The Place of the Oromo Diaspora in the Oromo National Movement: Lessons from the Agency of the "Old" African Diaspora in the United States

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Introduction

Just as European and African slave traders merchandised Africans and created the old African diaspora, successive colonial and authoritarian regimes of Ethiopia forced some Oromos out of their homeland, Oromia, and caused them to settle in the West. The displaced Oromo entered the United States as one of the “new” African diaspora groups four centuries after the old African diaspora began to be created. In the process, the Oromo diaspora emerged on the world stage. Whereas the old African diaspora lived under racial slavery and segregation for almost three centuries, the new African diaspora communities such as the Oromo came to enjoy a measure of freedom in the land of their refuge, primarily owing to the new conditions created by the struggle and sacrifice of the old diaspora. Elements of the Oromo diaspora who, under “Ethiopian political slavery,” lived without freedom of expression and association, came to exercise these rights in the United States. Members of this Oromo group created communities, political organizations, and scholarly associations. In foreign lands, they became able freely to define and defend their individual and collective national interests and to link the Oromo people to the global community.
This article documents the experiences of the old African diaspora in building institutions and organizations, in order to impress the lessons of these experiences upon diaspora Oromo nationalists. Isolated from the world for more than a century by Ethiopian colonialism, the Oromo people became scattered around the world. Oromo diaspora communities nowadays are building close linkages among themselves and with the Oromo movement at home, thanks to globalization and modern communication technology. The diaspora Oromo nationalists, if acquainted with the African American story, can be inspired to contribute their part to the Oromo movement’s struggle for survival, self-determination, and multicultural democracy. The article also aims to open a critical dialogue between the old and new African diaspora groups in the hope that African Americans, if informed about the tenacity and endurance of their African compatriots, can make common cause with the Oromo in the struggle for multicultural democracy and economic development on a global scale. Overall, the article will enable us to explore issues of transnationalism through which diaspora groups can direct and shape nationalist movements in the countries of their origin.

The Intellectual and Autobiographical Case for Comparison

As a member of the Oromo diaspora, I bring a particular perspective to this discussion. My own life and intellectual development are intertwined with the creation of the Oromo diaspora community. As an Oromo born and raised in Oromia, a displaced person who has lived in the United States since 1981, and a parent who has constantly engaged his children in a dialogue about the complexity of diaspora life, I have been intrigued by the similarities in the world system–imposed oppression and exploitation experienced by the African American and Oromo peoples and the similarities between the struggles and experiences of these two peoples.

As a scholar, while researching and teaching in the United States, I came to develop a deep interest in the literature and the history of the African American experience. My life experience and my intellectual interest engendered within me a scholarly interest in comparing the
experiences of African Americans and Oromos and the shared interest of the old and new African diaspora groups in the critical understanding of their respective stakes in the struggle against global oppression and racism. In the past, a lack of mutual understanding has caused African diaspora members and Africans to see Ethiopia as a symbol of black freedom, when in fact Ethiopia was a settler colonial state that participated in the European partition of Africa and in merchandising Africans. African Americans deserve to know that Ethiopia is a symbol of racial/ethnonational oppression and exploitation, not an emblem of black freedom. Just as African Americans have an interest in identifying all forms of racism and in getting rid of racialized global structures, Oromos in general, and diaspora Oromos in particular, need to know about the struggle of American blacks, so that they can acquire more effective ways of fighting against the injustices of the state in Ethiopia and the global racism that supports and justifies the oppression and exploitation of the Oromo.

At a time when some African American elite members, in collaboration with other progressive forces, are attempting to change U.S. foreign policy toward Africa, all the forces of social change need to understand how Ethiopian racism intertwines with Western racism to maintain racial/ethnonational stratification. As a movement whose aim is to confront the alliance of Ethiopian and Western racism and global tyranny, the Oromo national movement is one of Africa’s progressive forces, which needs to be recognized as a force whose purpose is to bring about positive social change.

Even though the old and new African diaspora groups entered the United States through different routes, they have similar challenges and objectives in fighting racism and underdevelopment and in promoting multicultural democracy. The interest of the African diaspora and its members’ human dignity cannot be fully protected without liberating the mother continent, Africa, from Western satellite regimes like that of Ethiopia. This can be made possible by initiating a critical dialogue between the old and new African diaspora groups, by taking into consideration the past and current experiences of these groups, and by developing long-term political and cultural strategies in this era of globalization. This dialogue could start with a basic understanding of the
Oromo diaspora and the agency of an old African diaspora in order to draw important lessons from almost four centuries of experience.

**The Development of the Oromo National Movement**

Conquered by and absorbed into Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, the Oromos were removed from the global community by the Abyssinian system of political slavery. Oromia was denied a "status as a nation among the community of nations." The Ethiopians established a settler colonial structure in Oromia, erased the cultural identity and the language of the Oromo from public life and the historical record, and isolated Oromos from one another. Ethiopia became "the intermediary representative in the outside world for all the peoples contained within the empire. When the Oromo political system with its overarching integrative republican mechanism of public assemblies was officially dismantled and replaced by centralized Ethiopian administrative policies in Oromia, the isolation of the Oromo peoples was complete."

Because Ethiopia imposed its rule on the Oromo and maintained a colonial relationship with them, Oromos never recognized the legitimacy of Ethiopian suzerainty and never assumed an Ethiopian identity for themselves. The effort to force an Ethiopian identity and culture upon Oromos succeeded only in assimilating a few Oromos who attended the few public schools in Oromia, established and controlled by the Ethiopian regime. The majority of Oromos did not receive formal education and remained largely unaffected by the assimilationist efforts. The Ethiopian colonial government in any case did not encourage structural assimilation or a policy of allowing its colonial subjects access to political opportunity, cultural and economic resources, education, or any resource or activity it deemed incompatible with its colonial interests.

Although marginalized, most Oromos kept their *Oromummaa* or *Oromoness* at the risk of being relegated to second-class citizenship within the Ethiopian colonial state. Disaffected, the Oromos continued to resist Ethiopian settler colonialism and to fight to regain their freedom and independence. Resistance sometimes took the form of local uprisings, including instances in which Ethiopian colonial settlers were expelled from Oromo areas. By the 1960s, Oromo resistance to the
imposition of Ethiopian settler colonial rule had assumed the form of reform nationalism, a movement whose purpose was to demand the Oromos accommodation and fair treatment as Ethiopian citizens. Nonetheless, it took a while for Oromo nationalism to mature, in contrast to the relatively short time, from the 1920s to the 1950s, that it took for nationalism to develop in various parts of colonial Africa.

Several factors contributed to the slow development of Oromo nationalism. The Ethiopian colonial state and its institutions impeded the development of an autonomous Oromo leadership by co-opting the submissive elements and liquidating the nationalist ones. State officials actively suppressed Oromo institutions, distorted Oromo history, and stunted the development of the Oromo language and culture. Denied access to formal education, Oromos remained without formally trained and culturally grounded intellectuals. Only a handful of Oromos were fortunate enough to receive formal education, an experience that opened their eyes to the abysmal situation of the lives of their kin. One such fortunate Oromo was Onesimos Nasib, a slave lad from western Oromia who was trained in Sweden as a Christian missionary.

In the first half the twentieth century, Onesimos and his assistants, Aster Ganno, Lydia Dimbo, and Feben (Hirphere) Abba Magaal, as well as the Islamic religious scholar Sheik Bakri Saphalo, pioneered the production of written literature in Afaan Oromoo and tried to introduce literacy to Oromo society. The Ethiopian colonial government and the Orthodox Church suppressed the efforts of these scholars and thwarted the emergence of Oromo national consciousness. In addition, after achieving independence in 1960, Somalia worked hard to Somalize some Oromos, in its irredentist ambition to annex a part of Oromia to Somalia. Compressed between Ethiopia, which saw it as a major threat to Ethiopian territorial integrity, and Somalia, which regarded it as an obstacle to the realization of the dream of Greater Somalia, Oromo nationalism remained an idea in the minds of a few Oromos.

By the late 1960s, the cumulative experiences of resistance and the politicized collective and individual grievances of Oromos had begun to be transformed into an ideology of nationalism. The process was assisted by the migration of many Oromos from rural areas to cities and the emergence of a small conscious Oromo intelligentsia. Paradoxically,
the collective consciousness of Oromos or Oromo nationalism was kindled among the Oromo elite, who had been educated to be co-opted by the Ethiopian ruling class. Barred by the Ethiopian Constitution from establishing a political organization, the nascent Oromo educated class, in 1963, formed the Macca Taulama Self-Help Association (MTSHA) in Finfinne (Addis Ababa), the capital city of the Ethiopian empire. The association was on record as stating that its objective was to formulate programs to solve economic, social, and educational problems in Oromo society, but the very act of its founding was construed by the Ethiopians as an expression of the collective grievances of the Oromo people.

Even though MTSHA was scrupulous in declaring that its objective was to contribute to the state’s effort to improve the social and economic welfare of Oromos and other Ethiopians, the members of the Ethiopian ruling elite were not convinced that the association did not have a subversive political agenda. A campaign of defaming MTSHA subsequently got underway, as its members were harassed, denied treatment equal to that of other Ethiopian bureaucrats and civil servants, and frequently accused of disloyalty to the state. On one occasion, Aklilu Habte Wold, then the Ethiopian prime minister, confided to Brigadier General Taddasa Biru the government’s undeclared policy to deny educational and professional opportunities to Oromos. The general was an Ethiopianized Oromo who later joined the association because of this event. In 1966, the stunned general attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate Emperor Haile Sellassie and take over power.

Haile Sellassie’s government was alarmed by this daring action and by the level of Oromo discontent and political consciousness. In 1967, MTSHA was banned, some of its leaders executed, and others imprisoned. Oromo cultural groups, such as the Affran Qallo and the Biftu Ganamo musical bands, were accused of being conveyers of devious political messages and disbanded. Between 1968 and 1970, the Bale Oromo armed struggle, which had started in the early 1960s, was brutally suppressed by government forces with technical assistance from Great Britain, the United States, and Israel. The severity and speed with which the government reacted to the attempted assassination of Haile Sellassie made it plain to Oromo nationalists that their demands for social and economic justice would never be attained by reforming the
Ethiopian state. Oromo nationalism was subsequently forced to go underground.

With the suppression of Oromo reform nationalism (calling for reform but not overthrowing the empire’s political and economic system), some Oromo nationalists fled to Somalia, the Middle East, and elsewhere to continue the struggle in exile. Others remained in Ethiopia. The continued denial of individual, civil, and collective rights and the suppression of Oromo organizations and movements forced Oromo leaders who remained in Ethiopia to press on with the Oromo struggle clandestinely. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, they established an underground political movement and expanded their influence by organizing different political circles in different sectors of Oromo society, including students, professionals, workers, farmers, and soldiers. Using political pamphlets that they produced and distributed secretly, they framed the Oromo question as a colonial question and, by doing this, defined the future direction of the Oromo national movement. By the early 1970s, Oromo reform nationalism had been transformed into a revolutionary nationalism that had as its goal the dismantling of Ethiopian settler colonialism and the establishment of an independent state or an autonomous region within a federated, multicultural, democratic society. In 1973, Oromos who had fled to foreign countries and received military training returned to Oromia to initiate an armed struggle. In 1974, this group and the revolutionary nationalists who had remained in Ethiopia announced the creation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to spearhead the Oromo struggle.

Soon, the OLF began to challenge Ethiopian colonial domination ideologically, intellectually, politically, and militarily. In response, the Ethiopian state initiated counterinsurgency operations against Oromo nationalists and the Oromo people. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the OLF encountered difficulties as it sought to accelerate the pace of the struggle. International support was hard to come by, and acquiring bases from which to launch guerrilla attacks proved difficult. Ethiopia’s relentless attacks and Somalia’s challenge to Oromo nationalism, coupled with internal disagreement within the OLF leadership, stunted the growth of revolutionary Oromo nationalism, which had begun to develop quickly in the mid-1970s. In one incident in 1979, almost all the members of the
OLF executive committee were wiped out on their way to an important organizational meeting in Somalia. Oromo nationalists and veteran leaders like Tadassa Biru and Hailu Ragassa were killed in 1976. In 1980, the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam rounded up and murdered high-ranking OLF leaders and several hundred activists. Because of all these factors, the Oromo movement could not play a direct, leading role in the fall of the military regime in May 1991.

With the demise of this regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power with the support and endorsement of the U.S. government. A Transitional Government, composed of the EPDRF and various liberation fronts, the most prominent of which was the OLF, was formed to pave the way for the eventual establishment of an all-inclusive, democratic government in Ethiopia.

During the early phases of the transitional period in 1991 and 1992, Oromo nationalism was transformed from an elite movement to a mass movement. The development of the Oromo national movement representing the largest ethnonational group in Ethiopia was viewed by the TPLF as a major roadblock to the march toward the establishment of Tigrayan hegemony. In an effort to remove the obstacle, the TPLF-led ethnocratic Ethiopian government labeled Oromo nationalists, businessmen, and intellectuals as "narrow nationalists" and "enemies of the Ethiopian Revolution" and began a systematic effort to destroy Oromo nationalism altogether.10 Thousands of Oromos were killed, imprisoned, and robbed of their property. Several prominent Oromo journalists and intellectuals were imprisoned illegally and many were killed. Even a relief organization that served Oromos, the Oromo Relief Association (ORA), was outlawed and expelled from neighboring countries.11 Despite the challenges to the Oromo people and their national movement, the OLF and other Oromo organizations continued the Oromos' national struggle for self-determination. The intensification of the national struggle, as expected, brought Ethiopian state terrorism down on Oromos. These conditions have forced thousands of Oromos to seek protection in the West and join the African diaspora groups that came before them.
Globalization and the Emergent Oromo Diaspora

The process of globalization that started in the sixteenth century is characterized at the present stage by a revolution in information, communications, and transportation technologies that have reduced the relevance of national boundaries, eliminated barriers to global investment, and allowed the easy movement of capital, information, technology, and labor. In the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s, these global changes and structures, combined with oppressive conditions in the Ethiopian empire, forced hundreds of thousands of Oromos out of their homeland and made them refugees in foreign lands. The dispersal of Oromos has now produced nascent Oromo diaspora communities worldwide. Noting this phenomenon, Bonnie Holcomb commented: “[A]fter a century of separation from one another, Oromos have come together in the world beyond Oromia where communication was unrestricted.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Ethiopian military regime declared an all-out war against “narrow nationalist” and “secessionist” enemies of the revolution. With the support of the former Soviet Union, the regime attacked Oromo nationalists with unprecedented fury. Massive human rights violations were committed as political and religious persecution was unleashed and schemes of forced resettlement and villagization, a political project that created peasant hamlets on government-selected sites, were carried out. The combined effect of these policies and attacks, summary executions, and political persecution caused the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Oromos, who migrated to neighboring countries. In the 1990s, the TPLF-dominated government of Ethiopia continued the long-standing persecution of the Oromo people and their independent political and civil organizations, this time with assistance from the West, particularly the United States. Oromo nationalist journalists, businessmen and businesswomen, intellectuals, teachers, students, farmers, artists, and civil servants were killed, imprisoned, or “disappeared” without trace. Ethiopian state terrorism “drove millions of people to abandon their homes to escape conscription, starvation, and certain death by seeking refuge beyond the borders of the empire.” In this process, about half a million Oromos were scattered around the world.
Today there are about 50,000 Oromos in North America, the majority of whom immigrated to the United States and Canada as refugees. A few others came as tourists and students but decided to remain for political or personal reasons. Among the latter group, some began organizing Oromo diaspora associations in order to expand the support base for Oromo nationalism and the struggle for national liberation.¹⁵ Their ideas came to fruition in 1974 when 11 Oromos came together to form the Union of Oromos in North America (UONA).¹⁶ More Oromos joined UONA during its second congress in the following year.¹⁷ Promoting the Oromo national movement and openly advocating Oromummaa, OLF-affiliated organizations such as the UONA, the Union of Oromo Students in Europe (UOSE), and later the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), the Oromo Relief Association (ORA), Oromo community organizations, Oromo support groups, and Oromo Christian and Muslim communities sprang up in the West and in other parts of the world.

The base of the Oromo diaspora community has been expanding recently in both number and diversity. As more refugees arrived in the West, the Oromo diaspora was transformed from a handful of educated Christian males from Western and Central Oromia to a more broadly based representation of the population of Oromia. The new wave of arrivals brought women and children, farmers, traders, Muslims and traditional religionists, and persons of less urbanized, relatively less privileged, and consequently less “Ethiopianized” background and experience.¹⁸

Living outside the control of Ethiopia, the new Oromo diaspora community quickly became engaged in building organizations that reflect Oromummaa and promote the Oromo struggle for self-determination, self-expression, and self-sufficiency both in Oromia and abroad. Although they are concentrated in big cities like Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Atlanta, Seattle, Toronto, and Ottawa, the members of the Oromo diaspora community are scattered over most North American cities. They have raised the voice of the Oromo people in the First World. Lessons from the accumulated experience of African Americans can provide workable strategies and fresh insights for the new Oromo diaspora in building effective organizations to challenge Ethiopian settler colonialism and its sponsor, global tyranny.
The Agency of the Old African Diaspora

In the seventeenth century, enslaved Africans entered the global capitalist system via racial slavery and played a decisive role in founding and building the United States without enjoying the fruits of their labor. The system that created racialized and exploitative structures also nurtured the development of the African American movement and occasioned a dynamic interplay between racialized structures and African American human agency. The American capitalist system developed a racial caste system (embodied in slavery and later in segregation) to prevent, for the benefit of white elite members and society, the advancement of African Americans as individuals and as a racialized, ethnonational group.

After 246 years of struggle to retain an African identity and restore freedom, African American peoplehood developed from the enslaved Africans of various ethnonational origins, from African cultural memory, from the collective dehumanization of slavery, and from the hope for survival as a people in the future. There were various forms of individual and group resistance struggles and protonationalism in African American society. The ancestors of African Americans, both individually and collectively, resisted enslavement in Africa and fought against slavery on slave ships and later on American plantations. Some slaves revolted while others formed maroon communities beyond the reach of planters.19 These and other forms of ideological and cultural resistance established a strong social foundation from which cultural memory and popular historical consciousness emerged to facilitate the development of African American institutions and nationalism.20

Surviving the violence of racial slavery and American segregation for more than three centuries, the descendants of the old African diaspora effectively consolidated their struggle for liberation, self-determination, and multicultural democracy in the first half of the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, African American nationalism had developed as a cultural, intellectual, ideological, and political movement whose purpose was to achieve civil equality, human dignity, and economic development by ending white racial and colonial dictatorship.
Development of Institutions

Until the mid-1860s, African American nationalism developed rather haltingly, owing to the persistence of racial slavery, the active repression of African culture, the prohibition of formal education for slaves, and the denial of political freedom to African Americans. Between the 1770s and the 1860s, however, freed African Americans and their descendants laid the foundation for the emergence of black nationalism by building institutions and organizations that later provided “a favorable structure of political opportunities” for the African American struggle. In the urbanized North, they established autonomous self-help and fraternal associations, churches, schools, small businesses, media outlets, and cultural centers before the Civil War. Freed African Americans developed an organizational infrastructure, evolving from these indigenous organizations and institutions, that helped develop the African American movement during the first half of the twentieth century. A few antebellum black scholars played a decisive role in seizing political opportunities, developing popular consciousness, and building institutions and organizations. They produced books, magazines, newspapers, and journals that later helped develop black cultural memory and popular historical consciousness. These scholar-activists, while fighting against racial slavery and segregation, attempted intellectually to capture the African cultural experience. Reconnecting African Americans to the African cultural past and introducing various African civilizations to the world, they challenged the white racism and Eurocentric historical knowledge that posited that blacks were backward, primitive, pagan, and intellectually inferior to whites. By revealing that African civilizations and cultures prior to the sixteenth century were equal to or, in some respects, more advanced than European ones, the black intellectuals refuted the claim of the natural superiority of the white people. Despite the fact that these scholars sometimes held elitist and “modernist” positions, they produced an alternative knowledge that laid the foundation for an Afrocentric scholarship, the paradigm that promotes the idea of multicultural society.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, freed and freeborn blacks struggled to free their enslaved black brothers and sisters and gain civil
equality, and to consolidate the cultural and ideological foundations of African American political consciousness and nationalism. Politically conscious freedmen and their children used various platforms to fight against racial slavery and to promote civil equality. In 1827, for instance, Thomas Paul and Samuel Cornish established the nation’s first African American newspaper, Freedom’s Journal. The editors and pamphleteers of this newspaper provided a critical social, political, and cultural commentary that invoked the common African ancestry on which the earlier nationalists had drawn on to shape a moral community. In 1829, David Walker published the Appeal, in which he stated, “the greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears,” and demanded that white Americans “make a national acknowledgment to us [blacks] for the wrongs they have inflicted on us.”25 In this manifesto, David Walker demanded civil equality and cultural integrity, condemning racial slavery, white racism, and the corruption of Christianity and other institutions. Also worthy of note in the black resistance literature of the nineteenth century is a magazine called the Liberator, which William Lloyd Garrison founded on 1 January 1831.

The politically conscious blacks also started to build a collective movement. At the suggestion of Hezekiah Grice, Richard Allen convened a clandestine meeting of 40 self-selected delegates in September 1830 in Philadelphia and founded the National Convention Movement, the first civil rights movement in the United States. This movement met only twice, in 1830 and 1835, but it shaped the future African American political agenda. Describing the movement’s significance, E. B. Bethel writes:

The architects of the movement transformed race identity for free African Americans into a political resource upon which two major twentieth century liberation movements would draw to fuel their agendas. [The first was] . . . the impulse for cultural unification of people of color that would also drive twentieth century Pan Africanism. At the same time, and complementing the focus on citizenship . . . and the improvement of the status of free African Americans, the movement aimed to eradicate the structural and legal sources of racial oppression. In this way it foreshadowed the
political and economic agendas both of post-Civil War Reconstruction in the Southern states and of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{26}

The numerical growth of the free African American population in the Northern states, and the expansion of a literate public within that population, combined with two great civil rights movements—the (biracial) Antislavery Movement and the (African American) Convention Movement—resulted in a political climate that fostered a black intellectual and literary movement. A few intellectuals helped lay the ideological foundation of African American nationalism by cultivating an African American collective consciousness based on the politicized collective grievances and personal experiences expressed through autobiographical and cultural memory, and on the shared beliefs, myths, and images of the past.\textsuperscript{27}

The struggle for freedom had a few sympathizers and supporters in white American society. The antislavery movement was a biracial movement that brought together black activists and white reformers to fight against American slavery. Quakers dominated the antislavery movement until the mid-nineteenth century by providing large numbers of members and effective leadership. M. L. Dillon argues that these abolitionists had “great moral courage and independence of mind to venture to subvert the dominant practices and values of their age.”\textsuperscript{28} To their credit, they succeeded in persuading Congress to pass gradual emancipation laws in the North and to end the foreign slave trade in March 1807.\textsuperscript{29}

The American Civil War (1860–65) obviously ended slavery.\textsuperscript{30} It should always be remembered that black and white abolitionists made an ideological case against slavery, but the institution of slavery was effectively abolished by nonabolitionist forces whose primary interest was to dismantle the power of the slave-owning class, which was against the interests of core capitalists. In addition to creating the social-structural and conjunctural factors that were necessary for the destruction of slavery, the Civil War also contributed to the development of black nationalism. The defeat of the planters and the abolition of slavery removed the control that the slave owners had had over the enslaved Africans and transformed the nature of the African American struggle.
For almost a decade after the Civil War, the U.S. federal government intervened in the South to protect freed Africans. After establishing its political hegemony in the South, however, the federal government withdrew, leaving freed women and men to the mercy of the Southern states. With the departure of federal power, these states established Jim Crow laws in order to segregate and continue to dominate, exploit, and oppress blacks. “Push” factors, such as the Jim Crow laws, racial dictatorship, oppressive social control mechanisms, lawlessness, terrorism, denial of political and cultural rights, poverty, lack of education and other opportunities, combined with “pull” factors from the North, such as the availability of jobs, had occasioned the great migration of black folks, mainly to Northern cities.

The mass migration of blacks to Northern cities transformed African Americans from rural agricultural laborers into urban industrial workers. In their urban milieu, black workers set up communities, fraternities, churches, mosques, schools, organizations, and urban associations. The black educated class and other activists who had previously been isolated from their slave brothers and sisters found fertile social ground in which to plant their ideas of social change and struggle. African American activist intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois politicized the collective grievances of blacks and mobilized white activists and reformers who were committed to the legal dismantling of racial segregation. White reformers channeled assistance in several forms from white foundations, clergy members, student volunteers, and other supporters, who were known as “conscience constituencies.” At the turn of the twentieth century, the efforts of blacks and whites led to the formation of African American organizations, such as the Niagara Movement (1905), which evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1910), and the National Urban League (1911).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of blacks who moved to cities created conditions conducive to the development of black institutions and organizations. In the urban setting, African Americans overcame the obstacles of dispersion that they had experienced in rural areas by creating social networks and media outlets and by using transportation and communication networks. The very fact of
concentration in cities increased the opportunity for interaction and facilitated recruitment into various movement organizations. These institutions and organizations became the foundation of professional social movements and political organizations. In urban centers, African American nationalism blossomed and galvanized the African American people and their supporters for collective action.\textsuperscript{32}

**An Analysis: Three Forms of the Black Struggle**

In the first half of the twentieth century, the African American struggle settled into three forms. These were cultural nationalism, the civil rights movement, and revolutionary nationalism. The goal of the first was to redefine black cultural identity, which had been distorted by racial dictatorship, the second, to liberate blacks from the racial caste system, and the third, to introduce a fundamental social transformation in the black community.

Black cultural nationalism emerged in opposition to white racist discourse and white cultural hegemony. Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick note that the period "from about 1880 to 1930 witnessed the flowering of a clear-cut cultural nationalism. It was evident particularly in a rising self-conscious interest in the race's past and in efforts to stimulate a distinctively black literature."\textsuperscript{33} The "New Negro" movement promoted the principles of ethnonational self-help cooperation, ethnic heritage and pride, militancy, and the determination to struggle for constitutional rights. Starting from the era of racial slavery and segregation, African Americans struggled to build their history and fought for recognition of their humanity through developing their peoplehood and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{34} Black cultural nationalists gradually challenged the negative images associated with Africanness and blackness and the self-styled virtues of "Europeanness" and "whiteness" in the areas of civilization and culture. African Americans retrieved and reclaimed their African heritage and accepted blackness as a mark of beauty.

Three ideological movements, Garveyism, the Harlem Renaissance, and Pan-Africanism, did more than others to reconnect African Americans to their African cultural roots. According to Martin Luther King, Jr., Garveyism was a movement that "attained mass dimensions,
and released a powerful emotional response because it touched a truth which had long been dormant in the mind of the Negro. There was reason to be proud of their heritage as well as of their bitterly won achievement in America.35 The Harlem Renaissance reconnected African Americans to Africa and cultivated Africanization by encouraging the black artist to turn to his or her African heritage. The Pan-African movement was formed in the first half of the twentieth century by a few radical black intellectuals from the United States, the West Indies, and Africa to challenge white domination and supremacy both in Africa and the New World.

The regeneration of black culture and the ideological revival of the connection to Africa presaged the cultural, national, and international characteristics of the emerging black nationalism. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, prominent black activist scholars, artists, and literary figures moved to Harlem and made it a center of African American cultural and intellectual discourse.36 Inspired by the black cultural nationalism that grew out of the African Americans’ cultural, ideological, intellectual, and political experience of urban America, civil rights activists and their supporters formed various organizations to marshal black resources, human, financial, intellectual, and ideological, to fight for black freedom and to dismantle the legal basis of segregation in America.37

Born in the urban setting as the main black national organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was engaged in a legal struggle to challenge black disfranchisement and racial segregation.38 This organization extended its branch offices to the South in 1918, linked its activities to the black church there, and fought against lynching, segregated education and transportation, and political disfranchisement. The NAACP provided organizational and managerial skills for the black national struggle by recruiting and training ministers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, union organizers, and other activists, and it taught them how to organize themselves and establish working relationships among themselves. In 1954, the lawyers of the NAACP challenged the legality of school segregation before the Supreme Court in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case. The court’s ruling dealt a severe blow to the legal basis of segregation in public schools.
Owing to the NAACP's legal successes, white racist and terrorist groups, such as the White Citizens' Council, the American States' Rights Association, the National Association for the Advancement of White People, and the Ku Klux Klan intensified their organized attacks on the NAACP with the tacit acquiescence of the Southern states in the 1950s. Their relentless onslaught weakened the NAACP and created an organizational void in the black struggle in the South. In the 1940s and 1950s, this situation led to disillusionment and frustration among blacks. African Americans realized that court actions could not destroy racial segregation, without protest and revolutionary action. As King noted, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." The founding of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 by some black students and elite members, white socialists, liberals, and pacifists contributed to the development of the nonviolent direct action strategy to fight against racial segregation in public facilities. The direct action of CORE included sit-ins and freedom rides with the aim of desegregating the public transportation system.

The black church was made the center of a liberation struggle in the Southern states because of its independent leadership, financial resources, organized mass base, and cultural and ideological foundation. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed in 1957 as "the decentralized political arm of the black church." In the 1950s and 1960s, CORE combined its nonviolent struggle with that of the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Using the social and otherworldly gospel as a guide in the struggle, Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as the charismatic and sophisticated revolutionary leader of the SCLC and the black struggle of the mid-twentieth century.

King criticized the white church for ignoring its social mission of dealing with moral issues in society and for rationalizing the racial caste system, colonialism, and imperialism. He recognized the vital role of the masses and elites in bringing about progressive social change and insisted that, when the oppressed "bury the psychology of servitude," no force can stop them from achieving their freedom. King considered the black struggle for freedom as a "new expression of the
American dream that need not be realized at the expense of other men around the world, but a dream of opportunity and life that can be shared with the rest of the world." To that end, he developed with his colleagues the political strategy of involving the masses and elites in mass direct action through boycotts, demonstrations, and marches.

This visionary and democratic revolutionary leader dreamed and struggled to create a just multicultural society where all peoples can live together as brothers and sisters, where every person "will respect the dignity and worth of human personality." The SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and other organizations led effective desegregation campaigns. King used religion, the media, and the nonviolence strategy, plus mass mobilization and participation, in challenging American segregation. Under his leadership the Civil Rights Movement matured and blossomed as "the Negro thrust himself into the consciousness of the country, and dramatized his grievances on [a] thousand brightly lighted stages." Two important laws, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, toppled the edifice of legal segregation. King recognized the importance of these legal actions, but realizing that the laws would not fundamentally change the condition of the black majority, he set out to expand the purpose and scope of the civil rights movement.

King raised human rights issues and aimed at creating an alliance of the poor and the working class in the United States. A sophisticated religious and pragmatic leader, he took on the racist capitalist system on its own territory by developing different strategies and tactics for the struggle when he started the Poor People's Campaign. Describing his vision, he said: "I am speaking of all the poor, I am not only concerned about the black poor; I am concerned about poverty among my Puerto Rican brothers; I am concerned about poverty among my Appalachian white brothers, and I wish they would realize that we are struggling against poverty for everybody and would join in a movement to get rid of poverty." He called upon white and black churches to challenge the status quo and to change the oppressive social order; he condemned racism, economic and labor exploitation, and war as the three primary evils in American society.

For advocating solidarity between the black and white poor, King was described as integrationist. His idea of integration nonetheless was not
reducible to a simple label. "Integration," he once wrote, "is meaningless without the sharing of power. When I speak of integration, I don't mean a romantic mixing of colors. I mean a real sharing of power and responsibility."50 That is why King struggled to reduce or eliminate poverty by recognizing the connection among political power, wealth, and poverty. He was a civil rights activist, a nationalist, and an internationalist leader. Laying out his commitment to social justice, he wrote:

Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World—Asia, Africa and Latin America—will no longer be the victims of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy, and disease.51

King was assassinated in 1968, perhaps because of his "unfinished search for more radical reforms in America."52 There is no doubt that his ideological and intellectual maturation and commitment to the emancipation and development of all oppressed groups had shortened his life. "Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were both assassinated," Robert Allen writes, "at precisely the point at which they began working actively and consciously against the racism and exploitation generated by the American capitalist system, both at home and abroad."53 The assassinations of these two prominent leaders left black Americans frustrated and made them more militant. King and Malcolm came by different routes to lead the black struggle, but they both recognized the inability of existing organizations to attain the objective of the black movement. Malcolm X gradually evolved into a militant leader whose understanding of the black question went beyond the views of other black leaders.

Malcolm X was a product of the Nation of Islam, a religious-national movement that emerged in the 1930s and appealed to the black masses in the 1950s and 1960s. After his death, Malcolm "quickly became the fountainhead of the modern renaissance of black nationalism in the late 1960s."54 Because of his views and militancy, he was expelled from the
Nation of Islam and created the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU) in 1964. Malcolm X was committed only to revolutionary black nationalism, which focused on the fundamental political, economic, cultural, ideological, and social transformation of black America rather than on the reformist approach embraced by King. Black revolutionary nationalists were antiracist and anti-integrationist; they "opposed Jim Crow laws and simultaneously advocated all-black economic, political and social institutions." Malcolm X argued that black people "want a complete freedom, justice and equality, or recognition and respect as human beings. . . . So, integration is not the objective or separation the objective. The objective is complete respect as human beings." 

Like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Toure, forcefully argued that black America should have control over its political economy, life, and culture in order to fundamentally transform itself. Revolutionary black nationalist groups such as the OAAU, the SNCC, and the Black Panthers fought to bring about a fundamental social change in American society. The new black militants believed "that black dignity and liberation are not possible in the United States without profound changes in the system." In 1966, the Black Panthers developed a Ten Point Program that included demands for political power, self-determination, full employment, decent education, housing, food, social justice to end police brutality and unfair trials, and the promotion of economic development. The formation of the Republic of New Africa in 1967 to create an independent African American state in the Deep South was another expression of revolutionary black nationalism.

Some of the revolutionary organizations attempted to engage in armed struggle. The urban black rebellion, which lasted from 1964 to 1972, was an integral part of black militancy that the white establishment could not ignore. While the government co-opted black reformist elite members by using civil rights laws, it suppressed the black masses and revolutionaries. Several hundred African American revolutionary leaders, who participated in a series of rebellions, were killed, imprisoned, or exiled. The nonviolent approach limited the capacity of the struggle by preventing a fundamental social change, while the militant revolutionary approach provoked repression from the white establishment. Still, the African American movement:
succeeded in institutionalizing significant gains during the early 1970s. Blacks became an important voter bloc, participating at higher rates than whites of the same socioeconomic status and the number of black office holders rose rapidly. . . . significant progress against the most overt forms of racial discrimination in education and employment gradually became evident.59

The suppression of revolutionary nationalism and the imposition of the politics of law and order on the black masses and revolutionaries perpetuated the underdevelopment of black America. Given the absence of a national organization that could effectively mobilize and organize blacks and articulate the demands of the majority of blacks, the civil rights organizations and black elite members were not able to obtain adequate goods and services for the black community. Consequently, the majority of African Americans have been left in ghettos and exposed to such social ills as police brutality, poverty, illiteracy, disease, unemployment, crime, drugs, and urban crises.

In its long struggle, the black movement succeeded in destroying the legal basis of the racial caste system. But individual and institutional racism remained intact. The majority of blacks are still poor and remain at the bottom of American society. They still do not have meaningful access to the political, economic, and cultural resources of the country. Furthermore, the struggle for cultural identity and multicultural democracy has not achieved its desired goals. The objective of fundamentally transforming black America is yet to be realized.

Discussion and Conclusion

African American nationalism developed to resist racial oppression, colonialism, and racist democracy. Oromo nationalism emerged to overthrow Ethiopian settler colonialism and its oppressive institutions in Oromia. Compared to its African American counterpart, Oromo nationalism is in a fledgling stage of development. The Oromo people are isolated and impoverished people, and they live under Ethiopian political slavery without freedom of expression and association.
The Oromo diaspora is uniquely positioned to learn and then transfer to the Oromo movement four centuries of African American experience of resistance and triumph. The new Oromo diaspora can learn mechanisms of survival and strategies of struggle from the rich experience of the old African diaspora. Although individuals can be successful in life, it is important to remember that individual rights are not guaranteed without a strong collective identity, buttressed by enduring institutions and organizations. Maintaining Oromummaa or Oromo identity and nationalism, borrowing cultural and political experiences from others, and building enduring institutions and organizations that reflect Oromo personality are necessary to liberate the Oromo from a century-old dehumanization and degradation. The world is moving faster than ever, educationally and technologically, for those who have power and wealth. Members of the Oromo diaspora understand that their entry into the United States has exposed them to opportunities and challenges and that they should not be dazzled by the glow of their new lifestyles and shirk their responsibility of shaping the destiny of their people.

The African American people survived the scourge of racial slavery and segregation through cultural and ideological resistance. Learning from this experience and following in the footsteps of their ancestors, in the antebellum period, freed blacks and their children fought to free their folk from racial slavery by building autonomous institutions and forming different cultural and political platforms. Educated blacks rediscovered ancient African cultures and civilizations and laid the foundation for an Afrocentric paradigm with which to challenge the ideology of white racial supremacy. By creating institutions and producing newspapers, magazines, and books, free blacks developed a popular cultural consciousness that facilitated the emergence of African American nationalism. When the institution of racial slavery was dismantled, black nationalists and activists and their supporters continued the struggle against racial domination and segregation. With the emergence of favorable social structural factors and conjunctures, African American nationalism flourished and became a mass movement in the first half of the twentieth century. The blossoming of this nationalism assisted the dismantling of the legal edifice of racial segregation in the 1960s and 1970s. This rich experience could be a programmatic guide for the
Oromo national movement. The Oromo diaspora can use this rich experience to develop an Oromo-centered cultural, ideological, and organizational vehicle that could assist in advancing the struggle and bringing liberation to the Oromo people.

To overcome the challenge they face as a human group in the racialized capitalist world system, members of the Oromo diaspora must build and consolidate a broad-based Oromo nationalist movement. Although the new African diaspora groups, including the Oromo, have different experiences from those of African Americans, the fate and future of people of African descent are interconnected. Indirect institutional racism and old views about Africa and African peoples have continued to negatively affect old and new diaspora groups alike. Further, the West and its international institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unwittingly lend support to authoritarian African regimes like that of Ethiopia, regimes that deny human liberty, democracy, and development to their citizens. Therefore, the danger that emerged with racial slavery and colonialism still exists and negatively influences the fate of blacks everywhere, despite some positive changes. In this age of intensified globalization, Africans in Africa and in the diaspora are marginalized and unable to occupy an appropriate position on the world stage from which to influence events to their advantage. One of the indicators of this reality is the destruction of African young people by war and diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and the suffering of more than a million and half young African Americans in American prisons.

While attempting to maintain their *Oromummaa* and achieve self-determination, members of the Oromo diaspora and other Oromos must be ready to develop Pan-Africanism from “below,” based on the principles of popular democracy and multiculturalism, by forming an alliance with antiracist, anticolonial, and all the progressive forces to expose and remove obstacles to social justice, popular development, and self-determination through education and sustained, organized struggle. Oromos should enter into this alliance as proud and confident human beings, using their unique cultural identity. As members of the Oromo diaspora build networks within their communities to maintain both unity and diversity, they need to extend their networks to other communities in
order to exchange information, ideas, knowledge, and goods and services. Just as the Oromos in diaspora have much to learn from the African American struggle, African Americans can learn from the experience of Oromo culture, particularly from the Oromo democratic tradition and social networks to challenge racism, elitist democracy, and underdevelopment.

Notes

1. The first draft of this article was presented at the 44th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Houston, TX, 15-18 November 2001.

2. I refer to the reign of Menelik (r. 1889-1913), the reign of Haile Sellassie (as regent, 1916-30, as emperor, 1930-74), the military-socialist regime (1974-91), and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) regime (1991 to the present).

3. The Ethiopian political system practices political slavery by denying the freedom of self-expression and self-development to the colonized nations. Since this system works without the rule of law, Ethiopian political leaders engage in genocidal massacres with impunity. The system is based on the use of structural and political violence to control the political behavior of the colonized nations. As a result, there is no freedom of association, organization, or expression in the Ethiopian empire. The Ethiopian state does not even respect its own laws.

4. Constrained to live in exile in the United States in the early 1980s, I started to develop a keen interest in the experience of the old African diaspora. Reflecting on the experience of this population group and the experience of the Oromo movement, I published a book entitled *Fighting against the Injustice of the State and Globalization: Comparing the African American and Oromo Movements* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). This book reflects my distinctive autobiographical and intellectual experiences, rooted in my enforced exile from Ethiopian colonial domination and political slavery, my participation in the Oromo nationalist movement both at home and abroad, and my work as a critical/Oromo/African scholar in the United States.


6. Ibid., 5.


11. Terfa Dibaba, "Humanity Forsaken: The Case of the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) in the Horn of Africa," (lecture, Oromo Studies Association Annual Meeting, University of Minnesota, 1997).


15. One of the organizers was Lubee Biru, who had earlier participated in the Maccaa Tulama Association, was instrumental in the creation of Oromo associations in North America and had close contacts with prominent Oromo nationalists in Oromia. Another was Addisu Tolossa, who worked with Lubee on the idea of organizing Oromos in North America. Telephone interviews with Lubee Biru, 20 December 2002, and with Dr. Addisu Tolossa, 23 December 2002.

16. According to Lubee Biru, these 11 Oromos were himself, Yeshi Lemma, Umar Abadir, Ismael Haji Kormee, Risai Issa, Mohammed Ahmad, Asras Aboye, Jalata Alemu, Ahimad Bashir, Nuradin Ahmad, and Ibrahim.

17. According to Lubee Biru, those Oromos who joined UONA during its second congress were Mardassa Raga, Gugsa Makonnen, Ayalew Makonnen, Tarfa Kumsa, Solomon Kana’aa, Itana Gamada, Badhane Tadassa, Mitiku Firisa, and Habte Qitessa.


27. Ibid., 83–84.
28. Ibid., xiii.
32. Ibid., 703.
37. These organizations, associations, and movements included the Niagara Movement, which was formed in 1905; the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People, which evolved out of the Niagara Movement in 1909; the National Urban League, which was founded in 1911; the Garvey Movement; and the Congress of Racial Equality, which was founded in 1942.
38. For instance, the NAACP legally attacked “the grandfather clauses” that limited the right to vote and municipal residential segregation ordinances, in 1915 and 1917 respectively. It also vigorously attacked the poll tax and school segregation laws between the 1920s and the 1950s.