Settler Colonialism: The Oromo Extremist Narrative

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1. The Genesis: TPLF’s Anti-Amhara Ideology and Its Consequences

The Stalinist ideology of nations and nationalities that was espoused by the Ethiopian students’ movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, served as the foundation that led to the rise of secessionist, anti-Ethiopian forces, such as the EPLF, TPLF and OLF. The toxic alien ideology, which was induced from abroad on a junket, including the 1936 book by Roman Prochazka (Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel), asserted the existence of one privileged ethnic group, the Amhara, that exclusively ruled over the rest. The sentiment was further cemented in Eritrea, thanks to the 60-year colonial rule by Italy and Britain.

These three secessionist forces have been tremendously successful at achieving what they set out to do, and more.

The 1975 TPLF manifesto took the anti-Amhara ideology literally, and made the Amhara people its primary enemy.

Today, Ethiopia is fragile and at risk of dismemberment—a feat even European colonial forces and many others before them had not be able to pull off. Eritrea has long seceded, leaving Ethiopia as the largest country in the world without access to the sea. Tigrai is a quasi-confederate state out of the reach of the federal government’s military, security and law-enforcement organs. The OLF (with the warlord JaWar) is rapidly establishing a medieval-type hegemony over the so-called Oromia region and spreading instability to the adjacent regions.

Meanwhile, decades of vengeful rule against the “enemy” Amhara people by the TPLF regime has resulted in abject poverty and destitution in the so-called Amhara killil. For example, as documented by journalist and activist Getachew Shiferaw, the Amhara killil has over 1000 primary schools that are barely more than straw huts or make-shift straw structures. Further, as
the late Amhara region official, Tesfaye Getachew, courageously revealed, there has not been a single power-substation that was constructed in the region during the TPLF rule, essentially ruling out the possibility of having any large-scale industries.

Millions of Amharas, who live outside of their “killil”, have been constantly displaced and systematically relegated as 2nd and 3rd class citizens throughout the country. Although, according to the official census, Amharas are either the second or third largest ethnic groups in such areas as Oromia, Benshangul, Harrar, Dire Dawa and Gambella, ranging from 10% to close to 25%, they are not eligible to hold offices or have representations.

In contrast, almost all non-Amhara ethnic groups, including Agew (plus Wag), Oromo, Qimant and Argoba, which constitute 3.7%, 3.0%, 1.2%, 0.4%, respectively, of the Amhara region population, are accorded self-rule and zonal or special woreda level administrations.

This stark asymmetric disenfranchisement and underdevelopment of the Amhara ethnic group throughout the country is the effect of the TPLF’s narrative that made it its primary enemy. (This should have been one the primary agenda for ANDM/ADP if it were an actual organic organization that promote and protect its constitutes’ political and economic interests. But organic political party, it is not! It was founded as TPLF trojan-horse to implement the policy of retribution and vengeance mentioned earlier. This ANDM/ADP group, even after the so-called reform and undergoing name change, is still in the mindset of being taken for a ride by a master so much so that its senior apparatchiks’ and leaders are being had by Oromo Nationalists and extremists alike. But this is a topic for another day). Admittedly, the egregious oppression of the Amharas by the TPLF is all very well known. It has been written about, talked about and protested-against, and is seared in the conscience of the new generation who came of age through its consequences. However, as will be highlighted below, what has not been equally talked about or is well known outside of the Oromo nationalist circles is the narrative of the Oromo extremists’ fabricated grievances, which has been nurtured and effectively used to advance the TPLF’s anti-Amhara campaign.

2. “Settler Colonialism” Narrative

Parasitically attached to TPLF’s widely known governing ideology of the existence of one ethnic group that has dominance over the rest, but unbeknown to most Ethiopians, is the Oromo extremists’ narrative of settler colonialism. This narrative, which once was considered a fringe,
and ignored and laughed at because of its fantasy and falsehoods, is now embraced as “history” by the so-called Qeerro generation.

Incidentally, there are now several Oromo extremist intellectuals who are active purveyors of this false history and spreading poisonous propaganda to shape the current Oromo generation, with adverse consequences on the integrity of contemporary Ethiopia.

One such hate monger is Asafa Jalata, a professor of sociology and African studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, who spreads falsehoods and fascistic propaganda against the Amhara people. In one of his writings, he declared:

“The African American and Oromo movements have been anticolonial struggles, and they aimed to dismantle racial/ethnonational hierarchies legitimated by the ideology of racism in the hegemonic state of the United States and peripheral and imperial state of Ethiopia. … Oromos make up 50% of the Ethiopian population. … The Oromo movement emerged to fight Ethiopian settler colonialism and its institutions, and underdevelopment” (Jalata, 2003).

First, the paper is blatantly flawed in asserting that the Oromia make up 50% of the population. At the time of the publication of the paper, Ethiopia had conducted two censuses, in which the Oromo subpopulation constituted 31% and 32% in 1984 and 1994, respectively. Therefore, Jalata’s assertion of 50% is a clear demonstration of his blatant disregard for academic integrity, in which census figures are fabricated at will for a political goal.

The myth of “Oromo is 50% of Ethiopia,” which has been laundered and pumped into Oromo political bloodstream for a long time by extremists like Jalata, is now being used to “justify” the ongoing “kegna” campaign. This is a campaign intended to establish absolute Oromo ownership and hegemony, through direct control of all the economic, political and security establishments in the country, and to realize their latent desire to “Oromize” many heterogeneous communities.

Tragically, the campaign has not only created massive displacements, but also has made it impossible to conduct any credible census in the so-called Oromo region in the foreseeable future.

Jalata’s other assertion that the Oromo ethnic group has been under settler colonial occupation has no theoretical or historical basis. Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism which seeks to replace the original population of the colonized territory with a new society of settlers. As in all
forms of colonialism, it is based on exogenous domination, typically organized or supported by an imperial authority. Well-known examples of settler colonialism, of course, include Canada, the United States and Australia, where the indigenous people (i.e., native Americans and Aborigines) were systematically decimated, replaced or dominated by the new settlers. Thus, Jalata’s assertion is not only inconsistent with the notion of “settler colonialism”, but is also in direct contradiction to his fabricated “Oromo is 50% of Ethiopia” mythology. If his fantastic claim of settler colonialism was true, the Oromo population should have been wiped out like the Australian Aborigines or native Indian tribes in the US, who are limited to be “sovereign” in tribal reservations, scattered throughout the mid and interior Western states.

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Propagandists like Mr Jalata on one hand claim Oromo ethnic group is dominant with 50% of Ethiopian population but on another they turn around and claim Oromo is dominated and under settler colonialism—in which case the Oromo population should have been wiped out like the Australian Aborigines or native Indian tribes in the US—who are limited to be “sovereign” in tribal reservation dotted enclaves scattered thought-out the mid and interior Western states.

For anyone who has not been to one of the Oromo nationalists’ propaganda cesspools, the idea of “settler colonialism”, in a country that has preserved its independence for centuries, may be incomprehensible. However, the Oromo extremists’ narrative, which asserts that the indigenous Oromo country was colonized by settlers, mostly by the dreaded Amharas, now has a mainstream feel, with a firm stranglehold on the conscience of the current generation!

The third fabrication in Jalata’s paper, and one embraced by other extremist Oromo propagandists, is the laughable narrative of grievances and victimhood which equates the so-called Oromo struggle with that of the struggle of African-Americans for civil liberties and equality. This fabrication is an insult to millions of African-Americans, as it trivializes the legacy of 400 years of slavery, segregation and brutality where its effect is still visible today.

As any cursory reading of Ethiopian history shows, the Oromos migrated and expanded northwards from the Borena area in the 16 and 17 Centuries, decimating many communities along the way. However, according to Oromo propagandists, the beginning of history was when
Menelik II came to power as King of Shewa in 1865 and then as Emperor of Ethiopia. Further, it seems to be of no relevance to extremist academics-without-ethics like Jalata that there is no evidence to support the claim of segregation to which the Oromo people were subjected, as were African Americans in the United States.

3. The Five Million Massacre Lie

The “settler colonialism” narrative, through which Oromo extremists see their world, has been a convenient framework to fabricate and exaggerate alleged atrocities, drawing from intra-war stories that were all too common in that era.

Among the myths of the settler narrative that have been pushed down to the Oromo populace by TPLF and extremist propaganda include the killings of 5 million Oromos and the graphic mutilation of women at Anole (Arusi).

Contrary to the claims of the propagandists, there is no evidence to support the assertion that Emperor Menelik II ordered the killings of 5 million Oromos. In fact, there is no evidence that any large-scale massacre ever happened, much less it was ordered by the king. The truth is that the entire Ethiopian population at the end of Emperor Menelik’s reign was at most about 5.0 million, as can be figured from historical estimates of 2.8%-2.9% annual population growth rates.

Unfortunately, this myth is now a widespread belief held among the uncritical Oromo youth, thanks in part to the works of irresponsible social media nihilists, and diehard Oromo nationalists, such as Mohammed Ademo, who has been promoting his vicious hatred for Amhara through his appearances at Arab satellite TV stations, and influential positions in OLF/ODP circles and the Oromia Broadcasting Network (see twits made in 2012 and 2018).
If intellectual elites like Mohammed Ademo can spread “5 million Oromos killed” lie without any evidence, other than siting some mythical beliefs, when Ethiopian total population, at the time of this alleged massacre is, at best 5 million, will there be any moral or ethical restraint for any of these extremists that prohibit them from concocting “historical facts” and myths to help achieve their secessionist/expansionist goals?

4. The Anole Myth

Perhaps one of the most egregious fabrications of the Anole myth that led to the erection a gruesome monument, depicting a severed body part of a woman. The fictional narrative and the monument were intended to paint a gruesome atrocity perpetrated by the invading and conquering Amhara army led by Emperor Menelik II, thereby poisoning the minds of young Oromo children and inculcating in them hatred, animosity and resentment against Amharas.

Incidentally, the man responsible for the fabrication of this myth was a former TPLF operative and Eritrean national, Tesfaye Gebereab. The fiction, which was propagated in graphic and gruesome detail by Gebreab, has been debunked by prominent Oromos, including the late Dr.
Negasso Gidada. Although Gidada supported the monument for political reasons once it was constructed, he admitted that there was absolutely no evidence in support of the claim that the atrocity happened in the way it had been depicted.

More recently, Addisu Arega, a top Oromo politician and head of the ruling OPDO/ODP Secretariat, made a very rare admission about this part of the Oromo Nationalists’ false narrative, and revealed that the Anole myth had been part of a well-orchestrated and generously-financed TPLF operation to create animosity between the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups. He specifically singled out Tesfaye Gebereab for condemnation for his active role in promoting the myth.

While many observers praised Ato Addisu’s stand to tell the truth, the negative reaction from the Oromo body politics was swift, with immediate backlash. He was vociferously vilified, asked to resign, and condemned by extremists, nihilist Oromo activists and politicians alike. As a result, he was obliged to walk back, repeatedly apologize, and ask for forgiveness. The OLF, the oldest Oromo secessionist paramilitary group that commits bank robberies and displacements with impunity, warned any attempt to touch the “history” of the Anole hate monument would have serious consequences.

In the ensuing days, several demonstrations were held by Oromo youth in Arusi area condemning Ato Addisu for his admission of the truth. The demonstrators demanded the fiction writer and “their history” be respected, and amplified the Anole myth, waving banners that displayed men with severed hands.

Needless to say, the absence of facts and evidence is immaterial to Oromo political nihilists and propagandists. To them, evidence and facts are secondary to their wild dreams of Oromo state formation and the urge for vengeance. Indeed, as they blindly march towards those ends, all means, fabricated and myths, are justified.

5. The Consequences

The underlying motive of the false narrative is unquestionably the desire to create an Oromo state or to Oromize much of Ethiopia. Therefore, this resentment had to be created, nurtured and propagandized. It is also essential to introduce the “us” versus “settler” fascistic mentality to mobilize the youth and some of the more cautious members of the Oromo society.
The hatred that is fueling the current displacements and thousands of home demolitions we have been witnessing in the so-called Oromo region is but a small part of this grand scheme. The constant reference to Addis Ababa as a “garrison city” is a prelude to a campaign of a medieval type, with the ultimate goal of expelling the “settlers” from, what they consider, an enemy enclave.

In the face of these potentially genocidal consequences, the likes of which the country has never seen in its long history, the Ethiopian elites have a moral responsibility to confront this cancerous and fascistic false narrative being propagated by Oromo extremists. There can be no excuse for failure to address the barrage of easily provable lies with documented historical facts, when the most brazen history and narrative heist is being hermetically sealed into the Oromo youth psyche.

It is critical that every Oromo extremist’s false assertion and made-up narrative be confronted with the truth, and refuted based on historical facts and evidence. It might not convince the brainwashed mobs who are mindlessly brandishing their machete to avenge for their ancestors; however, it would at least help initiate informed conversations about the fanciful narratives of “settler colonialism” and “the 5 million lie”.

Finally, propagandists like Asafa Jalata, who laid the intellectual foundation for displacements and tensions we see today, should incontrovertibly be held responsible for the displacements and atrocities that have happened and those yet to come.

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Comparing the African American And Oromo Movements in the Global Context

Asafa Jalata

The African American and Oromo movements have been anticolonial struggles, and they have aimed to dismantle racial/ethnonational hierarchies legitimated by the ideology of racism in the hegemonic state of the United States and the peripheral and imperial state of Ethiopia. The African American and Oromo ethnonational minority groups are similar in numerical size, and different in political strength. Each population numbers about 30 million. However, African Americans constitute only 13% of the U.S. population of 270 million, while Oromos make up about 50% of the Ethiopian population of 60 million. As the African American movement developed in opposition to American slavery, racial segregation, and underdevelopment, the Oromo movement emerged to fight Ethiopian settler colonialism and its institutions, and underdevelopment. The two movements emerged in opposition to colonial domination, a racial/ethnonational hierarchy, economic and labor exploitation, cultural destruction and repression, and the denial of individual and national rights. The capitalist world-system that produced modern slavery, colonization, genocide or ethnocide, cultural destruction and repression, and continued subjugation also facilitated the emergence and development of the African American and Oromo movements.

Initially, African Americans and Oromos resisted slavery and colonization without systematically organizing themselves. Their cultural and political resistance continued after their enslavement and colonization because in Ethiopia and the United States, these two peoples were assigned the status of slaves and colonial subjects and second-class citizens. Moreover, since the early 1950s the United States has sided with the Ethiopian state to suppress Oromo society (Jalata, 1998; 1999).

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