



A Conversation with Attorney Mulu Alemayehu, Defender of Migrant Rights

—Priscilla Ankrah, Priority Africa Network

Like keloids, the images remain branded on our minds: a brown Customs and Border Protection officer is scowling. Mounted on a horse, he clutches a whip, as [a man with deep ebony skin runs to escape the whip's sting...](#)

We are neither in the Reconstruction era, nor in the age of Jim Crow.

We are in 2020, but for the [thousands of African and Haitian migrants seeking asylum at the border](#), we may as well be.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, under [a law called Title 42](#)¹, a person that seeks asylum at the United States' borders can be expelled because of a public health exception. Essentially, Title 42 is the “invisible wall” that enables the U.S. to excuse its duties, under [national](#) and [international law](#)², to be a refuge for those fleeing the threat of racial, religious, and political persecution.

¹ In Attorney [Mulu Alemayehu](#)'s words.

² The US ratified the The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (see page 4).

By grace, there are advocates who defend the rights of asylum seekers, and who despite the overwhelming narrative, focus on the invisibilized group of Haitian and African asylum seekers.

One such advocate, attorney Mulu Alemayehu, has been traveling to the US-Mexico border to advise migrants, particularly African and Haitian migrants, on how to effectively apply for asylum.

She is one of the four immigration attorneys featured in the film, [Las Abogadas](#), which [PAN will be screening on the 29th in Oakland](#).

PAN had the honor of speaking with her recently about her journey from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, to Chicago Illinois, to where she is now— an immigration attorney in Los Angeles.

In this conversation, Attorney Mulu walks us through escaping the Dergue regime and leaving her home in Ethiopia, and living her purpose as a lawyer in California.

In Attorney Mulu Alemayehu's Words:

The Dergue, and the Decision

I went into law because of the injustices that I witnessed, growing up in Ethiopia with the [Dergue regime](#) (in the 1970s and 80s).

There were so many human rights violations and there was so much injustice. Basically, there was no law, no place where you could turn to for any sort of refuge or justice. I saw a lot of that growing up, so I always said that I wanted to become an attorney.

I knew I wanted to do work with more of a meaningful humanitarian aspect to it. But I didn't know it was going to be immigration law. I thought I would practice some form of international law or be in a human rights organization, something like that.

If I was able to go to law school in Ethiopia, I don't think I'd have left my country. I would have still stayed there to contribute to bringing justice and reform in the country. But I wasn't even able to get access to law school during that time.

Back then, they assigned you to whatever college or studies they wanted you to pursue once you finished high school. I was placed in the Commercial College and was made to study Secretarial Sciences.

But if I had the opportunity, I think I would've stayed back home even with all the injustices that I witnessed and with all the persecution that myself and my family went through.

It was horrible, some of the things we went through. Sometimes I would be driving down the street with my mother, and we would see dead bodies.

Prior to the Dergue regime, my father worked with the government and he also had his own personal businesses. He was a self made, very successful, very kind, intelligent, and fair person. During the regime, any land or additional home property was confiscated and we were left with just the one home that we were living in. And my father was also forced to retire before his retirement age because they didn't want anybody that was with the previous regime to be working or to continue to work. We were actually happy with his retirement because, believe it or not, a lot of his colleagues were either arrested or killed.

So, we grew up having to be taken into detention or the local jail because we didn't go to a meeting that was held by the cadres, or the local offices at the time, just because we didn't go to the indoctrination meetings that they wanted us to go to.

My own sister was arrested and tortured; we thought she was dead. They were just horrible experiences. So at the time, a big goal our parents had was for each of the children to leave the country.

I remember the day that I got my visa and how my dad took me to church right after we left the American Embassy. He stopped by the church and gave thanks to the Lord.

From Chicago, Illinois to Defiance, Ohio

I went to Chicago because my brother, who's passed now, was living there. He was here before my sister and my brother who were living in Denver. We all went to Chicago to be with him.

I started work at the Field Museum and then I went to Defiance College, in Defiance, Ohio, a small private college where I studied criminal justice. Next, for law school, I went to the University of Toledo, College of Law.

Working as a research assistant for my amazing immigration law professor, is where I believe I decided that immigration is what I wanted to focus on.

I fell in love with immigration law at that time, and that's how I went. I decided, that's what I'm gonna do.

Navigating Race in America

Being Black in the U.S. is something I would have to say is a learned experience for us as Ethiopians. Because there were times where I look back and I didn't even pick up on how what I experienced was actually racism. Now, having lived in it, I recognize it for what it was. You know?

Especially in college, when I was a member of the Black Students Association, I would have Black friends recognizing instances of racism. We didn't catch it because I didn't know what racism looked like; we didn't grow up in that environment.

Until I lived through the system, and started seeing it over and over, only then could I see the subtle— very, very subtle—racism and discrimination that you face because of the color of your skin. It was a very rude, learned awakening, you know?

Now I pick it up right away. Sometimes I tell myself to try not to be too stuck on that. But in a way I'm very happy that I didn't pick up on it because I think it would've crushed my goals, and my drive to succeed to get to where I want to get to. It could have really crushed me if I recognized it as such, because, discrimination is ugly. When you see how somebody looks at you in a different way just because of your color, even though you try to have a tough skin, it still penetrates to your soul.

Serving Black Migrants at the Border

All migrants are going through struggles, and when we go out to the Border, we help all migrants. But African and Black migrants have an added layer of discrimination.

The type of interviews and credible fear determination screenings that they were going through are becoming much stricter and much more rigid. I help them to know how to pass that screening, and how to relay their stories and the persecution that they suffered.

But when I go to the Border, I also want Black migrants to know that I see you, and that we're there for you.

On Sunday, January 29th, Attorney Mulu will be featured in a salon conversation with Reverend Debbie Lee of the [Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity](#) (IM4HI). The event has sold out but you can watch the live streaming by going to the Priority Africa Network FB page: <https://www.facebook.com/PriorityAfricaNetwork>