniform from the private to the rank of general, community and religious leaders. In short, the association launched a pan-Oromo country-wide movement that championed social, cultural, educational and health improvements, and political rights of the Oromo people. The Macha-Tulama
galvanized the collective will and determination of the Oromo to assert their unity and dignity. The movement marked the beginning of a new inclusive political experience that generated the growth of Oromo nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s, an experience that taught the Oromo that only through co-ordinated and determined struggle could they achieve their own freedom, as self-respecting proud people who placed their relations with other peoples in Ethiopia and the wider global community on a plane of human dignity and mutual self-respect.

The Leaders of the Macha-Tulama Association (MTA)

Colonel Alemu Kietessa, was a key founding member of the Macha-Tulama Association. He served as president and Chairman of its Board of Directors. Baqala Nadhi, a lawyer by training, was the Vice President, while Colonel Qadida Gurmess was the second Vice President of the Association. The other notable founding member was Haile Mariam Gamada, who was the real brains and strategist behind the formation of the association itself. A widely respected lawyer, he served as the General Secretary of the Association. Haile Mariam Gamada chaired the Committee that drafted the bylaws of the association, coined the name of the association and produced its logo: the Odaa (sycamore tree), providing the rationale for that image to serve as the symbol of freedom and self-administration. The name of the association symbolized the unity of two major branches of the Oromo society, i.e. the Macha-Tulama, while its logo, the Odaa symbolized the unity of all Oromo under one cover and their strong desire for return to Gada democracy. "Traditionally the Oromo believed Oda to be most sacred of trees, the shade of which was the source of peace, the centre of religion, and the office of government—the meeting group for the democratically elected gada leaders."

Shortly after its formation on January 24, 1963, the leaders of the association submitted their application to the government for permission to organize the people for educational, health and economic development. It was only in May 1964 (i.e. 14 months later) that the association was permitted to function as a self-help organization in the administrative region of Shawa. It was a grudging recognition, which Amhara officials later regretted. Once the government permitted it to function as a self-help association, its leaders immediately started mobilizing the Oromo through successful public gatherings.
General Tadesse Birru Joins the MTA

It was on June 23, 1964 that General Tadesse Birru joined the MTA. He was one of the most famous officers of Oromo origin, a rising star within the Ethiopian political establishment. He was one of the high-ranking officers who saved Emperor Haile Selassie from being overthrown during the attempted coup of 1960. General Tadesse Birru was the officer who taught Nelson Mandela of South Africa his first introduction to military science and saved his life when an attempt was made to kill him in Addis Ababa in 1962. It was only during the funeral of Nelson Mandela in December 2013 that General Tadesse Birru received his due measure of recognition from South Africans and other peoples around the world for protecting one of the greatest historical figures of our time. [5]

By 1964 General Tadesse was Commander of the Rapid Force (riot battalion), the Deputy Commissioner of Ethiopian Police Force, the Commander of the Territorial Army and the Chairman of the National Literacy Campaign. He lived in the spotlight of fame and was well known for his concern for the poor and the downtrodden. General Tadesse Birru was an Ethiopian officer with wide-ranging interests, including his deep interest in religion, spread of literacy and equality among the peoples in Ethiopia and his concern for their welfare. He stood out as a sincere officer whose bravery and capability won respect among men in uniform.

As a veteran of anti-Fascist resistance movement and a distinguished officer with a long service both in the Ethiopian military and police force, he was the most popular officer of his time, universally admired both by the men in uniform and the civilian population. As one of the highest-ranking officers of Oromo origin, General Tadesse Birru inspired other high-ranking officers and government officials to join the Macha-Tulama association. Together with several other outstanding individuals, such as Generals Dawit Abdi, Astede Habte Mariam – the only woman
within the highest policy-making Board of Directors of MTA, and *Dajazmach* Kebede Buzunesh, outstanding patriotic leader during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, and many others, General Tadesse Birru inspired the Oromo to have their voices heard in the affairs of Oromos and Oromia. The above-mentioned leaders had wined and dined among the highest social circles of Ethiopian/Amhara leadership, but they were appalled by the misery, abject poverty and outright dehumanization to which the Oromo people were subjected in those days. By joining the association, the leaders of MTA elevated the status of the association and put it on the political landscape of Ethiopia. By championing the cause of the most humiliated and most exploited people in Ethiopia, these leaders attracted the envy and fear of many Amhara officials.

The MTA had an expanded policy-making board of 15 men and women, and 13 committees, which were led by military officers, lawyers, government officials and businessmen. General Tadesse Birru himself chaired three of the 13 committees, namely the Education, Provincial Branches and Advisory Committees. The MTA Board members and those who chaired committees were all highly successful men and women who were well respected among the Oromo. These leaders were the most privileged elements of the Oromo society. And it was these privileged social elements that led the first pan-Oromo national movement. They turned to express identity with their ethnic roots in reaction to the, as-yet, unmitigated attacks on Oromo identity through the policy of Amharization. They realized that the policy’s ultimate goal was the elimination of Oromo national identity. By joining MTA, they not only elevated the status and transformed the image of the association, most importantly, they provided the association with connections to their circles of influence, their skills, knowledge, organizational capacities and leadership qualities. In the process they made it possible to transform what started as a local self-help organization registered in central Oromia into a pan-Oromo movement with huge membership and branch offices all over Oromia.

As a pan-Oromo movement, the goal of the association was to end national oppression in Ethiopia. It was open to all Ethiopians. For this purpose persons from many oppressed nations and nationalities were invited to join and readily became members of the association. These included the Adare, the Afar, Bella Shangul, the Gamo, the Gimira, Issa Somali, Kulo Konta, the Sidama and the Walyeta. There were 26 non-Oromo individuals who held responsible positions within the various committees of the association. This demonstrates that for the leaders of MTA the cause of the Oromo was in large measure the cause of all oppressed people of Ethiopia. From this perspective, it is fair to say that the association was the first organization that brought together the oppressed nationalities of southern Ethiopia,
who, like the Oromo, were exposed to national oppression and subjugation, economic exploitation and cultural domination.

Besides attracting non-Oromo individuals, the MTA also attracted Oromo students from Haile Selassie I University as well as members of the Ethiopian parliament. Among the radical students who joined the association were Baro Tumsa (the Chairman of Haile Selassie I University Student Union), Lieutenant Mamo Mazamir, Ibssa Gutama, Mekonnen Gallan, Taha Ali Abdi, and several others. With the exception of Mamo Mazamir, who was martyred in 1969, these men were among the founding members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1974. There were also several members of the Ethiopian Parliament, including Tesema Negeri, the President of the Parliament, and Qanzmach Abdul Aziz Mohammed, a representative of the people of the city of Harar, who were active members of the association.

It was Baro Tumsa and Tesema Negeri, two prominent members of the Macha-Tulama Association who secretly arranged for the first ever "Land to the Tiller" demonstration in 1965 in Addis Ababa. "Land to the Tiller" remained the most captivating slogan in preparing the intellectual climate and political background for the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia. This means the leaders and the members of the MTA contributed to the outbreak of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, which changed the course of Oromo history and that of Ethiopian history as well.

Tadesse Birru and the Radicalization of the MTA

The news of General Tadesse Birru joining the MTA sent a shock wave through Amhara political establishment. Amhara officials had been determined to destroy what they termed as "the pagan movement" in its infancy. That was particularly the case with the Prime Minister Akelilu Habte Wolde, who assumed Tadesse Birru
to be an Amhara and confided in him several blatantly discriminatory policies of the Ethiopian government against the Oromo. After the stunning realization that the General himself was an Oromo, the Ethiopian Prime Minister set out a strategy for damage control that targeted both General Tadesse Birru specifically and the MTA generally for elimination. It was the threat on General Tadesse Birru's life and known targeting of other militant leaders, which transformed the MTA to focus on political agitation among the Oromo. The leaders of the association, especially General Tadesse Birru, Haile Mariam Gamada and Mamo Mazamir wanted to ignite the fire of Oromo nationalism that would outlive the destruction of the association and its radical leaders. Although the MTA started massive development oriented gatherings in 1964, it was in 1966 that politically oriented large gatherings started taking place in different areas throughout Oromia. One of those gatherings was held on May 15, 1966 at Itayaa in the region of Arsi, where close to hundred thousand people gathered to listen to the fiery speeches of the leaders of MTA.

The Itayaa gathering was a real turning-point in the short history of MTA for two primary reasons. First, in his opening remarks, Haji Robale Ture, one of the leaders of the association in the region of Arsi, called outright for the formation of an Oromo country. In a direct translation of his own words, he said, "as streams join together to form a river, people also join together to be nation to become a country." Haji Robale Ture boldly urged the Oromo to strengthen their unity and to create their own country. As Mohammed Hassen has written elsewhere, this was a quantum leap from the original goal of self-help activities in one province to the creation of an Oromo country. That was surely a seminal historic moment when the dream of an Oromo country to represent their identity was stated publicly and their love and pride as one people started taking shape in the minds of the best elements of the Oromo society.

Second, in his speech General Tadesse Birru, who firmly believed in the equality of all the people in Ethiopia openly, attacked the identity of Ethiopia for being built upon the supremacy of one ethno-national group, the Amhara. He also attacked the policy that exposed the Oromo to economic exploitation, ignorance and diseases. General Tadesse Birru not only articulated legitimate Oromo grievances but also urged the people to be united to defend their own rights. It must be remembered that following their conquest during and after the 1880s, the Oromo lost not only their sovereignty and independence, but also lost their pride as a people. The daily degradation, economic exploitation, political subjugation, cultural dehumanization to which the Oromo had been subjected for several decades dampened their bravery and slowly ate away at Oromo national pride. By articulating Oromo grievances and inspiring them to resist, General Tadesse Birru and militant leaders of the
association lifted the spirits of their people and restored their confidence in themselves as a people.

The leaders of the MTA, by uniting the Oromo from every region of Oromia, raised the Oromo from the depths of hopelessness and restored their pride as a people by showing them that they were capable of struggling for their human dignity. The new Oromo nationalist spirit that was born through the activities of MTA leaders cut across class, religious and regional differences and fused the Oromo into a single nation. In fact, one of the most memorable moments at the Itayaa meeting came when Oromo leaders overcame religious taboos that had long prevented them from eating together. When time came for blessing the animals to be slaughtered, both gave traditional Oromo cultural blessings. Then Muslims ate meat slaughtered by Christians in the name of the Oromo and the Christians did likewise eating meat slaughtered by Muslims. That was an unprecedented event in modern Ethiopian history, which shocked and outraged Amhara officials who immediately branded the MTA as a "pagan" movement.[11]

What further angered the Amhara officials was that the Itayaa meeting was addressed in Afan Oromo, at a time when the language was banned for public use in Ethiopia.[12] The leaders of the MTA boldly challenged the authority of the Ethiopian state for banning Afan Oromo from being used for writing, teaching, preaching and broadcasting. Mohammed Hassen has observed, "It was out of this challenge that the political objective of producing literature in the Oromo language was born. It was also out of this challenge that the idea of correcting the distorted image of Oromo history was born."[13]

The May 1966 gathering was followed by other gatherings, including the October 15, 1966 gathering, which was held in the town of Dheera in the region of Arsi. That mass meeting attracted tens of thousands of Oromo peasants as well as General Tadesse Birru, General Dawit Abdi, Dajamach Kebede Buzensh, Dr. Moga Firrisa, Lieutenant Mamo Mazamir and so many others. When Dajamach Sahlu Difaye, the most corrupt[14] Amhara governor of Arsi Province wanted to prevent the gathering from taking place, Oromo peasants defied the governor's order and attended the meeting. Through their profile in courage the peasants in the province of Arsi demonstrated that the days of frightening the Oromo into submission through threat were over. In his speech General Tadesse Birru warned the Oromo gathered there that Ethiopian government officials were planning to take drastic action against MTA. His words of dire prediction became reality when Amhara officials embarked on a poisonous anti-Oromo propaganda campaign shamelessly attacking the Oromo as "aliens" who came from Kenya to which they have to be returned.[15] This was an open attack on the rights of the Oromo even to be
Ethiopian citizens, which exposed the kind of cultural chauvinism was allowed public expression by some Amhara officials of the 1960s. It was a revelation of deeply seated anti-Oromo prejudice held by those in the Ethiopian political establishment who opposed the existence, let alone the success of this new Oromo-led movement.

Despite open and clandestine opposition, General Tadesse Birru guided and directed, Colonel Alemu Kittessa and other militant leaders such as Mamo Mazamir and Haile Mariam Gamada, in organizing the MTA to catapult Oromo national consciousness onto the political stage, inspiring Oromo to intensify their struggle for dignity and respect as citizens of Ethiopia. Those militant leaders acted rationally with ultimate goal of improving the economic, political and social status of the Oromo. By politically mobilizing the Oromo, the leaders of MTA established Oromo political opinion as an autonomous factor in its own right on the Ethiopian political landscape.

Oromo Political Consciousness

One major expression of Oromo national consciousness was in the use of Afaan Oromo in addressing mass public gatherings. General Tadesse Birru spoke in the Amharic language through an interpreter to the multitudes assembled to hear him. He became a lightning rod in doing that. Other Amharized Oromo elite followed his example. However, they started their speeches with this apology: “I was born of you. I apologize for using an interpreter to make this speech.” This was a radical shift in attitude among Amharized Oromo, who had previously prided themselves in speaking only in Amharic, which they regarded as a mark of civilization and a status symbol. Suddenly Amharic lost its magical quality for Amharized Oromo. Slowly but surely, Afaan Oromo replaced Amharic as a language of Oromo political discourse. Politically conscious individuals recognized Afaan Oromo as the core and foundation of Oromummaa or Oromo national identity. This was an unprecedented achievement in the short
history of the Macha-Tulama Association, which cultivated Oromo pride in their national identity, language and cultural heritage.

Since nothing positive was written or taught about the Oromo people in the Ethiopian educational system, the leaders of the MTA believed that the association had to write Oromo history. That task was left to Haile Mariam Gamada, a lawyer by profession, who was the leading authority on Oromo history and oral tradition, and to Mamo Mazamir, who made writing Oromo history and production of literature in the Oromo language the ideological battleground for the movement. Lieutenant Mamo Mazamir wrote, "History of the Oromo," which was confiscated by the government when his house was searched in 1967.[17] In addition to history, the document Mamo prepared included a plan for a new government, a new constitution and distribution of land among the landless tenants.[18] This was too much for the ruling Amhara elites, and Mamo Mazamir was martyred for producing that document. On the pretext of causing an explosion at a cinema hall in Addis Ababa, Mamo Mazamir was hanged by Haile Selassie’s regime. [19]

Haile Mariam Gamada too was martyred. Haile Mariam Gamada was so brutally tortured to the extent that he did not survive it. General Tadesse Birru was sentenced to death, which the Emperor changed to life imprisonment. Never was there such horrible historical ingratitude as that suffered by General Tadesse Birru at the hands of the Emperor Haile Selassie, who he had served so long and whose throne the good general saved in 1960. These three individuals who instilled the greatest fear and attracted the most extreme form wrath in Amhara officials were martyred. Their martyrdom watered the spirit of Oromo nationalism. Consequently, today mentioning the names of General Tadesse Birru, Mamo Mazair and Haile Mariam Gamada inspires joy and pride in Oromo nationals who enjoy the fruits of their sacrifice.

A closer look reveals how these three key individuals have shaped the political orientation of the MTA. Because of his knowledge and wide experience with the Ethiopian legal system, Haile Mariam Gamada became the leading strategist of the MTA behind the scenes. Even the Emperor Haile Selassie accused him of being the “genius” behind the organization.[20] Because of his prestige and popularity, it was General Tadesse Birru, an iconic figure, who shaped the public awareness and political orientation of the association. It was he who the Amhara officials of the time feared the most and he they were determined to destroy. Then, because of his age and knowledge about Third World revolutions, it was Mamo Mazamir, who was seen by authorities as a dangerous radical. These three prominent leaders within the association had a lot in common.
Tadesse Birru’s life was a journey from a humble background to a highly respected General. He and Haile Mariam Gamada fought against the Italians in 1936 and both were prisoners of war who were detained in Italian Somali Land. Mamo Mazamir was a graduate from and later instructor at Harar Military Academy before he joined the Haile Selassie University Law School. These leaders also complemented one another. They came from peasant backgrounds. They were self-made men, all of whom who were disillusioned with the Ethiopian government’s policy toward the Oromo. They were exceptionally gifted individuals who had tremendous organizational skills and boundless energy. They became the shining exemplars of a new generation of Oromo nationalists, who had risen to high status among Ethiopians, yet chose to sacrifice everything, including their precious lives for the cause and in the interest of their people, who had actively resisted their subjugation throughout Oromia for decades. Like other leaders and members of the association, General Tadesse Birru, Haile Mariam Gamada and Mamo Mazamir, together with other prominent leaders raised the banner of Oromo resistance and mapped a path for the Oromo struggle with their sacrifice.

One value all shared, expressed in words and deeds, was the importance of unity. The main aims of the leaders of the association were to mobilize the Oromo and unite them with other oppressed peoples of Ethiopia for the purpose of ending the Amhara ruling elites’ domination of the Ethiopian political landscape and creating instead a democratic and just system in which all the people of that country would live together in peace and genuine equality. However, Haile Selassie’s government accused the association and its leaders of plotting to dismember the territorial integrity of Ethiopia, the pretext on which the regime banned the first Oromo civic association. Not a single leader of the association escaped excruciating torture and imprisonment. They all demonstrated enormous courage for the cause of their people. Among those whose horrific torture led to his death was Haile Mariam Gamada, the man accused by Emperor Haile Selassie as MTA’s organizing genius. 

On his deathbed Haile Mariam Gamada said farewell to his friends with the following words of full of wisdom. "Whether we die or not, our ideas [about the freedom of the Oromo] will be realized by our children or grandchildren." The final words of Lieutenant Mamo Mazamir before he was cruelly hanged still resonate with the new generation of Oromo nationalists: "I do not die in vain. My blood
will water the freedom struggle of the Oromo people... It may be delayed, but the inalienable rights of the Oromo people will be restored by the blood of their children."

In 1975, the Ethiopian military regime that succeeded Emperor Haile Selassie executed without trial the following leading members of MTA: General Tadesse Birru, Colonel Hailu Regassa, Qanazmach Abdul Aziz Mohammed, and Zewga Bojia. These, along with several other members of the association, were buried in mass graves. The act demonstrated the continuing absence of the rule of law in Ethiopia and the profound disregard for Oromo status within Ethiopia. Since the creation of the empire-state in the 1880s, Ethiopia has failed to produce a single government that did not destroy independent Oromo organizations, such as the MTA, a single government that respected Oromo national dignity, a single government that treated the Oromo as full citizens of Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The leaders of the Macha-Tulama Association challenged and defied the established Ethiopian political order in two major ways. First, they organized huge mass meetings at which the proscribed Oromo language was used very publicly as the medium for fiery oratory, dramas, poems and prayers, which moved the Oromo to tears of both inspiration to champion Oromuumma and anger against the oppressive Ethiopian system which suppressed their identity and denied their rights. A profound Oromo desire to be treated with respect and dignity began from that point to find expression in Afaan Oromo through written literature. That empowerment became the starting point for the birth of Oromo resistance literature.

Oromo nationalism was given its modern shape through an intellectual renaissance of the 1960s. Leaders such as Haile Mariam Gamada, Haji Robale Ture, Colonel Alemu Kietessa and many others, were nurtured both in the civilization of Oromo democratic heritage as the legacy of their peasant backgrounds. While others such as Mamo Mazamir, Baro Tumsa and others were trained in the rigors of Western-oriented higher education, which made them aware of the extent of Oromo subjugation. Their awareness of both legacies positioned them to make the Oromo conscious of their shared experience as a people and consequent need for unity and also conscious of their deprivation and their treatment as second-class subjects.

These leaders urged the people to become agents for their own freedom and equality with other peoples of Ethiopia and to exercise influence within the larger arena of Ethiopian politics. Secondly, the leaders of the MTA not only united the Oromo themselves but also sought to unite them with other oppressed peoples of
Ethiopia by providing them with an organizational framework designed for the purpose of ending national oppression in Ethiopia. This came as a severe blow to the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), which had never lost the feeling of sitting on top of a volcano. Consequently, in 1967, imprisoning the leaders and banning the Macha-Tulama Association, the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie won a short-term victory.

Once the association was banned, it was forced underground. Out of the nationalism generated under Macha-Tulama Association, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was born in 1974. Thus, within seven short years, by 1974, the Ethiopian regime's policy of banning the association resulted in the transformation of Oromo politics beyond recognition. The association's demand for equality within Ethiopia was transformed into the OLF's demand for national self-determination for Oromia. The association's efforts to spread literacy in the Amharic language using Ethiopic script were transformed into literacy in the Oromo language using the Latin alphabet. What was unthinkable in 1967 became feasible by 1974.

In short, the Ethiopian government's unwarranted cruelty and brutality produced the Oromo elite's rejection of Ethiopian identity itself. Those who have rejected Ethiopian identity do not feel loyalty to the Ethiopian state and its institutions. On the contrary, many are struggling for the formation of an independent state of Oromia. In short, what the Ethiopian government wanted in 1967 was the destruction of Oromo political consciousness by destroying the association. What it got in 1974 was the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front, which articulated Oromo political nationalism and became its primary organizational expression.

The leaders of the Macha-Tulama Association came together from different parts of Oromia. They have become symbols of courage and sacrifice that have propelled millions of Oromo into organized action. The leaders of the association were truly dedicated individuals who stepped forward primarily from the most privileged elements of the Oromo society to become agents of Oromo political consciousness. With a firm grasp of reality, they looked upon peaceful resistance with a boldness of imagination unsurpassed in modern Ethiopian
history. What spirit was it that moved them, made them accept suffering, torture, imprisonment, loss of property, breakup of families and loss of life itself? Without a doubt, it was the spirit of Oromo political awakening that propelled these men and women onto a new historical stage.

The leaders of the MTA became the organizational expression of a latent Oromo national consciousness and, in turn, created an institution that nurtured, deepened and the development of an articulated national identity. They struggled and some died for the cause of the Oromo as part of an association that became the "womb of ideas and the spring of power" which represented the decisive stage in the formation of Oromo nationalism.

All of the leaders of the Macha-Tulama Association – those who were martyred as well as those who were tortured and imprisoned for many years – set a pattern for the new generation of Oromo by accepting sacrifice for the cause of their people. This new generation has been reared and brought up upon story of the lives of MTA leaders as examples of real heroes and heroine. These stories are now the stories that have attracted the attention and captured the imagination of the Oromo youth. Through their struggle and sacrifices, these martyrs won a lasting place in the hearts of the Oromo nation. "...They died physically, but the cause for which they died will never die and they will remain in our hearts through the history of the Oromo struggle which is written with their blood. ...Their names will live forever, lighting the torch of freedom for the Oromo nation."[35] Through their achievements in building the Macha-Tulama Association these remarkable human beings became classic examples of Oromo nationalism, which embodies the Oromo spirit of resistance. Their names assume a prominent position in a galaxy of Oromo heroes and heroine.

*The organizers of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Macha-Tulama Association prepared this brochure. A member of the organizing team provided it exclusively to OPride.

Endnotes

1 Information for this brochure was drawn mainly from the first major work on this unique association is that of Olana Zoga, which appeared in Amharic language in 1993. We are truly indebted to Olana for writing an excellent book, which has enriched our knowledge and expanded the horizon of our understanding of an Association that played crucial role in the rise of political consciousness, which in turn gave birth to modern Oromo nationalism. Olana's book depicts not only the political condition in which the association was formed in 1963, and its short legal existence but also the strength and weaknesses of its leaders and the association's achievements and failures.
2 Olana Zoga, *Gezatena Gezot and Matcha-Tulama Association*, (Addis Abeba: No name of publishers, 1993). Additional Information for this treatment was drawn from sources quoted below.


[5] By exhibiting foresight and courage in saving the life of Nelson Mandela in 1962 General Tadesse Birru contributed to the possibility for saving South Africa from a potential blood bath – a peaceful transition to democracy was brought about through the leadership of Mandela, the first democratically elected Black President of South Africa who effectively led his country through the time that tried the soul of South African society.


[16] Taye, 34.

[17] Zoga.
[18] Zoga, 249.


[22] Zoga, 402.

[23] Zoga, 278.
