

## **Oromo Studies Association (OSA) Statement<sup>1</sup> on the passing of Dr. Ali Birra,**

**November 6, 2022**

It was with profound sorrow that members of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) learned of the passing of Ali Birra on November 6, 2022 in the city of Adama, located in Ethiopia's Oromia state. On behalf of its members, the OSA Executive Committee and Board of Directors extend profound condolences to Dr. Ali Birra's wife, Lily Birra, his life-long friends and all of those who have enjoyed Ali Birra's music for over five decades. Dr. Ali Birra was a famous well-known and well-loved Oromo singer whose popularity was sustained for nearly six decades. As scholar Greg Gow remarked, he was "the voice of the Oromo yearning for freedom...an Oromo institution as well as their heritage."<sup>2</sup>

Ali Birra made an unparalleled contribution to Oromo music by re-inventing various aspects of the genre and, in the process, opening up the universe of Oromo music to be regarded as an integral part of world music. Ali Birra's special gift for languages enabled him to sing in seven languages. "It is very rare to find a singer anywhere in the world who can touch human heart [in seven languages]."<sup>4</sup> OSA members and the Oromo Diaspora enjoyed Ali Birra's music which has sustained them for decades, lifting their spirits and connecting them with the homeland that many left behind several decades ago. Ali Birra expertly combined day-to-day Oromo issues with a message of Oromo political nationalism. Ali Birra devoted his musical life to raising the political awareness of his people through his profoundly inspiring songs. We are particularly grateful for the joy with which Ali Birra and other Oromo artists entertained our members during OSA annual conferences in Toronto, Minneapolis, Washington DC, Atlanta and Seattle. His songs carried our members joyfully back to Oromia. Ali Birra's songs connected the Oromo Diaspora with the struggle in Oromia for lifting the Oromo out of the depths of extended humiliation, misery and genocidal war.

### **Ali Birra 1948-2022**

Ali Mohammed Musa was born in the city of Dire Dawa in 1948. As he grew up during the 1950s and 1960s Dire Dawa during that time became the birth place of modern Oromo music. There were five musical bands in the city of Dire Dawa in the early 1960s. The most famous one was the Afran Qallo, formed in 1962 for the purpose of reviving Oromo language and cultural heritage. Ali Birra joined this group in 1963. Ali Birra just needed an opportunity for his talent to see the light of day. He got that opportunity when he sang on stage his first famous song lovingly titled "Birradha Barihe" ("spring has arrived"). The term "Birra" refers to the beginning of a new Oromo year. "Birradha Barihe is charged with Oromo cultural symbolism, including, but not limited to, the dawn has come, clouds have cleared, the rains have ceased, the flowers have blossomed and hope is brightened [by the beginning of the New Year]."<sup>5</sup>

Ali's very first singing performance was groundbreaking. His song immediately attracted public attention and triggered a great love and enthusiastic response from the Oromo audience. In fact, that first song "Birra-dha Barihe" gave Ali his famous last name of "Birra" which stayed with him to his last day. That first performance also created an insatiable spark in Ali Birra as an artist. Notably also, the success in 1963 of the Afran Qallo musical Band "...captured the heart and the soul of Oromo people far beyond the city of Dire Dawa".<sup>5</sup> This development alarmed

Amhara authorities in the city of Dire Dawa, who "... who confiscated the musical instruments of Afran Qallo singers & destroyed them".<sup>6</sup>

Ali Birra and other members of the Afran Qallo Band were invited to sing in the city of Djibouti in 1964, where their songs were warmly received and greatly appreciated. That was the first time that Oromo singers had performed on international stage. However, upon their return to Dire Dawa, they were all arrested. Ali Birra was detained for six months at the infamous prison in the city of Harar. It was his singing in Afaan Oromo in Djibouti, which was viewed by Amhara authorities as the "crime" with which Ali was charged.<sup>7</sup> While in detention, Ali Birra was subjected both to physical and psychological torture. He had a cellmate, an Oromo famer called Hasan, who was falsely accused and sentenced to death, which was gross miscarriage of justice. Ali Birra was horrified by witnessing the gruesome hanging of his cellmate. Through his prison experience, Ali Birra realized that there was no justice for his people as they lacked power — they were stripped of their human dignity.<sup>8</sup> He concluded in those days and throughout his lifetime that the Oromo have been a humiliated people in Ethiopia, probably the most humiliated. It was out of his bitter prison experience that Ali Birra later composed his most famous political song, which he sang for decades for uplifting the spirit of his people (see below). Ali Birra was released from his prison nightmare in 1965. His father arranged for Ali to travel to Addis Ababa (Finfinnee) in 1966. It was in the same year that Ali Birra joined the *Imperial Bodyguard* musical band, in which he performed until 1969. Then for about 2 years, Ali Birra worked for the Ethiopian Rail Company at Awash Station. In 1972 Ali Birra began professional musical performances at several hotels and night clubs in Addis Ababa (Finfinnee).

### **Ali Birra's Oromo Cultural and Political Songs**

Ali Birra was the first Oromo artist who sang about historical importance of the Oromo *Gadaa* system and about the dynamic Oromo democratic institution that shaped the course of Oromo history. The core of the *gadaa* system was the gathering of the *chaffee* assembly, the democratic election of *gadaa* leaders and the making of Oromo law. In 1900 Emperor Menelik, who established the Ethiopian Empire by destroying Oromo power, banned the gathering of the *chaffee* assembly.<sup>9</sup> Emperor Menelik's deliberate aim with this ban was the destruction of the democratic Oromo *gadaa* system. Ali Birra sang his famous song in early 1970s about the decline of the *gadaa* system.

Ali Birra's song... ' *Karaan Manni AbbaaGadaa Eessaa, dhaqeen galma isaa Jajjabeessaa, taa'een seenaa isaa babareessaa* '. 'Where is the road to Abbaa Gadaa's home? I would go there to rebuild its palace and would sit there and write its history'.

In those lyrics the artist reminds us about the decline of the Gadaa system due to the imposition of an imperial system of governance and the relegation of Oromo history and culture to a subjugated position.<sup>10</sup>

Ali Birra believed that his career became political as soon as he started his musical journey. In his own words, "singing in Oromo then was already political."<sup>11</sup> A few examples of his political songs given below make the point. His first openly political song was "Maltu Adan Nubasee". (None Will Divide Us!).

“Whoever made injustice - God or Man <sup>12</sup>  
We are of the same mother that none will split up  
Though confounded and rocked left and right  
Keep on the correct path and shun the sideline.  
Brothers, come together and promote conversation  
Resolve differences and establish consultation  
Children of the same parents, true brothers  
Not to be alienated like some beasts of the wild  
Drop bickering and tackle the adversary  
None will surpass us when differences [are] sorted [out].<sup>13</sup>.

The lyrics of that song were written anonymously and sent to Ali Birra's mail box in Addis Ababa. He was delighted when he found the text.<sup>14</sup> Ali recomposed the lyrics and started singing it fearlessly for the purpose of awakening the Oromo people. As soon as Ali released it, the message of this song touched the Oromo and raised awareness about standing up for their rights. Through the lyrics of “*Maltu Adan Nubasee*” Ali Birra called on the Oromo to unite. For him all Oromo are one people. “The message of his powerful song cuts across, religious and regional differences and fuses the divided people into a single Oromo nation”.<sup>15</sup>

Another example of Ali Birra's powerful political messages in song was written out of his prison experience, known as “Maal Jedhanni” (“What Did They Say!”). By writing the lyrics and singing it with his unique voice Ali Birra succinctly articulates his understanding of the Oromo situation of the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

What did they say?<sup>17</sup>  
How did they put it,  
When weighed down with worries  
Confounded and wretched  
When dispossessed of land and robbed of all possessions  
Rejected subjugation and defied oppressors  
Took to the forest to fight for justice  
What did they say? How did they put it?

When he sowed but was denied the harvest  
His aspirations and potentials frustrated  
How did he deal with these catastrophes?  
What did he do to change his fortunes?

He whose vision went and turned blind  
His days darkened and his life's sparkle dimmed  
What of laments as he stumbled

Those that oppression forced to the wilds  
Took up arms to regain their rights  
And gave their life for freedom  
What did they stand to gain  
For the ultimate price they paid?<sup>19</sup>

When the above song was published in 1972 as part of Ali Birra's new cassette release, many politically conscious Oromo nationals felt that he was singing about the collective anguish of the Oromo, who in the land of their birth were powerless, landless, without rights, whose language was banned from being used for teaching, writing, publishing, preaching, singing or broadcasting in Ethiopia. In fact, in those days, the Oromo were called by a derogatory name<sup>20</sup>, which was imposed on them for the purpose of belittling their humanity and degrading them to a sub-human level.

Another example of Ali Birra's political music is known as, "Oromiyaa"<sup>21</sup>, a very popular song that was used as a national anthem by several Diaspora Oromo radio and television stations for several decades. The words of "Oromiyaa" are connected with the country of the Oromo in Ethiopia. The song clearly "...expresses the common experience of disconnectedness felt by Oromo exiles throughout the world".<sup>22</sup>

"Oromiyaa, Oromiyaa, Biyya Abba Kooti, Gammachu koo hirru, Amma sii arguuti".

Oromiyaa, my fatherland  
My happiness is never complete until I see you again  
A country of [thousands of years]  
When I get up or lie down you are all my hope  
My hope and aspiration is you my destination  
My patience is nearly expiring for Oromiyaa.<sup>23</sup>

In 1982 Ali Birra married Birgitta Astrom, Swedish Diplomat. In 1984, when his wife was assigned to the Swedish Consulate in Los Angeles, California, Ali Birra arrived with his wife in Los Angeles. He was "probably the first Oromo to have been issued with Swedish diplomatic passport".<sup>24</sup> His arrival in California opened new opportunities for Ali Birra to serve as an outstanding ambassador for Oromo music in the Diaspora. He responded to a call and to provide music which addressed the emotional and spiritual needs of hundreds of thousands of Oromo nationals abroad who had been driven from their homeland, forced to abandon their homes, property, relatives, friends and community. Most of those refugees went into exile as Ethiopians. Through the music of Ali Birra and other Oromo singers, they discovered another identity separate from Ethiopia – that is, Oromumma, Oromo-ness – which many embraced in the form of Oromo nationalism. "Oromo music carries the message and the identity of Oromoness in the lyric and concept of the lyrics".<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt that "... music and dance . . . do encourage people to feel that they are in touch with an essential part of themselves, their emotions and their community."<sup>26</sup> Music offers a pleasant and easy participation in Diaspora activities, as it provides an entry into "the practices and sentiments of an ethnic belonging,"<sup>27</sup>. Ali Birra excelled in cultivating and nurturing pride in Oromo music, cultural heritage and the richness of Oromo language. Through his many songs that deal with several themes such as Oromia, the country of the Oromo in southern Ethiopia, love of the country, richness of Oromo language and culture and the oppressive Ethiopian system, the struggle against that corrupt system, Ali Birra made his music a part of Oromo Diaspora's life. His music shaped their understanding of their lives, and a means for articulating their knowledge of themselves, other peoples, places, times and things and their relation with the Oromo national struggle.<sup>30</sup> Ali Birra's songs and those of other Oromo artists serve as a crucial means by which all Oromo

Diaspora maintain connections with their place of origin thousands of miles away<sup>31</sup>. His music creates emotional connection with Oromia.

The Oromo Studies Association held its annual conferences in Toronto during the years 1988-1991, 1993, 2000, a period that coincided with the presence of Ali Birra, Nuho Gobana, Qamar Yusuf and other Oromo singers in Toronto. OSA annual conferences were held on a weekend at the end of July or beginning of August every year. While scholarly presentations were scheduled during the day, evenings were devoted to Oromo cultural activities. Ali Birra entertained OSA members not only in Toronto, but also in Minneapolis, Atlanta, Seattle and Washington, DC. OSA's cultural nights<sup>32</sup> were very popular and well-attended by OSA attendees and local community members who appreciated the vitality, diversity and richness of the Oromo cultural universe.

### **A Legacy Well Recognized**

Ali Birra spent almost 20 years in exile, entertaining the Oromo Diaspora in Europe, Australia and North America with music whose messages called on Oromo to become masters of their own destiny. It was in recognition of his contribution to the development of Oromo music on the world stage, as well as for enriching Oromo language and cultural heritage that OSA gave its highest award, **the OSA Lifetime Achievement Award to Dr. Ali Birra in absentia in 2015**.

Ali Birra had become a legend in his own lifetime. Ali was also a gifted poet who composed more than 30 of his own famous repertoire of over 300 Oromo songs. Additionally, he touched millions with the music of other famous singers performed, as mentioned above, with ease and joy in seven different languages.<sup>33</sup>

He received two honorary doctorate degrees for music. One was awarded from **Jimma University and the other from Haromaya University in recognition for his outstanding achievement**. Such recognition for an Oromo artist was the first of its kind in Ethiopian history. This in itself was a victory for Oromo music and for Ali Birra himself as it was a dream come true, a harvest of five decades of struggle.<sup>35</sup> For a young man who was imprisoned and tortured in 1964 for singing in the Oromo language to receive awards for developing Oromo music revealed to him that with time and struggle everything changes. All told, Ali Birra received more than forty awards both in Oromia and while he was in the Diaspora.<sup>36</sup>

Ali Birra made significant and lasting contributions to the development of Oromo political awareness over a sixty-year career – through music, poetry, performance and activism. His musical service over those decades has both instilled and sustained Oromo pride in their cultural heritage. Oromo testify that Ali's music up-lifted the people's spirit markedly during the dark days when writing, teaching, preaching and broadcasting in the Oromo language was legally banned in Ethiopia prior to 1974.

A notable legacy is that Ali Birra inspired other Oromo singers. He had built "a solid cache of goodwill" among other Oromo musicians, all of whom adored and respected Ali Birra. Oromo singers owe a debt of gratitude to Ali for opening up the Oromo musical universe. They all acknowledge his undisputed achievement and seniority. His colleagues' respect was gratifying for Ali and inspired him. He found their belief in him is a truly humbling experience.<sup>37</sup>

In July 2013 in keynote remarks at a 50 year celebration recognizing Ali Birra's impressive musical career, Dr. Gemechu Megerssa offered a few very apt observations about his life-long friend for whom he composed a number of famous songs. According to him, it is impossible to

“...capture the true essence and full importance of Ali's contribution to the Oromo cultural renaissance....For many Ali was a singer. For those of us who know him closely, Ali is an honest person who loves life, is loyal to his friends, and respectful to whoever he encounters. He is extraordinarily intelligent, who can see beyond the corner and adjust his actions accordingly. As an artist, he has been a unique gift to the Oromo nation....He is an artist and an activist whose creative works are dedicated to the promotion and furtherance of the Oromo cause.... Among all artists in the empire, Ali Birra stands out...as a cultural leader. As someone who comes from a people that were subjected to a protracted period of political oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation, Ali cheerfully embraced his role as a cultural leader in terms of raising consciousness...Ali Birra's commitment to the Oromo language...came out loud and clear when he produced the song ' Affaan Oromo' . In this song he depicted the role and place of Oromo language as a repository of Oromo wisdom and knowledge, an indispensable resource that should provide the foundation for building future Oromia....His songs tell the story of the richness of Oromo culture and the agony of the Oromo struggle under the brutal role of successive settler colonialism.<sup>38</sup>

By opening up the universe of Oromo music and inspiring his people's pride in their cultural heritage, Dr. Ali Birra left behind a valuable heritage that is crucial for shaping the future of Oromia. He was a universally loved artist, whose death was an immeasurable loss for OSA members as it is for his wife, friends, the Oromo people and others in the international community who have benefitted from his vast musical repertoire for several decades.

## Endnotes

1. OSA's President thanks Mohammed Hassen for drafting this tribute on behalf of the association. Mohammed himself thanks Bonnie Holcomb for her comments on this tribute.
2. Greg Gow, *The Oromo in Exile from the Horn of Africa to the Suburbs of Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002: 58, 74.
3. Mohammed Hassen & Lily Marcoss-Birra, *Ali Birra A Fifty Year Journey For The Love of Music of & His People* (Self published, Dallas, Texas, 2013), p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 18.
5. Ibid., p. 19
6. Ibid. p. 20.
7. Ibid. p. 25.

8. Ibid., p. 29.
9. Getatchew Haile, *The Works of Abba Bahriy and Other Documents Concerning the Oromo* (in Amharic, Avon, Minnesota, 2002, No name of publisher): 222. See also, G.W.B. Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia: The Kingdom of Kafa and Janjero*, ( London : International African Institute, 1955): 83-84.\
10. Asebe Regassa Debelo, “ Voice of Resistance: An Analysis of Hacalu Hundessa’s songs” *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 27, Numbers 1& 2, 2020, p.8.
11. Hassen & Lily Birra, Ibid. 64.\
12. Song translation attributed to Taha Ali Abdi.
13. Hassen & Lily Birra, ibid., 67.\
14. Ibid., 64.
15. Ibid., 67.
16. Ibid.
17. Credit to Taha Ali Abdi for his translation of this song.
18. Hassen & Lily Birra, ibid., 69-70.
19. Ibid
20. “Galla” was the Abyssinian (Amhara and Tigrayan) name for the Oromo. According to Gadaa Melbaa, “the Abyssinians attach a derogatory connotation to the Galla, namely ‘pagan, savage, uncivilized, uncultured, enemy, slave or inherently inferior.’” Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People*, Reprint. (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 14
21. “Oromiyaa” is Afaan Oromo spelling. “Oromia” is the English spelling.
22. Gow, ibid., 57.
23. Ibid., 57-58.
24. Hassen & Lily Birra, ibid.,39.
25. Gow, *Ibid.*, 63, 12.
26. Malcolm Chapman, "Thoughts on Celtic Music," in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, 36
27. Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music," in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. by Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994): 13.
28. Hassen & Marcoss-Birra, Ibid. 64.

29. Hassen & Marcoss-Birra, *Ibid.* 39.
30. Gow, *Ibid.*, 63. 12.
31. Hassen & Marcoss-Birra, *Ibid.*, 73-74.
32. Gow, *Ibid.*, 56.
33. *Ibid.*, 62.
34. Chapman, *Ibid.*, 36.
35. Hassen & Lily Birra, *ibid.*, 55.
36. Marcoss-Birra, *ibid.*, 44-50.
37. Hassen & Lily Birra, *ibid.*, 55-56.
38. Gemechu Megeressa, "Ali Mohammed Birra: Artist, Activist and an Embodiment of our Lived Reality in the last Fifty Years" Hassen & Lily Marcoss-Birra, *ibid.*, pp. 96,99-100, 103, 110,