

CHILDREN OF HOPE

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Introductory Ruminations

In the summer of 2007, thirty-five years after I had come across an obscure reference to a group of liberated Oromo slave children at Lovedale Institution in the Eastern Cape, I sat spellbound in the University of Cape Town's African Studies Library as Neville Alexander, the grandson of one of those children, recounted what he remembered of a woman named Bisho Jarsa and her remarkable story. The children had been enslaved in their lands located to the south, southwest, and southeast of Abyssinia (old Ethiopia) in the late 1880s.¹ They were taken to the coast and crammed into dhows that were to ferry them across the Red Sea to further bondage in Arabia. British naval gunships intercepted the dhows, rescued and liberated the children, and took them to Aden in today's Yemen, where a Free Church of Scotland mission station at a nearby oasis, Sheikh Othman, took them in. Eventually, a group of sixty-four of these Oromo children were transported thousands of kilometers away and entrusted to the care of Scottish missionaries at the Lovedale Institution in South Africa.

Dr. Neville Alexander was a man of towering intellect and firm convictions. He was also an intrepid campaigner for justice who had spent ten years as a political prisoner on Robben Island and subsequently became one of South Africa's most distinguished educationalists. There we were, sitting side by side near the library window, bathed in late afternoon sunlight, as Neville recalled his frail, old Oromo grandmother, a former slave girl named Bisho Jarsa. Neville remembered Bisho when he was a young boy in Cradock, a small town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. He remembered his grandmother murmuring to herself in an incomprehensible language. His younger siblings would run to their mother, Dimbiti, asking, "What's wrong with Ma? Why is she talking in that strange language?" Dimbiti, Bisho's daughter, would respond soothingly, "Don't worry about Ma. She's talking to God."

But who were these Oromo children and why were they here in South Africa? In February 1972, I began working for Rhodes University's Cory Library for Historical Research² in the Eastern Cape. Within weeks, while familiarizing myself with the library's manuscripts and the various card catalogs, I came across several entries reading "Galla slaves."³

I was baffled. Who were these "Galla" slaves and what was their link with the Eastern Cape? As I asked questions of then head of the Cory Library Michael Berning and

explored further, I discovered that the cards referred to a cluster of documents in the archives of Lovedale Institution relating to a group of sixty-four Oromo children who had been enslaved in the Horn of Africa during 1888 and 1889. These children had different experiences of enslavement, but all were eventually put aboard dhows headed for the Arabian slave markets on the opposite shores of the Red Sea. One set of dhows was intercepted and their cargoes of slave children liberated by a British warship in September 1888. However, as Bisho Jarsa's story related, a further group of dhows was similarly intercepted by the Royal Navy, and a smaller group of Oromo slave children were liberated in August 1899. Both groups of children were transported to Aden in Yemen, where they were taken in by a Free Church of Scotland mission at Sheikh Othman, just north of the city. Two of the missionaries applied themselves to learning the children's language, and, with the assistance of three fluent Afaan Oromoo speakers, they interviewed each child, asking for details of their experiences effectively from their earliest memories to the moment they reached the Red Sea coast.

It was soon obvious that the children, weakened by their experiences, had severely compromised immune systems and were therefore easy targets for disease. When a number of the children died within a short space of time, the missionaries decided to find a healthier institution for their care. After medical treatment and a further year of recuperation and elementary schooling, the missionaries shipped these sixty-four Oromo children to Lovedale Institution in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Despite the wealth of documentation on these children in the Cory Library and other South African libraries and archives, the story of the liberated Oromo children of Lovedale had lain virtually unexamined for more than a century. As I probed deeper, I felt a frisson of speculative anticipation. Here was evidence and documentation of an unprecedented nature. Here were potentially important personal narratives of slavery and the slave trade, overlooked for far too long. The flame of what would prove to be a lifetime interest in and fascination with these Oromo children—their origins and their outcomes—was ignited deep within me there in the Cory Library over forty years ago.

However, my passion was tempered by pragmatism and life circumstances that intervened. At the time, I was busy with my part-time professional studies at Rhodes as well as working at the Cory Library. In addition, I was a social science graduate without a history major. It took years to acquire the essential grounding in history master's-level study, first at Rhodes and later at the University of Cape Town, always driven by that unquenchable flame.

What I could do immediately was to make photocopies of the children's narratives to take home. Many years later, I showed them to my husband, the late Robert Shell, a leading historian of Cape slavery. As one of the few cliometricians in the history profession, he was proficient in the use of quantitative methodology. Robert read the stories through with gathering enthusiasm. He pointed out that these stories, besides being a set of rare individual mini-biographies of slave children, were clearly the result of consistent interviewing and lent themselves readily to systematic analysis. He told me that if I encoded these narratives, translating them into numbers, the children's stories would allow for, at the very least, an opportunity to glimpse trends in the

patterns of slavery and the slave trade in the Horn of Africa—in addition to enabling the individual children to tell their own stories. Theirs were authentic African voices relating their first-passage experiences within weeks of their liberation.

Analysis at a group level meant mastering the methodology of quantitative history (cliometry). Further, the nature of the documents suggested the development of a cohort-based, longitudinal prosopography, based on the core documentation of the Oromo children's own first-passage accounts. While biography is familiar as a tool by which we examine the lives of individuals, prosopography is a collection of biographies that allows for the study of groups of people through systematic analysis of their collective characteristics. Prosopography hands the historian a tool with which to discover common attributes within a group as well as to highlight any variation. From that variation, historical knowledge is generated.

In looking at the history of prosopography, we discern three distinct phases. In the first phase, prosopographers focused on studies of elites, mostly in the classical era, producing static, paper-based texts in the precomputer era. Almost without exception, the earliest applications of prosopography were within the context of studies of classical, Byzantine, and medieval nobility.⁴ In 1929, Lewis Namier, an influential historian, launched his lifelong prosopography of eighteenth-century British parliamentarians. His work dominated British historiography during the 1930s.⁵ In response, the British Parliament commissioned the Houses of Parliament Trust, which, in 1951 and under Namier's oversight, began the monumental project of documenting the biographies of all British members of Parliament.

Static text prosopographies were not the preserve of the precomputer era alone. In 2005, Ghada Osman, an Arabic scholar and linguist, published a rare slave prosopography—a bottom-up rather than top-down study—examining the position of foreign slaves in Mecca and Medina during the sixth century.⁶ To do this, the author looked at Christian slaves used as “teachers” of the Prophet and slaves used as builders of the Ka'aba, as well as a selection of Byzantine, Abyssinian, Egyptian, Persian, and Mesopotamian slaves in Mecca and Medina during the same period. She listed the names of slaves and as much biographical information as she was able to glean from the available sources.

Prosopographers of the second phase also engaged in top-down studies of elites but had moved into the age of the mainframe computer. Lawrence Stone, an influential historian of the Tudor period, kept the spotlight on elites in 1966 when he published his studies of the British aristocracy.⁷ In 1971, Stone defined *prosopography* as “the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives.”⁸ Stone used the mainframe computer to process machine-readable texts so that he could maximize the application of the techniques of prosopography.⁹ However, Stone conducted his study nine years before the advent of the personal computer in 1980. Stone had to query or process everything in terms of the hierarchy of operators and programmers who were largely insensitive to the needs of the historian. These interlocutors came between Stone and his data.¹⁰ Nevertheless, scholars acknowledge Stone as the pioneer of modern prosopography in the premodern era, although he never used the computer again.

In 1981, Bruce M. Haight, using an IBM 134, contributed one of the few African prosopographies with his study of the rulers of the Gonja of West Africa.¹¹ Four years later, in 1985, he and William R. Pfeiffer II, the president of a Michigan-based computer service bureau, published a methodological account of their “pilot study in the use of the computer to handle information for the writing of African oral history.”¹² The mainframe computer enabled them to test hypotheses that would have been too complex and impractical to test manually.

The third and present phase began with the advent of the personal computer in 1980. This not only democratized the approach to prosopography but coincided with the inclusion of bottom-up analyses, which, under the influence of the *Annales* school, were becoming popular. A persistent feature of prosopography was that it remained a methodology applied largely to top-down studies of society. However, following the introduction of the personal computer, prosopographers used the collective biography approach with great effect for bottom-up as well as top-down analyses. For example, Katharine Keats-Rohan, a pioneer prosopographer, lauded the technological advances, pointing out the suitability of the relational database to prosopographical research.¹³ Her work, widely regarded as seminal in the field of modern prosopography, and her prosopography portal resource site,¹⁴ have provided an invaluable stimulus to such research. Since the 1990s, with the escalating sophistication and accessibility of technology and the ever-increasing capabilities of the PC, the popularity of historical quantitative methodology—including prosopography—has experienced a flourishing resurgence.

While the children’s narratives provided the core set of unique documents distinguishing this episode of postemancipation slavery, the Royal Navy (which liberated this group of children in the Red Sea) kept excellent records of the events, and fortunately the Scottish missionaries at the Keith-Falconer Mission in Sheikh Othman maintained full records. The prosopography also links with information gleaned from various external sources, including school records, the responses to a repatriation poll taken by the Lovedale Institution in 1903, death registers, street directories, census data, official documentation, and the personal correspondence of the children themselves. Such documents transformed the core prosopography from a synchronic to a longitudinal or diachronic database.¹⁵

The use of the prosopographical technique allows for a flexible analysis that goes far beyond anecdotal methods. Encoding the narratives enables the researcher to move from the realms of narrative, social history to an empirical, systematic analysis and creates the potential for generating new insights into one of the least researched areas of African slavery: the first passage.¹⁶ Robert was right: this prosopographic technique yielded a profoundly different and more complex picture of the children’s first passage, which emerged as a far longer, more intricate, and more varied ordeal than generally recognized.

Exploring the historiography of the slave trade and slavery in the Horn of Africa region, I soon discovered for myself the scarcity of personal slave accounts of that “first passage” (i.e., contemporary accounts of captives’ experiences from capture to the coast). As sources in the historiography of slavery and the slave trade, a large clutch of contemporary and systematic child slave narratives such as this is virtually unknown.¹⁷

Three discrete traditions impinge on this book: first, the study of the slave trade, namely the first and middle passages, which includes the phenomenon of prize slaves;¹⁸ second, the study of missions in the nineteenth century; and third, the study of the histories of Ethiopia and of the Oromo people.

In the course of exploring slavery and the slave trade, I have long been curious about the identity and experiences of the slaves themselves: Who were they? What was their status within their own societies? What were their lives like? How and why and by whom were they enslaved? In the majority of accounts of the slave trade, answers to these questions do not emerge, simply because of the dearth of information about the identity of the slaves themselves. There have, however, been several first-person slave accounts—single biographies—and the vast majority of those have emanated from West Africa. Those studies have contributed considerably to our knowledge of the lives of specific individuals such as the celebrated Nigerian Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa, as he was known throughout his life, dubbed “the father of African literature” by Chinua Achebe)¹⁹ and Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua.²⁰ Crossing to the other side of the African continent, the leading Oromo sociologist and scholar Merkuria Bulcha included “four biographical vignettes” in his study of the Oromo in the diaspora, which offered examples of “the different ways of wresting honour from the dishonour of slavery.”²¹

In recent years, clusters of scholars have gone beyond the standard Western sources and instead have searched for authentic African voices within the African communities themselves: oral traditions and testimonies, life histories gleaned from interviews with missionaries and colonial authorities, as well as folktales, songs, and other African sources. This ongoing drive, led by Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, and Martin Klein, seeks to illuminate African perspectives.²² Still, their focus remains largely on the slave trade of West and North Africa, with only a relative nod toward personal slave accounts drawn from the Horn or East Africa. They have aimed, primarily, to bring the essential human perspective into play through seeking qualitative interpretations to supplement the purely numeric quantitative assessments offered by, for example, Abdul Sheriff’s statistical work on the slave trade of Zanzibar.²³

With this study it has been possible to offer both, pulling the quantitative and the qualitative together in a unique and unified set of insights. On the one hand, the prosopography (or, loosely, group biography) presents group analyses suggesting trends and practices in the slave trade of the Horn of Africa; and on the other, it presents the personal accounts of each of the sixty-four children, tracking them not only during their period of enslavement but from cradle to grave.

We need to bear in mind that these accounts were almost exclusively penned as memoirs years after enslavement. The genre of the memoir is essentially one of reconstruction of an elusive past, informed in part by the inevitable interventions of experience and learned knowledge. We all experience this in recalling events from our own childhoods—how much of what we “remember” is what really happened, and how much has been suggested by and inextricably interwoven with our conversations and readings, with the natural subliminal adjustment born of the knowledge of hindsight, and with our own experiences and interpretations across the intervening years?

For example, the East/Central African life histories assembled by Marcia Wright were part biography and part autobiography, compiled by a female Moravian missionary in Tanzania “when the women were grandmothers” at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁴ By contrast, the immediacy of the children’s narratives analyzed in this study adds a significant new dimension to our knowledge and understanding of child slave experiences. Interviewed within weeks of their liberation, each Oromo child answered the same series of questions, presenting the reader with freshly minted, systematic detail without the filter of hindsight, learned experience, or suggestion.

First-person slave accounts have, for the most part, been retrospective records of stand-alone experiences, snapshots of individual lives situated in differing times and places. These certainly provide valuable insights into individual experiences, but the historian would be on shaky ground in any attempt to draw inferences from these specifics to define a general first-passage reality. However, caches of small groups of child slave narratives do exist in East and Central Africa. Missionaries played an important role in encouraging the recording and preservation of slave biographies at their stations in Kenya in East Africa. Significant studies based on these and other missionary collections include the early work of Arthur C. Madan, in which he used narratives from the collections of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (UMCA); followed more recently by Ned Alpers (who regarded the UMCA accounts as representing “a genuine African voice”); Margery Perham; and Fred Morton, who explored narratives held in the archives of the Church Missionary Society (CMS).²⁵ The groups are small—those in the UMCA archives number only twelve, with thirty-nine in the collections of the CMS. Nonetheless, these have extended our knowledge of the slave experience on the eastern side of the continent and would suggest that the discovery is possible of further caches of records in the missionary archives of East and Central Africa.

Despite this scholarly interest, no one has yet attempted a systematic group analysis of these pluralities of narratives. Should the Kenyan narratives lend themselves to group analysis, the results could provide a useful comparative study with the Oromo children’s experiences. Of course, the accounts of the Oromo children have the advantage of greater numbers ($N = 64$), allowing for more effective group analyses and the possibility of determining trends and representivity more accurately. Data quality permitting, there would also be virtue in amalgamating the Kenyan and Oromo data to generate fresh results from the augmented sample. These are enticing possibilities for what the consolidated data might reveal, and for the potential of extending the pioneering findings detailed in this study.

The sensitive topic of African domestic slavery—that is, the enslavement of Africans by Africans as opposed to the raiding for slaves to supply the external, oceanic slave trade—has engaged the minds of many historians of slavery, particularly those who have interpreted the phenomenon as a degree of kinship, and their interpretations have frequently produced vastly different conclusions. Anthropologists have suggested that rather than participating in the commercial trade in slaves, precolonial African slave owners exchanged rather than sold their slaves.²⁶ Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff counterposed the Western notion of slavery as a fixed status of chattel,

permanently at the bottom of the social ladder, with a need to consider the influence of rights-in-persons and a slavery-to-kinship continuum within an African model of social and kinship relationships.²⁷ Others noted the incidences of male relatives selling their children in East Central Africa, and there are comparative examples of kin selling their children in southern Asia, where this was apparently common practice.²⁸ Among the Oromo, slave ownership was common.²⁹ Interestingly, the Borana Oromo, living in the southern regions of today's Oromia as well as across the border in Kenya, practiced a system of adoption, or *guddifachaa*, by which, for example, child war captives were adopted rather than enslaved. This practice would conform to the Miers and Kopytoff model but takes it further to include those children's incorporation into the community and ultimately into the national Oromo stream.³⁰

The level of detail of the Oromo children's data informing this study included the identity of their captors and, subsequently, their successive purchasers and sellers. The children also gave details of the prices paid or commodities bartered for them—for example, “a handful of peppers”—at capture and when they changed hands. These data offered the unique opportunity to explore the nature of the moment of capture and the frequently contested question of agency. They also produced incontrovertible evidence of commodity trading rather than kinship absorption at the time of capture and later during the children's often long periods of domestic servitude.

The social status of slaves prior to capture has long been an arena of speculation rather than empirical analysis. The rare commentaries on slave status invariably focus on postcapture and postemancipation mobility. However, the eyewitness accounts of two English army officers contributed useful insights into social conditions among the Oromo at the end of Emperor Menelik II's reign and directly after World War I.³¹ And Philip Curtin contributed a useful perspective in his study of the social structure of Senegambia, in which he concluded that the slaves who fell within the Senegambian social strata were foreigners or *captifs* who were later integrated into Senegambian society.³² This study elucidates this generally opaque feature and period of the slave trade and pushes our knowledge forward with intricate details of parental occupation, measures of immovable and movable property (including slave ownership), the species and numbers of livestock, and other measures of relative wealth of the slave children's families—including evidence that four of the Oromo girls sprang from princely families.

The reasons for targeting particular individuals for captivity and the methods used during capture have been largely broadbrushed in the literature. Those brushstrokes were informed primarily by the third-person accounts of travelers, missionaries, military, and other observers; reasons for capture ranged from spoils of war and house-breaking to debt redemption and retribution; and the modes of capture were largely kidnapping, ambush, or negotiation.³³ Whatever else, the moment of capture was indubitably the most traumatic point of a slave child's life, prompting Fred Morton to write with graphic insight that for children, “life's memory was anchored in that place and moment.”³⁴ The memories of the Oromo children were indeed firmly “anchored in that place and moment,” and, as demonstrated in this study, they were able to give detailed evidence about the moments when they lost their freedom. They were able

to tell us who enslaved them and where their captors came from. They were able to tell us if they were seized by force, if their seizure was negotiated with their parents, if they were sold or bartered, or if they were they stolen by stealth. These are detailed insights from a sizable group of children that no external-observer account could possibly reveal.

Invaluable quantitative analyses have provided innovative models and base grids not only for our better understanding of the middle passages in both the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean slave trades, but also in elucidating the first passage of the Horn of Africa and Red Sea slave enterprise. Philip Curtin broke new ground with his quantification of the Atlantic slave trade as well as his attempt to create a first census. However, he also provided an invaluable model for the calculation of the time slaves spent on the first passage—the journey from capture to the coast—which helps illuminate that recondite and underresearched slave experience.³⁵ Fred Cooper, Jon R. Edwards, Abdussamad H. Ahmad, W. G. Clarence-Smith, Timothy Fernyhough, Ralph Austen, and Patrick Manning have all contributed informed analyses that have advanced our empirical knowledge of the first passage as experienced by captives entrapped in the slave trade of the Horn of Africa, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean regions.³⁶ These studies have, variously, modeled the slave trade, estimated slave numbers, analyzed prices paid, compared routes taken from the scant data available, and also calculated the slave sex ratio on the Indian Ocean side of the African continent.

This study demonstrates the considerable divergence in the Horn of Africa from the Atlantic slave trade norm, not only because of the starkly different target population for slave traders (the trade of the Horn of Africa was a trade primarily of children rather than strong young men to work the transatlantic plantations), but also because the middle passage, which primarily informs our knowledge of the Atlantic trade, was virtually absent in the Red Sea trade. The Oromo children endured no middle passage of any duration. The period they were held aboard the dhows amounted to a matter of a few hours before they were liberated. What this study uniquely contributes in the literature is the probability that deaths on board the slave ships of the Atlantic were not the result of the harsh middle-passage experience alone but primarily the consequence of the lengthy and grueling first-passage ordeal.

When the Oromo children were liberated in the Red Sea through the interventions of the Royal Navy, they technically became “prize slaves.” The British Admiralty instituted a reward system after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 that called for the Royal Navy to intercept vessels believed to be carrying slaves, seize the vessels, capture the slavers, and liberate the slaves. The Admiralty paid “prize” money for every slave liberated, and, all too often, the crews aboard Britain’s naval vessels regarded slave dhow hunting and the liberating of “prize slaves” as something of a sport. As Lindsay Doulton has pointed out, the prize money, which was distributed among the crew proportionately to rank, was an incentive not only to sign up for naval service but also to track and secure as many slave vessels and their slave cargo as possible, regardless of the levels of violence used in their apprehension. Prize money, albeit at a lower rate, was paid out on the corpses of slaves as well, victims of “collateral damage” in the inevitable skirmishes between navy and slavers.³⁷ Fortunately, British naval officials

were required to document their activities minutely, so the primary documentation of the naval interventions during which the Oromo children were liberated is substantial.³⁸ Christopher Saunders, Richard Watson, and Patrick Harries are among those who have contributed substantially to what we know about the impact of “prize slaves” at the Cape of Good Hope.³⁹

This study takes its place within the literature as a unique, comprehensive analysis shining twin spotlights on two issues for which scholarly sources of information are woefully scarce. The first shines further light on the history of an underresearched geographic area of Africa. The second spotlight, most significantly, illuminates the scarcely documented first-passage experience through analyses of experiential narratives of the period not only from capture, but from cradle to the coast, told by a group of enslaved children themselves.

South African Missionary Efforts

Nineteenth-century missionary education at the Cape has long been the subject of vigorous debate. Critics have questioned the motives and intentions of the missionary establishment, categorizing all missionaries as agents of colonization, conquest, and capitalism, as well as destroyers of autochthonous culture. Others, like the husband-and-wife team of John and Jean Comaroff, while examining the influences of culture, symbolism, and ideology, have nonetheless drawn sweeping generalizations from too small a base of specific empirical evidence, regarding missionaries as “the human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview.”⁴⁰ Still others have examined the impact of the missionaries primarily through studies of African converts (the *kholwa*) and the linkages between mission stations and the rise of South African Black Nationalism. Norman Etherington has contributed an impressive personal canon of publications on southern African missions over the last thirty or more years. His scholarly significance runs deeply within the genre and leaves a substantial imprint on broader southern African issues.⁴¹

Individual missionaries approached their spiritual and temporal tasks in the Eastern Cape in different ways. The humanitarian Dr. John Philip presented an illuminating counterposition to the Comaroff motif. Philip committed his missionary and personal life to relentless and outspoken opposition to the injustices perpetrated by the colonial government in the dispossession and dehumanization of the amaXhosa. His battle for justice and human rights brought him into conflict not only with the colonial powers but also with the white settlers of the Eastern Cape and with the majority of his fellow missionaries.⁴²

The Reverend Tiyo Soga, on the other hand, conveyed a more ambivalent picture of the missionaries’ role. On the one hand, suspicion and resentment bred hostility against the intruding Christianizing force in the midst of the amaXhosa. This was matched, on the other hand, by a desire for education and the material benefits enjoyed by the invading strangers.⁴³

Lovedale Mission, begun in 1823 through the efforts of the Glasgow Missionary Society, spawned the leading missionary institution in the Eastern Cape—arguably in the country—which opened its doors nearly twenty years later in 1841. The primary

focus of the Scottish missionaries on the Eastern Cape frontier was education. They imparted their belief in equality and Christian brotherhood along with some useful secular teaching. However, working within the context of colonial influence and controls meant that they could not always match their ideals with their actions. They raised African hopes and expectations that could not be met in the context of the Cape political environment. Nonetheless, they offered Africans at their institutions the opportunity for a new, common identity that could transcend both clan rivalries and national divides.⁴⁴

Countering this interpretation is the postmodernist view of missionary discourse and African response, which suggests, *inter alia*, that Victorian Christians (like James Stewart at Lovedale) spearheaded “a narrative in which Africans are metaphorically characterised as an ‘infant’ race in the more general march of ‘civilisation’ world-wide.”⁴⁵

Gender issues in the mission context have prompted considerable discussion on subjects including missionary education that reinforced the stereotypes of women’s roles in home, classroom, and workplace. Nineteenth-century missionaries and educators never quite lost sight of the gendered, domestic, and largely inferior role of young African women.⁴⁶ A feminist subset of critics suggest that the missionaries wanted to turn young African girls into Victorian women, with their place firmly rooted in the home. However, placing women in the home released them from agricultural labor. In defense of the missionaries’ more complex motives, they wished to emancipate women from the fields and to render the males into Christian yeomen. This movement began with the Watson Institute at Farmerfield in the Eastern Cape in 1838 and spread throughout South Africa.⁴⁷

Support for this notion comes in an essay (included in this book; see appendix D) written by one of the Oromo boys, Gutama Tarafo, while at Lovedale. Drawing a direct comparison between the Oromo and the Xhosa people, Gutama insisted that Oromo men would never allow their wives to work in the fields. Instead, the Oromo women had dominion over the family home. As a male Oromo teenager, Gutama tellingly championed the right of women to be relieved of heavy manual field labor and to regard their position in their homes as one of domain rather than servitude.

Ethiopia and the Oromo People

Ethiopia, of all African countries, has a *sui generis* historiography.⁴⁸ However, the preponderance of Ethiopian studies have largely bypassed the history of the Oromo people, focusing on the agencies of power rather than on those who have been, and remain, powerless. Even those critical of the successive monarchies remained state-centered, focused on the rulers rather than the ruled, giving little attention to the powerless and the ordinary people in the southern regions below the geographical boundaries of old Abyssinia.⁴⁹

The middle years of the twentieth century saw a surge in both Ethiopian and Oromo scholarship. However, the tendency remained to valorize the elite and powerful with barely a nod to the conquered peoples—including the Oromo. Identity politics wielded in Ethiopian halls of power played a powerful role in suppressing

the history, the culture, and even the language of the Oromo people. Given that the Oromo were (and are) the largest population group in Ethiopia, the leading Tigrayan elite feared that to permit recognition and widespread knowledge would promote a sense of Oromo identity. Given their superior numbers, this would, in their view, place Ethiopian identity at risk. However, at the height of the period of the Derg—the administration put in place following the socialist military revolution that overthrew the Ethiopian monarchy in 1974—Oromo scholars, many of whom had already fled the country and were living in the diaspora, took the reins into their own hands. In the vanguard of these were Mekuria Bulcha, Mohammed Hassen, and Asafa Jalata, who began writing about their own and others' experiences, exposing the historical, political, and social causes of forced migrations of Oromo from Ethiopia. These studies initiated a burgeoning of nationalist—particularly Oromo—scholarship.⁵⁰

Interestingly, in the early twenty-first century and echoing evolving changes in historiographical approach, non-Oromo scholars like Bahru Zewde, who had hitherto focused on the history of the ruling elite, began exploring Ethiopian democracy from the bottom up, partly redressing the criticisms of their earlier work.⁵¹ In recent years, Oromo scholarship has responded to the intransigency of the ruling party and the growing oppression of the Oromo by becoming increasingly militant regarding the tensions between the Oromo and southern nations on the one hand, and the Ethiopian state on the other, from the era of Emperor Menelik II to date.⁵² Issues of Oromo identity, slavery, dispossession, land tenure, and political contestation underpin the history and nature of escalating Oromo nationalism today.⁵³

When the Oromo children arrived at Lovedale in 1890, they were no longer slaves, but theirs was, nonetheless, a form of forced migration. In recent years we have witnessed the forced migration of Oromo individuals and groups fleeing widespread repression, arbitrary arrests, detention without charge, enforced disappearance, torture, and possible death. While Oromo migrants and refugees have been seeking protection in other African countries—including South Africa—for decades, an “Addis Ababa Master Plan,” proposed by the authorities in Ethiopia for the expansion of the capital city, triggered major Oromo protest and heavy government response. For the Oromo, the majority of whom are agriculturalists and nomadic pastoralists, the plan meant expropriation of their land. In response the government declared a state of emergency in October 2016, shut down communications (including Internet connectivity), and closed Ethiopia's doors to foreign journalists, observers, and human rights organizations. Hundreds were killed, and many more were injured, arrested, or detained.

Since then, the Master Plan has been shelved and an apology issued for the deaths, while in April 2018 an Oromo member who had served in the Ethiopian Parliament since 2010, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, was elected the twelfth prime minister of Ethiopia. This was doubtless a strategic move designed, at least in part, to placate the Oromo people. Though his vision is believed to be at odds with the Oromo people's demands for self-determination within their Oromia region without federal interference, toward the end of 2017 he issued a statement that may signal hope: “[Ethiopian citizens] expect a different rhetoric from us . . . we have to debate the issues openly and respectfully. It's

easier to win people over to democracy than push them towards democracy. This can only succeed peacefully and through political participation.”⁵⁴

When the Oromo runner Feyisa Lilesa crossed the finish line on 21 August 2016 to win the silver medal for the marathon at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, he raised his arms above his head and crossed his wrists. In that silent sign of protest, he signaled his support for the hundreds of thousands of protesters back home in his Oromia state in Ethiopia. With that simple gesture Feyisa Lilesa was more effective in delivering a startling wake-up call to the world that all is not well in today’s Ethiopia than any number of mainline media articles or NGO reports.⁵⁵ As one South African online newspaper headlined his story: “Ethiopia’s Feyisa Lilesa Gets a Silver for Running—and a Gold for Bravery.”⁵⁶

What many among the world’s reading and viewing public discovered in the backwash of Feyisa Lilesa’s graphic message was that the ongoing protests and the injustices meted out to the Oromo in Ethiopia were not new. The Oromo people have been marginalized and oppressed as a political, economic, and social minority in modern Ethiopia since Emperor Menelik II ascended the imperial throne in old Abyssinia in 1889—the year the final group of Oromo children of the following story were liberated.