

**Milkesa**  
**Edited by Corinne Squire**

My name is Milkesa. I am Ethiopian, of Oromo ethnicity. I crossed the border between Ethiopia and Sudan in December 2012, and between Egypt and Sudan in May 2013. I left Egypt on 16/6/2015 and arrived in Italy on 25/6/2015.

**Oromo people, their language and cultures**

The Oromo are indigenous to Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and parts of Somalia. The Oromo make up the largest portion of the Ethiopian population. Oromos have their own unique language, culture, history, and civilization.

The language is called 'Afaan Oromo' which means 'Oromo language'. The Oromo language belongs to Afro-Asiatic family. It is the largest language in Africa next to Arabic, Hausa and Swahili. The Oromo use Latin alphabet. It has vowels and consonants like English language. For example, the consonants are A, E, I, O and U; while the rests are consonants. It has upper and lower cases.

The Oromo people governed themselves using a unique African democratic system, called the 'Gadaa'. Gada system is an indigenous democratic socio-political system of the Oromo.

(Please see attached appendix for more details).

**My family background, and my family's disintegration**

My father was of Ethiopian Oromo ethnicity. Both of my parents were born and raised in the eastern part of Ethiopia.

My father was a farmer. He used to produce cereal crops and coffee in the eastern part of Ethiopia. My parents used to generate their income from these assets. My mother was a housewife.

My father was an active member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) when OLF was part of the 1991 to 1992 Transitional Government of Ethiopia. Based on the charter proclaimed in 1991, my father used to support the OLF financially, in order to build infrastructure such as dispensaries, schools and roads during the Transitional period. My father also used to attend Oromo meetings in his birth district in Ethiopia.

Following the OLF's withdrawal from the then Transitional Government in mid-1992, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) government's intelligence services arbitrarily arrested and detained my father from 1993-1995 and then, in 1996 and in 1997, in prison. On the alleged grounds of his continued support for the OLF, he was finally killed in 2000. All our properties were confiscated by the current Ethiopian government on the grounds of my father's OLF involvement. My family was denied the right to take my father's corpse and to bury him. My mother was also killed in 2000.

From my early years of age, there was always a volatile interest from the security forces in my parents and me because of our suspected OLF involvement. The soldiers would come to our house and threaten my parents at night. I would worry after twilight, as the dusk fell.

I have two brothers and a sister. The other things about my childhood, my life with my mum and dad, school – these personal things are terrible stories.

### **My early life**

I was born in the Oromia region of the eastern part of Ethiopia. I attended my primary and secondary schools there. I completed my teachers' training study in 2010. After high school and during and after my training, I was imprisoned three times in Ethiopia because of false allegations against me.

### **2005-2006: Detention in prison**

There was a General Election in Ethiopia in May 2005. This time coincided with the time I completed high school. According to the local government authority's plan at that time, I had to get a recommendation letter from the government administrative office in order to go to University or college. This was a time when one of the Ethiopian government's parties, called the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), needed to train students to campaign in the countryside to spread government policies in order to obtain votes and win the election. I was among those trained students to be sent to villages to campaign for OPDO. I accepted and campaigned, just because I wouldn't have been issued with the recommendation letter to go into higher education if I had refused.

But most of the people I canvassed voted for the opposition party, called the Oromo People's Congress (OPC), which was against the Ethiopian government.

Attacks on the OPC political opposition party members and other dissenters persisted through 2005, with mass arrests of ethnic Oromo civilians, including me. I was arbitrarily arrested in June 2005 on charges of involvement with the OLF. I was accused of inspiring the people to vote for the OPC in order to achieve indirect OLF rule, without any indication of a reason for the accusation. I was interrogated about the alleged relation I had with the OLF against my government. I was at risk of torture and ill treatment. In May 2006 I was released, with stern warnings.

After my release from prison, I enrolled at a Teachers Training Centre. However, in order to complete the college registration process, I missed one academic year while I finished clearance with the government authority in my home district.

### **2008-2009: Detention in the military barracks**

I joined the Teachers Training College in September 2007. I finished my first year of study in June 2008. I was elected to the committee of the Oromo students' union when I became a second year student in September 2008. The students' union's objectives were first, around social life, to entertain our college students' cultural diversity, motivation and differentiations, with mutual respect, through our union; and second, to develop Oromo culture.

While I was working on the committee, conflict broke out between Tigrayan students and Oromo students which resulted in an open fight between the two groups at the centre of the college. The reason at that time was because one of the Tigrayan students presented a text in the class with derogatory words called Galla, the defamatory name used against those of Oromo ethnicity. I was arrested by armed military force at daybreak and was detained at the military barrack for eight months without any charge, credible evidence, or court decision. During my incarceration, my torturers speculated that our students' union had successfully created a clandestine collaboration with the OLF against my government. I was also accused of mobilizing students against conflict. I was severely tortured and persecuted during my stay in the prison. I received physical and mental torture. My torturers took me to the river. They tied a rope around my neck and held me under the water. They pulled me out and then beat me with a wooden stick and rifle butts and muzzles. My lower ribs were fractured among other injuries. But I was free and innocent of the Ethiopian authorities' bizarre accusation of mobilizing students to be initiated into the OLF, which I knew nothing about. I was released after I was forcibly signed a document to forfeit my life if any suspicion of me having my relation with the OLF would develop.

After my release this time, the security forces were following my footsteps.

### **2011 –2012; My third detention, again in prison**

After I graduated from college in June 2010, I was employed as an Oromo Language teacher at a school in my birth zone. During my work as a teacher in this school, I became coordinator of the Oromo Language and Cultural Club. As a club, we - other teachers and I - arranged different cultural concerts which I think adversely affected government officials. There were government spies who were learning in different grade levels in the school. They reported every word I spoke to the government office. The local authority officer at in the town used to question me about all the topics I taught in the school, to the extent that I suspected my own shadow. These spies watched all teachers' activities and reported to the government office.

Based on the Oromo Language subject, I taught my students about their Oromo cultural heritage, and I and other Oromo teachers organized different cultural shows

I arranged different cultural shows in order for everyone to learn about the cultural and social identity of my Oromo people. I felt that I was responsible for developing and protecting my culture, as I was coordinator of the Cultural Club, and an Oromo language teacher. However, the Ethiopian government doesn't want the development of Oromo culture and language. (Ethiopian government suppression of Oromo culture is well documented in an Amnesty International report of 2014).

I continued intensively teaching Oromo language and hosting the concerts; because it is declared in the Ethiopian Constitution that everyone has the right to develop their language and culture. But the Ethiopian government doesn't want the Oromo language and culture to be developed, unlike those of some other Ethiopian ethnicities. Just because I am from the Oromo ethnicity, government authorities linked my cultural activities with the OLF, simply in order to restrict me from developing it, because of their racial prejudice. But I continued, because I was responsible for developing my cultural identity, which doesn't have any negative effect on my government's political life.

As part of this severe social and cultural suppression by the Ethiopian authorities, I was accused of inciting Oromo students in the school to support the OLF against my government – an accusation which is itself commonly used as a motive to justify my ethnicity's social and cultural suppression. Nothing I taught my students was outside Ethiopian educational curriculum. But the Ethiopian authorities continued to severely restrict the basic civil right to develop Oromo culture and language. Government authorities forced me to drop Oromo culture and to teach Tigrayan culture -the culture of the ethnicity to which the ruling party belongs. But I refused their dead plan, and continued teaching Oromo culture.

Four intelligence officers came to the school in March 2011 by car. They all wore police uniform. They arrested me at my school and detained me in prison, just for my teaching of Oromo culture. I was accused of working as an OLF activist against my government. I was severely tortured during my stay in the prison. I was put in a cramped, confined and dark cell. Later I was taken to the interrogation room for investigation. I was hanged upside-down. I received intermittent assault and physical violence. I received foot and buttock whipping. Prison guards tied heavy weight to my testicles and forced me to kneel down and then to move on my knees. Sometimes my torturers would put a sack over my head, tie it around my throat with rope, submerge me in the river, then beat me. They pricked me with a sharp needle on my feet, on the tips of my fingers and on my genitals. They sprayed diluted chilli into my genitals and my eyes. When I innocently tried to convince them by requesting them to produce any piece of tangible evidence that show my association with the OLF, my torturers said to me, 'You are a great threat to our government as you are from the Oromo ethnicity'. So I learned that my being created as a person of Oromo ethnicity is a big crime in Ethiopia; I am an unnecessary animal to that country.

### **The route to Sudan**

I finally escaped from prison in December 2012 with the help of my aunt's husband, who bribed the prison officer. He took me to his friend's house, where he hid me. He then arranged my safe and clandestine departure from Ethiopia, using a smuggler. I crossed into Sudanese territory on 27 December 2012, on foot, at around midnight.

In Sudan, the smugglers put me and others into a car and drove us towards the capital. I arrived in Khartoum on 31 December 2012, seeking sanctuary.

Once I arrived in Khartoum, my Sudanese smuggler connected me with an Oromo person named Abu Milky who advised me to cross to Egypt. I spent five months in Khartoum, hiding myself in Abu Milky's house. He told me that there were many Oromo persons who were caught and deported to Ethiopia against their will.

### **The route to Egypt**

Using smugglers again, I left Khartoum illegally by land on 2 May 2013, with other migrants. The smugglers detained me for more than three weeks in the Nubian Desert, asking me to pay \$15,000 as a ransom or to lose one of my kidneys as compensation.

At the crack of dawn on 31<sup>st</sup> May, unbelievably, one of the Eritrean detainees among the migrants took the smugglers' car's key. He confided to us that the guard was taking a nap. I and some other immigrants who swiftly boarded the car escaped in the blink of an eye, entered Aswan town in Egypt and finally arrived in Cairo.

I was registered with the regional UNHCR office in Cairo in June 2013. I was being pursued by the clandestine network of the human traffickers who had sneaked me from Sudan into Egypt. I faced random physical attack and harassment via my mobile phone. I reported this to the UNHCR office and the Egyptian police, but there was no prospect for any durable solution from the UNHCR or the police. In addition, the Egyptians saw me as a person from a hostile country, because of the Nile River dam that is being built on the Nile in Ethiopia. The Nile River is a backbone for Egypt's economy. So I became a constant target in Egypt.

The Egyptian government's laws allow refugees neither to resettle nor to work in Egypt. Hence I needed legal protection. But I didn't have an offer of re-settlement from the UNHCR or any other governmental and nongovernmental organizations. As a last option, I came to Europe to ask for asylum, and to enjoy peace, freedom, security and human dignity.

### **My Journey in Europe**

I arrived in Italy's port, Catania, on 25/6/2015. On the same day, the Italian government boarded me and other immigrants onto a minibus and we headed to Milan. We arrived in Milan on 26/6/2015. After about ten minutes of our arrival in Milan, where numerous immigrants from different countries camped, they transferred us into another minibus and then took us to Brescia's police division. The police told us to immediately leave Italy, saying Italy has no resources and capacity to resettle us, as the country is in an economic recession. The police further stated that the Italian population do not support further refugees' integration. Then after about one hour stay in this police division, they boarded us in the same minibus and took us to one of the churches in this Brescia town, wherein they gave us lunch. After lunch they told us to leave, giving us our freedom to leave Italy. I would like to convey my heartfelt thanks and appreciation for the Italian government's humanitarian benevolence.

We left the church and scattered. I didn't know where to go. Every pedestrian I asked, from where I could board a train to Rome, spoke Italian and not English. Then I looked for people of black African descent like me, thinking that they could direct me. I came-across many black persons but some of them spoke French while others spoke Italian. At that point, the only French word I knew was "bonjour".

We went astray and were left with no hope. Finally we prayed for God to help us in our moment of difficulties.

Instead of rushing about together, I advised my Ethiopian friends from the boat to stay in a specific place, and I continued walking, together with one amongst my friends from my country who knew a little of the Somali language. We went to banks such as Western Union to try to change my U.S dollars into euros. All the banks I asked turned us away, saying that I couldn't change without a passport or any other valid identity document. Luckily we came-across a person of Somalian origin who had Italian ID. This Somali man helped me with changing my money. Then I returned back to where I had left my friends and I asked if they want to change money. All of them except one told me that they didn't have any money for transportation fares. I promised to pay for all of them.

On the night of the 27th we slept under trees in Brescia.

Among us there was a young guy; he came with me in the same boat from Egypt. He had a cousin and both were Ethiopian citizens of Somali origins. His cousin was an Italian citizen and she had lived in Naples for at least 20 years.

The young guy made a telephone call to his cousin. He then told our group that his cousin wanted to accommodate us until she could arrange our safe journey to any destination among the European countries.

I bought a train ticket, even for this young guy. It cost 65 euros each from Brescia to Naples. So instead of going to Rome, I and the rest of my friends accompanied him to Naples.

His cousin welcomed us at Naples train station. Then we walked for approximately eight minutes and she accommodated us in one of her Somalian brother's houses, which was about two or three minutes from her own house.

In the course of our stay, I learned that this cousin and her Somali friend were smugglers and human traffickers. They made fraudulent passports at their house and sent immigrants to different European countries by land or by air.

This cousin and her Somali friend, whom we thought were good Samaritans, held us for some days for ransom. She forced me to pay a great deal of money so that she could make a fake passport for me. She tried to convince me that it was impossible to cross to any other European country without a passport. But I instead told her to stop such fraudulent action and human trafficking. She threatened me. As I was already held as their captive, I gave her my friend's telephone number, who lives in Cairo as a political refugee under the UNHCR mandate. She cheated and convinced him to send 1400 US dollars via a Somali money transfer. He sent it from Cairo to her. She then gave me 125 euros and told me to leave. I begged her to give me some more money of her own free will. She refused.

Among us there was a man who had been an Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) member fighting against the Ethiopian government. This man was a 'dead alive' due to the inhuman torture that he had faced in Ethiopian prisons. He didn't know even a word of the English language. I humbly beseeched the woman for this old man to accompany me. 'He can't go without paying,' she said. No captives could leave without her consent. I worried for the old man and I started recording everything in my memory to confide to the police station nearest to her house. I abstained myself from actually reporting, just turning and tossing many things in my memory. This old man had no source of money. I decided not to step outdoors and leave the old man behind. I decided to face whatever fate would come in my life: To die and save him, or to die before he would die.

But then the young man, this woman's cousin, warned he would kill me with the cooperation of her friends. Later, this man tried to take revenge against the rest of my friends one by one. Each captive was waiting in suspense until their turn would arrive to be released after somebody had intervened with money. The young man later asked for asylum in Austria.

When I reached Calais, my time in the Jungle was I think the same as for the rest of the refugees. In general it ranges from insanity to death.

In keeping with their country's respected humanitarian tradition, laws and regulation, norms and international obligations, I submitted my asylum appeal to the relevant department of the France government.

I escaped ethnic persecution and severe human rights abuse in Ethiopia. I can't return to Ethiopia to restructure my life due to the political accusations against me. There is no justice in Ethiopia. There is no resource that will ensure my civil rights. So I fear I will face the worst fate and get killed.

I left the Jungle to ask for asylum in France; just for my safety, freedom and human dignity - thinking to visit the UK at some point in the future. I think my future is uncertain, wherever I am.

My hope and ambition to write about the situation that I have been experiencing in the southern French city where I am living is great. But my asylum process with the Court is under question as France is rejecting almost all refugees. One month from the date you received the court decision, if it is a negative decision, the government forces you to leave your house; and then you sleep on the streets. Everything will be cut from you, such as medical and food assistance, and money allowance; they issue no more valid documents. And then forced deportation follows. I signed this document and its copy is in my hand now. I mean that thinking and worrying about my tomorrow's forced deportation under French law is my every minute's major and minor possibilities. Hence I can't write anything more yet, and I don't think I will write anything, before I am issued with the document that allows me to stay in France. Otherwise, I am thinking about when I will be thrown into the streets and get forced deportation.

Thank God, I escaped from jaws of the Ethiopian government – I am out of the fire now. But if deportation is awaiting me at some point in the future, my current living has no meaning. Sleeping on the streets of France is not better and safer than my Ethiopian house. I can't see any hope of a bright future. I am in a turbulent situation and times of turmoil.