



Baro Tumsa: The Principal Architect of the Oromo Liberation Front

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The book is dedicated to all Oromo and others who have contributed to the birth and survival of the OLF by sacrificing their precious lives, families, professions, economic resources, labor, and knowledge.

PREFACE

The idea to write this book emerged over time. In 2002, I invited Ayetu, Baro Tumsa's daughter, to apply for The Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This program prepares minority undergraduate students for graduate studies in the United States. After mentoring many students in this program, I thought I would invite Ayetu to apply to this program to prepare her for graduate study. As a result, she applied and was accepted into the program. During the summer semester of 2002, I was Ayetu's mentor. I frequently met and discussed with her his role in forming the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and his contributions to the Oromo national movement. I expressed to her my deep admiration for him. As a student attending the Haile Selassie I University (which later became Addis Ababa University) in the 1970s, I learned about Baro and his immense knowledge, commitment, and contribution to the Oromo national movement.

I only met Baro face-to-face in 1973 at a secret meeting where he had lectured about the Oromo national issue. The meeting was held at Lencoo Lataa's home. The attendees were Oromo University students from different parts of Oromia that had been secretly selected to participate in this meeting. At that time, we had decided to return to our respective regions because the Haile Selassie I University was closed due to student protests opposing the corrupt and reactionary government of Haile Selassie. Baro advised us to organize youth groups in our respective localities that could contribute to the Oromo national movement. I was impressed by his

courage and bravery, openness and frankness, clarity of ideas and intellectual maturity, commitment to the liberation of the Oromo people from Ethiopian settler colonialism, and his view of the importance of capturing state power by any means necessary, even by a coup. At that time, I was a second-year university student.

Following Baro's advice, we, Oromo youth from Bojii, Najjoo, and Mendi, organized three youth associations in the summer of 1973. We organized the first youth group, *Burqaa Bojii*. The next group was organized in Mendi and called *Biqiltu Mendi*. This name implies that this group germinated with the help of the spring of Bojii (*Burqaa Bojii*). We organized the third one, called *Lalisa Najjoo*, which means growth and expansion. Overall, these names represent how the water of Bojii facilitated the birth of the youth branch in Mendi, and the latter helped the growth of the youth branch in Najjoo. These names indicate the relationship among the three units and their chronology of development. The names were also used as political codes and expressed their objectives as community development activities. The local authorities did not recognize the goals of these groups and, thus, did not take any action against them.

For many years, I heard about Baro's family after they arrived in the United States. I greatly respect the family because they sacrificed heavily for the Oromo national cause. Baro paid the ultimate sacrifice of his life in 1978 when he was murdered in Eastern Oromia. What is also tragic is that most Oromos still do not know the depth of Baro's contributions to the Oromo national struggle. In addition to adding clarity to the Oromo national struggle, this book attempts to make the Oromo people and others understand why Baro exposed himself to danger to liberate and empower them.

Ayetu has been passionate about her father and his role in the Oromo struggle. She told me that her mother, Warqee Bulto, would be frustrated whenever people misrepresented Baro when talking about him. Ayetu told me she promised her mother that she would write about her dad to overcome misrepresentations by individuals who did not know him well and to reveal his contributions to the Oromo liberation struggle. In 2005, Ayetu, with her mother's help, started to identify and interview a few prominent Oromo nationalists who closely worked with Baro.

Gradually, our families became friends, and we started to visit each other during deaths, marriages, and graduations. When my brother died in 2019, Warqee and Ayetu visited my family, and Ayetu told me that she

had interviewed and collected information about her father. She then requested that I write this book, and I agreed. She provided me with the interviews of eight Oromo nationalists and the thesis Baro had written in the partial fulfillment of his law degree at the Haile Selassie I University. When I started writing this book, I realized I needed more information and data to adequately write about this complex person. As a result, I interviewed twenty-four individuals who directly knew him. From the bottom of my heart, I thank these interviewees for taking the time to tell the history of Baro and the Oromo national struggle. I also appreciate the sacrifices they made for the liberation of their people. I collected published and unpublished materials available on Baro and Oromo nationalism, too.

I discovered that Baro's biography was linked to the history of the OLF and the Oromo people. I also recognized that Baro introduced a paradigm shift in the Oromo national struggle by designing a liberation front to mobilize and organize Oromo nationalists from different corners of Oromia by reflecting Oromo diversity and unity. To build confidence among these nationalists, he avoided being the front's leader. As a gifted scholar and leader, Baro developed strategies and tactics for liberating the Oromo society from Ethiopian settler colonialism and its institutions. The political roadmap he created with his colleagues in the 1970s still guides the OLF and the Oromo national movement.

Writing about the role of Baro in the founding of OLF for liberating Oromia and the Oromo society is complex and challenging because it involves the critical understanding of Oromo history, culture, humanity, and the civilization. I can't tell his history by integrating it into the Oromo national movement without learning about his personality, intellectual maturity, and personal integrity, which reflected the best elements of the Oromo tradition of social justice, political norms, and the egalitarian democracy of the *gadaa* system.

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Beka Jalata helped me in organizing the references. Imiru Itana assisted me in interviewing Betena Hotesso, a Sidama nationalist who lives in England. Betena closely worked with Baro in building an alliance among the colonized nations.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Theory of Quality Leadership	13
3	Baro and Gudina Tumsa: From Early Life to Adulthood	29
4	College Life and Political Involvement	45
5	Baro Tumsa’s Involvement with the MTA and Political Activism	77
6	Professionalism, Political Activism, and Networking	97
7	Baro and the Founding of the OLF	115
8	Political Opportunities, Challenges, and the Survival of OLF	171

9 The OLF: Baro's Legacy, Long Journey, Achievements, and Resilience	231
References	261
Index	275

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Asafa Jalata is the Betty Lynn Hendrickson Professor and Professor of Sociology and Global and Africana Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. As a leading social scientist in the fields of indigenous and human rights investigations, critical race studies, Africana and global studies, and nationalism and terrorism studies, Jalata has engaged in studying and explaining the chains of cultural, historical, and political-economic forces of the capitalist world system that have shaped racial inequality, development, underdevelopment, terrorism, and social movements on local, regional, and global levels. He is a worldwide renowned scholar in Oromo studies and these fields. Jalata has published and edited 15 books, 18 book chapters, 8 dozen refereed articles in national, regional, and global refereed journals, and several public journal articles.



Introduction

This book examines the role of Baro Tumsa in clandestinely bringing together a few Oromo nationalists of diverse backgrounds from all over Oromia, the Oromo country, to establish the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The Haile Selassie government's destruction of Oromo movements, such as the Macha-Tulama Self-Help Association (MTA), was an immediate reason for the birth of the front in the 1970s. While most Oromos have supported and sympathized with this liberation organization, the colonizers and their agents have vilified and attacked it to make the Oromo society leaderless. For almost a half-century, the OLF has struggled to uproot Ethiopian (Amhara-Tigray) settler colonialism and its institutions from Oromia to end the domination and exploitation of the Oromo for almost one-and-a-half centuries. Paradoxically, the name of the OLF existed before its formation in the mid-1970s.¹

For four reasons, writing this book, *Baro Tumsa: The Principal Architect of the Oromo² Liberation Front*, was complex and challenging. The first

¹ Phone interview with Lubee Biru on June 8, 2020.

² The Oromo people are the largest national group in the Ethiopian Empire, and they are colonial subjects and a political minority today. The second largest group are the Amhara, which have dominated the political economy, culture, and institutions of the empire, and their junior partner are called Tigrayans. There are also other minority groups struggling for their rights.

reason is that Baro's story is not a simple biography. His life story and rich experiences are an integral part of Oromo history. The second reason is that we cannot thoroughly learn and write about Baro without relating his account to the history of the Reverend Gudina Tumsa, his older brother, mentor, and the one who played a fatherly role in raising and educating Baro. Hopefully, Oromo scholars who have access to more information will write the story of the Reverend Gudina. Still, we can compare his role in Oromo society to that of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of African America and Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

While expressing his religious experiences in the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany, the Reverend Gudina noted his concern about humanity's spiritual and material conditions on a global level.³ *The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa*, published in 2003, indicates that he was a committed Protestant Christian who combined his religious gospel with a social mission. In his ministry, the Reverend Gudina discussed the oppressed and exploited peoples' political and economic grievances and the need to emancipate them from all unfreedoms. He sought to establish a just society on Earth. He asserted, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's power to save [believers] from eternal damnation, exploitation, political oppression, etc."⁴ Without a doubt, Gudina and Baro had similar views on the idea of a just society in Oromia, Ethiopia, and beyond.

However, the former was a pastor and a social activist, and the latter was a pharmacist, lawyer, and political activist. At the suggestion of his older brother, Baro gave a talk on the topic of "The Church and Ideologies" in 1976 in Najjoo, Wallaga, at the General Assembly of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekene Yesus. He articulated that the church should continue to promote social justice and support the revolution of 1974, which promoted land reform and other social justice reforms. He also stated, "Maybe in certain areas, the church might have to reorient its work methods ... And the capability to adapt to new situations becomes imperative for survival."⁵ Baro was well versed in the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly his teachings on ethics and morality, although he studied the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism. One of the quotes he recited at the

³ Gudina Tumsa Foundation, *The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa: General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekene Yesus (1929–1979)*, Addis Ababa, 2003, p. 48.

⁴ Quoted on the cover of the same book from "The Memorandum of July 1975 by Gudina Tumsa."

⁵ Baro Tumsa, "The Church and Ideologies," in *The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa: General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekene Yesus (1929–1979)*, Addis Ababa, 2003, pp. 35–36.

assembly, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” is one he interpreted to mean that Jesus taught forgiveness for those who committed offenses, engagement in peacemaking, and the need to express humility and meekness.⁶

The third reason why the writing of this book was challenging is that Baro coordinated and facilitated the creation of the OLF clandestinely. These factors created difficult conditions for fully understanding, reflecting, and writing about his contributions. Unfortunately, others told his story because of his unfortunate killing while struggling to liberate his people for unexpressed and unknown reasons. The fourth reason is that writing about Baro cannot be accomplished without linking his story to the history of the OLF, which is the symbol and embodiment of the national *Oromummaa* (Oromo national history, culture, and nationalism). The resurgence and development of national *Oromummaa* have enabled the Oromo people to rebuild their nationhood and peoplehood, which have been fragmented into local, regional, and religious identities by the divide-and-destroy tactics of *nafxanyas*’ (armed colonial settlers’) institutions⁷ starting in the late nineteenth century.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷ Menelik, the Amhara warlord, colonized the Oromo and other peoples with the help of England, France, and Italy during the Scramble of Africa and established settler colonialism and its institution known as the *nafxanya-gabbar* system. He terrorized and colonized the Oromo and other peoples to obtain slaves and commodities such as gold, ivory, coffee, musk, hides and skins, and lands. Menelik controlled the slave trade (an estimated 25,000 slaves per year in the 1880s), and owned with his wife 70,000 enslaved Africans, and became one of the richest capitalists in the region and the world: “The Abyssinian ruler had extended the range of his financial operations to the United States and [was] a heavy investor in American railroads ... with his American securities and his French and Belgian mining investments, Menelik [had] a private fortune estimated at no less than twenty-five million dollars” (*New York Times*, November 7, 1909). The colonialists used guns (*nafxi*) and established a system of dispossessing mainly Oromo lands and exacting their labor and agricultural products. The colonial settlers—soldiers, clergymen, and administrators, all known as *nafxanyas*—exploited *gabbars* (semi-slaves) who were coerced to provide them food, labor, tribute, and tax revenues both in cash and kind. A *ras* (a head of a group) or *dajazmach* (war leader) could receive 1000 *gabbars*, a sub-governor 200 or 300, a *fiawrar* (another war leader) 300, a *kan-gazmach* (lower war leader) 150, and ordinary soldiers, depending on their ranks, 20, 15 or 10. The Amhara-led colonial government claimed absolute rights over three-fourths of the Oromo lands and provided portions for its officials and soldiers in lieu of salary. One fourth of the land was granted to the Oromo collaborators, who became the agents of the *nafxanya* state. Even though some changes occurred in the Ethiopian Empire during 1974, 1991, 2018, the *nafxanya* of all kinds have come to power and continued to protect the same system. The current regime led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is characterized as the neo-*nafxanya* government because it tries to modernize the Ethiopian state by glorifying Menelik.

The OLF mapped an ideological and political roadmap for the collective Oromo nation. It introduced significant political innovations and the knowledge for liberation by challenging the dominant concept of *Ethiopianism*,⁸ which systematically degraded and abused Oromo history, culture, humanity, and identity.⁹ The OLF has gradually liberated the minds of millions of Oromos and mobilized them to fight for their freedom and the liberation of their country, Oromia.¹⁰ For instance, millions of Oromos and the Oromo youth, known as *Qeerroo/Qarree*, engaged in the persistent struggle for self-determination and democracy in Oromia and the diaspora between 2014 and 2018, bringing a regime change in the Ethiopian Empire.¹¹ The revolutionary elements of the Oromo youth movement have joined the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the politico-military organization of the Oromo society. As the continuation of the Oromo Liberation Front and the Oromo youth movement, the OLA has become the pillar and the fulcrum of the Oromo national struggle for self-determination, sovereign statehood, and egalitarian democracy.

Baro profoundly understood how the Ethiopian colonizers grossly oppressed and exploited the Oromo masses and elites. Even if they joined and participated in the Ethiopian colonial institutions, the Oromo elites were not equal citizens in the empire. Since the Ethiopian colonial government made them powerless, they could not improve the Oromo standard of living. The primary purpose of the Ethiopian educational policy was to Amaharize Oromo, who got access to education, to make them members of the Oromo collaborator class by imposing on them Orthodox Christianity and Amhara names, culture, and language. In this process,

⁸ Ethiopians/Abyssinians or Habashas (mainly Amharas and Tigrayans) consider themselves Semitic and suppress their Africanness or Blackness by claiming racial and cultural superiority to Blacks in general and the indigenous Africans they colonized. Successive Ethiopian state elites have used the discourses of civilization, race, culture, and religion to justify and rationalize the colonization and dehumanization of the indigenous Africans such as Agaos, Qimant, Oromos, Ogaden-Somalis, Afars, Sidamas, and Walayitas. See Asafa Jalata, "Being in and out of Africa: The Impact and Duality of Ethiopianism," *The Journal of Black Studies*, 2009, 40: 189–214.

⁹ Asafa Jalata, "Struggling for Social Justice in the Capitalist World System: The Cases of African Americans, Oromos, Southern and Western Sudanese," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 2008, pp. 363–388.

¹⁰ Asafa Jalata, *The Oromo Movement and Imperial Politics* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000).

¹¹ For example, **Mosis Aga**, "Qeerroo: A regimented organization or a spontaneous movement?" August 21, 2020 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/author/mosisa/>, accessed on 8/24/2020.

most of the educated Oromo have become Amhara and rejected their Oromo identity. However, Amhara elites did not treat them as equal citizens in the empire. Despite their academic and professional achievements, the colonial institutions have relegated these individuals to an inferior status relative to the Ethiopian (Amhara/Tigray) ruling elites because of their Oromo identity.

Having political awareness and knowledge and recognizing their low-level status, a few educated Oromo started to promote the development of the collective consciousness of Oromo peoplehood and Oromo nationalism. Due to a fundamental contradiction between the Ethiopian colonizing structures and the colonized Oromo, the Ethiopian society could not assimilate some Oromo elites culturally and structurally. The formation of the MTA in 1963–1964 marked the public rise of Oromo nationalism.¹² Because the Ethiopian Constitution disallowed the establishment of a political organization, emerging Oromo nationalists formed this association as a civilian self-help association using Article 45 of Ethiopia's 1955 Revised Constitution and Article 14, Number 505 of the Civil Code. Baro was one of the brilliant students of this association.

The MTA gave birth to the Oromo national movement and gained legitimacy among the Oromo; it politicized their collective grievances and appealed to their desire to regain their cultural, political, and economic rights. The association rejected subordination to the cultural and political supremacy of the Oromo oppressors. However, collective identities do not automatically appear but are the “essential outcomes of the mobilization process ... [which are] crucial prerequisites to movement success.”¹³ The struggle of the Oromo people developed from the culmination of previous resistance¹⁴ and due to the exploitation, oppression, and dehumanization

¹² Asafá Jalata, “Sociocultural Origins of the Oromo National Movement in Ethiopia,” *The Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 21 (Winter), 1993, pp. 267–286.

¹³ Steven M. Buechler, “Beyond Resource Mobilization Theory? Emerging Trends in Social Movement Theory,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 34, 1993, pp. 217–235.

¹⁴ The Oromo resistance to Ethiopian colonialism continued after their conquest because they were assigned the status of slaves and colonial subjects by the Ethiopian colonial state. Various Oromo groups challenged Ethiopian settler colonialism to regain their freedom. Numerous local groups expelled the Ethiopian colonial settlers from their country. The search for freedom was clearly manifested when thirty-three Oromo chiefs held meetings in 1936 and decided to establish a Western Oromo Confederacy. The document they signed to establish this confederacy expressed the desire of the people of Western Oromia to become a League of Nations protectorate with the help of the British government until the Oromo could achieve self-government.

of Oromo society. Overall, the emergence of an educated revolutionary sector, continued socioeconomic crises, and meaningful events, such as social upheavals and protests, produced the Oromo struggle. Colonial capitalism in agriculture and commerce created new class forces and social groups such as workers, the military, intellectuals, and students in the Oromo society during and after the mid-twentieth century. The Ethiopian colonial government had effectively excluded these emerging social forces and the masses from equal access to political power and cultural and economic gains.¹⁵

The colonial government effectively banned the MTA in 1967 by killing and imprisoning its prominent leaders. Before its banning, MTA had attracted millions of members and followers by initiating literacy education and important development initiatives such as providing health services throughout Oromia.¹⁶ After the violent targeting and silencing of MTA and its leaders, Baro and some other revolutionary nationalist elements of the association transformed the peaceful opposition movement that the MTA had inspired into a guerrilla-armed struggle led by the OLF.¹⁷ Baro was the leading pioneering nationalist intellectual in the political and ideological transformation of the Oromo society in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. He played a leading role in creating the OLF, which is the central subject of this book.

After the destruction of the MTA in 1967, a few Oromo nationalists who survived the crackdown were exiled and became political refugees in the Middle East and formed the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF) in 1971. Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa note that “intellectuals who had survived the banning of Macha-Tulama had gone underground to find a new approach. Those who had been able to leave the country were also searching for alternative tactics and strategies to achieve the objective they had espoused and find a new model for effective organization.”¹⁸ The ENLF’s primary objectives were to reform Ethiopia,

¹⁵ Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

¹⁶ Asafa Jalata and Mohammed Hassen, *The Macha-Tulama Association, and its Importance in Oromo History* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Printing Press, 2014).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1990), p. 299.

introduce democracy, and bring civil and political equality to all peoples by eliminating the imperial nature of the Ethiopian colonial state.¹⁹ However, most Oromo nationalists did not endorse the ENLF because they believed the organization inadequately understood the true nature of the Ethiopian state and its elites and institutions.

Instead, they supported the development of Oromo revolutionary nationalism, which aimed to dismantle Ethiopian settler colonialism at its root and its institutions by establishing a people's democratic government as an independent or autonomous state within a federated or confederated democratic society. As explained in detail, the clandestine Oromo study circles that Baro and his comrades formed were the main initiators of revolutionary Oromo nationalism and the OLF political program.²⁰ Baro brought together a few Oromo nationalists and established an underground political movement by transforming ENLF's reform nationalism into a revolutionary program. The Ethiopian colonial government denied the Oromo any channels to express their individual and collective interests. The Oromo nationalists understood from the beginning the importance of revitalizing Oromo culture and history for the survival of the Oromo national identity and the development of national *Oromummaa* or Oromo nationalism. Under the informal leadership of Baro, Oromo revolutionary nationalist leaders produced political pamphlets.²¹ They expanded their sphere of influence by organizing many underground and secret political study circles in different sectors of Oromo society, such as students, professionals, workers, farmers, and soldiers within the Ethiopian army.

In the early 1970s, after recognizing that the Oromo people needed a sense of nationhood and a liberation front, Baro, a pharmacist and a lawyer, created secret study circles in Finfinnee drawn primarily from Oromo intellectuals and students from diverse backgrounds and initiated the process of forming the OLF. Even though the Oromo national movement started to develop in the 1960s by challenging the policies and practices of the Ethiopian colonial state,²² it expanded its organizational capacity after

¹⁹ Asafa Jalata, "Sheik Hussein Suura and the Oromo Struggle," *The Oromo Commentary: Bulletin for Critical Analysis of Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa*, 1994, IV/1: 5–7.

²⁰ See the Oromo Liberation Front Program, 1974, and revised in 1976.

²¹ As example, I can mention *The Oromo Voice Against Tyranny* that was published secretly in 1971 by a few scholars.

²² Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–1992* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

creating the nucleus of the underground OLF in the early 1970s.²³ As explained in other publications,²⁴ social, structural, and other decisive factors, including the dynamic interplay of economic and political changes, urbanization and community formation, the development of institutions, the emergence of an educated class, and politicized collective grievances, facilitated the development of Oromo nationalism. Also, disseminating social, scientific, and political knowledge through networks and their interplay facilitated the development of the OLF-led Oromo movement.²⁵ This book focuses on the role of Baro in this process. It also aims to fill the gap in our critical understanding of Oromo nationalism and leadership in the Oromo national movement.

The book identifies relevant theories of leadership and uses them to examine various aspects of Baro's life: his social and cultural upbringing in the Oromo society, his student life, and political involvement at the Haile Selassie I University and the MTA, the relationship between his professional life and political activism, his networking and study circle activities, his involvement in underground projects of nation-building, his actions during the political crisis of the 1970s and his role in the birth of the OLF, and the impact of his ultimate sacrifice for the liberation of the Oromo people and his country.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

I used the data collected from qualitative interviews, historical accounts, government records, OLF documents, family members, memoirs, electronic media, and other sources to write this book. Ayetu, Baro Tumsa's daughter, and I collected data on Baro's role in creating the OLF through intensive interviews with prominent individuals who worked with him and knew him closely. Today, these individuals live in different parts of the world. We interviewed thirty-three pioneer Oromo nationalists, Ayetu interviewed eight, and I interviewed twenty-five.

²³ See Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1990).

²⁴ See, for example, Asafa Jalata, *Fighting Against the Injustice of the State and Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and *Contending Nationalisms of Oromia and Ethiopia* (Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing, Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2010).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Our interview questions included: (1) When and how did you become a friend of Baro Tumsa? (2) What issues helped in maintaining your friendship with him? (3) What kinds of personality traits and behavior did Baro manifest? (4) How did Baro deal with Oromos, who had different interests? (5) What were Baro's main principles, tactics, and strategies in organizing underground Oromo activist networks? (6) How did he develop these principles? (7) What are the things you admired about him? (8) What were his strengths and weaknesses as a person and a leader? (9) Most people who knew him mentioned he was an extraordinary person and leader. What is your take on this? (10) How did Baro make decisions on Oromo issues? (11) Was he a Marxist or an egalitarian democrat on the line of *gadaa* (Oromo indigenous democracy)? (12) Why did Baro insist on building an independent Oromo organization, the OLF? (13) What role did he play in creating the OLF? (14) How did he relate to the Macha-Tulama Self-Help Association? (15) What did the Oromo lose by his killing in 1978? (16) Are there more things you can tell us about Baro Tumsa?

To date, social and national movement studies focus primarily on broad structural changes or behavioral issues and pay little attention to the role of human agency or leadership. However, this work combines a structural approach with a social constructionist model of human agency. It employs interdisciplinary, multidimensional, qualitative, and critical methods to examine the dynamic interplay among social structures, human agency or leadership, and social/national movements. This book helps us understand the role of Baro and his colleagues in creating the OLF and developing national *Oromummaa*. In addition, it enables us to increase our comprehension of the complex issues of Oromo's collective and individual leadership and the Oromo movement. Also, this book provides insight into the complex and dynamic relationships between social agencies and their leaders by examining the Oromo national struggle.

THE OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 overviews the book's central organizing theme and sub-themes. It introduces conceptual issues and methodological and theoretical approaches to guide the reader through each chapter. Chapter 2 critically and broadly examines existing leadership theories that apply to analyzing Baro's leadership in the Oromo national movement. The chapter also investigates the dynamic relationship between leaders and organizations.

Chapter 3 explores how Baro's family and the Oromo culture and society shaped Baro's attitudes and behavior toward leadership. In the same chapter, the role of his older brother, the Reverend Gudina, in raising, educating, and mentoring him is examined. In addition, the chapter identifies and analyzes the types of literature Baro read in high school and college and how what he read helped him develop his knowledge and thinking concerning the struggle of the Oromo people.

Chapter 4 describes Baro's student life and political activities at Addis Ababa College and Haile Selassie I University (HSIU). He was politically and intellectually active when he was at HSIU. Chapter 5 explores the objectives of the MTA, identifies its prominent leaders, and describes the challenges they faced and the accomplishments they made. It also explains what the young Baro learned from other leaders and his roles in the association. He networked and prepared the groundwork for forming the OLF and the future underground movement after Haile Selassie's government banned the MTA in 1967.

Chapter 6 focuses on Baro's variegated professional experiences as a pharmacist and a lawyer and explains how he used his profession to become acquainted with more Oromo professionals and intellectuals and built underground social and political networks to create an underground movement in the formation of the OLF. It also deals with the political crisis of the early 1970s in the Ethiopian Empire. It explains Baro's and his colleagues' roles in popularizing two important slogans: "Land to the Tillers" and "The National or Nationality Question." This chapter explains why the land issue and the national question became the central organizing themes for overthrowing the Haile Selassie regime, which resulted in the rise of the military government. It also explores Baro's role in influencing the new administration to declare land reform by dismantling the private landholding system in the colonized territories such as Oromia. The chapter also explores several functions of Baro as a professional and an underground revolutionary leader.

The same chapter also covers the politics of networking and creating secret study circles and explains how Baro overcame security structures and spies while recruiting Oromo students, professionals, military officers, and intellectuals into underground study circles. It identifies issues raised and discussed during such study circles, such as revolutions, national movements, historical and current regional and global issues, Marxism, democracy, and armed struggle, and explores them relating to the formation of the OLF and the Oromo national movement.

Chapter 7 focuses on the central role Baro played in forming the OLF. The chapter also systematically explains how he mobilized secret study cells, political networks, and preexisting institutions to create and build the OLF in the 1970s. Chapter 8 identifies and explores opportunities and dangers for the survival of the OLF. It further explores why Baro joined the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the military wing of the OLF, in November 1977 by severing his relationship with the Ethiopian military regime. It also explains his killing in the jungle and how his murder impacted the OLA and the OLF. The final chapter identifies the historical successes and challenges of the OLF for almost a half-century, how and why it has survived this long period, and predicts its future direction. The final chapter also assesses the OLF's long journey of a half-century, its achievements, and Baro's profound legacy in the Oromo national movement.



CHAPTER 2

Theory of Quality Leadership

Baro Tumsa was an extraordinary revolutionary Oromo national leader admired by Oromo nationalists who knew and worked with him because of his wisdom, organizational, behavioral, and leadership qualities and capabilities. He was a selfless leader because he did not struggle for fame, power, and wealth. Still, he worked tirelessly to change the deplorable condition of his people, who had been suffering under the Ethiopian colonial system in a sea of poverty and ignorance for almost one century and a half. Baro was a pharmacist and a lawyer and held many important and high positions in the Ethiopian government establishment. The Ethiopian government mistreated Baro while he was working for the government. The authorities ultimately fired him because of his political activism, commitment to social justice and equality, and his attempts to raise the status of his people by using his knowledge and profession.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Baro formed the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. The OLF has a military wing called the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). He subsequently joined the OLA in Eastern Oromia (Hararghe) in November 1977 and was killed in 1978. His family and cultural background, having a brilliant older brother as a father figure, role model, and mentor, receiving higher education, and his brilliance made Baro an outstanding, selfless leader. This chapter explores the quality of Baro's leadership by relating it

to leadership and followership theories. Scholars of social and revolutionary movements define leadership as activities, relationships, and strategic choices packaged into policies to mobilize and organize a category of people to achieve defined objectives. For instance, Robert Gibb sees leadership as informal and interactional activities, which “include the negotiation of a collective identity and the development of a shared understanding among actors of the political and institutional environment ... in which they are operating.”¹

In interactional relationships, speakers become listeners, and listeners become speakers in a transformative way. Certain scholars consider leadership “simultaneously a purposive activity and dialogical relationship.”² Others see leadership as “a series of strategic choices by members of the organization’s dominant coalition.”³ There is a consensus among scholars of leadership studies that leadership, as an activity, involves intellectual directives and organizing activities. As intellectuals, political leaders develop theoretical, ideological, and organizing visions to identify and solve specific political and social problems. As some chapters of this book explain, Baro clearly understood the external and internal challenges and issues of the Oromo society. Hence, he clandestinely mobilized and coordinated selected Oromo activist students and intellectuals to study the central Oromo issues critically and to define them theoretically and practically. As a result, for the first time, Oromo nationalist scholars produced a document known as *The Oromos: Voice Against Tyranny* in 1971, which will be examined in Chap. 4.

Influential political leaders are theoreticians and social technicians who develop activity plans to solve identified problems by proposing appropriate policies and actions. Baro and his colleagues were not only theoreticians and technicians but also practitioners. Mahadi Mudee, an Oromo journalist and scholar, noted that Baro and his older brother, the

¹ Robert Gibb, “Leadership, Political Opportunities and Organizational Identity in the French Anti-racist movement,” p. 70, *Leadership and Social Movements*, edited by Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavallette (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 44–76.

² Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavallette, “Leadership Matters: An Introduction,” *Leadership and Social Movements*, edited by Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavallette (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 1–23, p. 5. Baker, Johnson and Lavallette (2001, p. 5).

³ Erwin Hargrove, “Two Conceptions of Institutional Leadership,” *Leadership & Politics*, edited by Bryan D Jones (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), pp. 57–83, 6.

Reverend Gudina Tumsa, played a central role in creating *Bariisa*, the first Oromo newspaper. They organized underground committees and helped finance and distribute newspaper copies throughout Oromia.⁴ Baro used his connection with the security chief of Ethiopia, Colonel Takka Tullu, an Oromo and a police member, to get initial permission to publish the newspaper in 1975.⁵ He knew how to use the existing system to benefit his people by mobilizing the underground Oromo networks he established.

Baro wisely combined reformist and revolutionary approaches while organizing and raising the political consciousness of his people. This prominent leader built broad networks of notable Oromos in government, academia, business, religious institutions, and sometimes the networks of ordinary Oromos from all walks of life. His down-to-earth relationship with many Oromos from different regions and religious backgrounds enabled him to build trust and respect from them. They helped him agitate, coordinate, and facilitate the formation of the OLF. The OLF has become the leading national political organization that has rebuilt the Oromo national unity by developing national *Oromummaa* (Oromo national history, culture, and nationalism) based on Oromo national culture and history. His charisma, social and communication skills, leadership qualities, networking skills, capacity to build connections, and ability to delegate authority made him a magnetic and far-sighted leader.

Leaders with cognitive and behavioral deficiencies cannot develop influential ideologies, build networks, or develop intermediate leadership (bridge leaders), and they are afraid to delegate authority to specialized bodies or individuals.⁶ Self-centered and autocratic leaders prevent the development of competent and confident teams of leadership that are interconnected through bridge leaders vertically and horizontally. Instead, such leaders would like to surround themselves with sycophants, ensuring the avoidance of reliable or accurate feedback on their activities. Baro recognized the deficiencies of self-centered leaders and mentored younger Oromos to hold leadership positions in the Oromo national movement. His leadership qualities were impressive; he was an effective listener and speaker while dealing with people.

Influenced leaders balance their “leading” and “led” selves through interactive and conversational relations. In this dialogue, some followers

⁴Telephone Interview with Mahadi Mudee, Abbaa Bariisa, June 20 and 21, 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶Colin Baker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavallette, *ibid.*

may emerge as leaders or take on some leadership roles. A constructive dialogue creates mutual understanding and agreement among and between leaders and followers within an organization or a movement. An effective conversation within the leadership and between leaders and followers can help develop strategic innovations from diverse perspectives and experiences and find new solutions for existing problems. Plans of action that emerge from participants' specific knowledge and experiences have more chances of success than plans imposed by confident leaders.⁷ Baro understood these qualities of leadership and effectively utilized them.

In addition, the effectiveness of leadership depends on personal and structural resources.⁸ Individual resources and commitment determine leadership performance. Personal resources involve mental and emotional power, focused energy and attention, analytical capacity, dedication and determination, the capacity to communicate, and the ability to blend the practices of leadership and followership by integrating "leading" and "led" selves. Structural and personal resources include layers of groups who share ideological and strategic ideas, formal and informal networks of people, political and economic systems, patterns of cultural expectations, the political dynamism of followers, recognizing and overcoming institutions' constraints, and leadership creativity.

The creativity of leadership depends upon the openness and willingness of those individuals in leadership roles to learn new skills that will help them gain the expertise they need to develop new political visions, policies, and strategies.

The expertise of individuals helps build and maintain political cohesion, take actions contingent on time and place, and continually renew political institutions or organizations. "Effective leadership ... involves a capacity to reassess, change tack, explore unknown territory, advance and retreat, and learn creatively. New possibilities disclose themselves; old action patterns prove inefficacious."⁹ The primary leadership responsibilities are guiding the constituent community in the struggle for organizational survival, policy achievement, and the acquisition of power by building

⁷ Aklilu Amsalu and Jan de Graff, "Farmers' views of soil erosion problems and their conservation knowledge at Ber'essa watershed, central highlands of Ethiopia," A *Agriculture and Human Values* volume 23, pages. 99–108 (2006), p. 90.

⁸ Bryan D. Jones, "Causation, Constraint, and Political Leadership," *Leadership & Politics*, edited by Bryan D. Jones (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), pp. 3–14. (Jones, 1989, p. 4).

⁹ Colin Baker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavalette, *ibid.*, p. 15.

expertise, developing internal cohesion, and securing aid from supporters, sympathizers, and others.

Creative and influential leaders understand the importance of the division and specialization of labor, the delegation of tasks to experts or specialists, and how those activities increase efficiency and productivity within the organization.¹⁰ Even though he facilitated the formation and building of the OLF clandestinely, Baro coordinated, organized, and trained leaders at all levels and locations. He built formal and informal networks that guided themselves and their constituents with his colleagues. He accomplished all these tasks under dangerous conditions because there had never been a rule of law and freedom for associations or organizations in the Ethiopian Empire. Successive Ethiopian governments have built and maintained security agencies and structures, the army, and the police force to destroy individuals and opposition forces by killing and imprisoning them. As a visionary leader, Baro combined transformative and transactional leadership styles to motivate and empower Oromo nationalists who pioneered a new liberation project for the Oromo society that had been colonized, brutalized, and exploited.

Visionary, pragmatic, and democratic political leaders create new possibilities in history by acting as agents of social change. There are two general types of leadership: transformative and transactional.¹¹ The former changes the paradigm, and the latter maintains the status quo. Maintaining a balance between the two forms of leadership is necessary to introduce change while maintaining stability. Just as introducing new ideas and innovations invigorates an organization, maintaining stability prevents the organization from facing chaos and disorder. Baro understood how human agency and objective factors determine the performance of leaders. By raising political consciousness in secret study circles and networks, Baro worked very hard to improve the capabilities of individuals to understand complex reality, build influential team players, and have the determination and courage to take well-thought-out actions.

He recognized that individual leaders and their teams could not accomplish everything they wanted since objective factors may limit their activities. For instance, the lack of political opportunity structures such as

¹⁰Mortis P. Fiorina and Kenneth A Shepsle, "Formal Theories of Leadership: Agents, Agenda Setters, and Entrepreneurs," *Leadership & Politics*, edited by Bryan n Jones (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), pp. 17–40, pp. 18–19.

¹¹Erwin Hargrove, *ibid.*, p. 57.

foreign assistance or economic resources negatively affected their actions. To overcome these challenges, Baro and his network members tried to establish connections with the embassies of China, Somalia, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union to obtain material and financial resources for the Oromo national movement.¹² He built relations with the embassies of these countries not because of ideological reasons but because of pragmatic reasons. Although the Oromo society has a similar democratic dispensation with the West, countries like England, France, and the United States have preferred to support the authoritarian-terrorist Amhara-Tigray regimes at the cost of the Oromo and other colonized peoples. Western countries have strong ties with the Ethiopian government. They are not even willing to recognize the existence of the Oromo people and their suffering under Ethiopian colonialism.¹³

Baro and his network members performed five significant tasks.¹⁴ The first task was defining the movement's objectives by establishing short- and long-term goals. The second task that Oromo leaders performed was providing the means of action by effectively identifying and channeling members' talents and energies and securing resources. Third, Oromo leaders established and maintained the structure and cohesion of the organization by regulating tensions within the organization, dealing with adversarial situations that might have destabilized the movement, and controlling the circulation of information. Unfortunately, the OLF failed to establish strong cohesion and effectively regulate tensions after Baro's death. Also, many individuals became impatient because the struggle had taken almost half a century.

Consequently, opportunist individuals from the organization's leadership and members left the main OLF and unsuccessfully tried to use its brand name. Some shamelessly joined the enemy camp or became passive and continued to attack the OLF and its leadership. Despite these challenges, the OLF has survived attacks from external and internal enemies and has intensified the Oromo national movement. The fourth task was expanding membership numbers and mobilizing members' support for the movement's objectives by appealing to the campaign's interests and

¹²Telephone interview with Faqadu Waqijira, a prominent OLF leader, June 17, 2020.

¹³For instance, read, Asafa Jalata, "Imperfections in U.S. Foreign Policy toward Oromia and Ethiopia: Will the Obama Administration Introduce Change? *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, March 2011, pp. 131–154.

¹⁴Robert Gibb, *ibid.*, 64–65.