

## The Challenging Legacies on the Development of Wolaitta History



### History

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### ABSTRACT

*This research is intended to reconstruct the challenging legacies on the development of Wolaitta history since 1894. Even though Wolaitta had old history since a long period, and there are challenging legacies on the development of the reconstruction of its history since 1894. Wolaitta experienced the rich political, social and economic aspect of the past. To know the challenging legacies on the development of Wolaitta history, this study used oral informants and written sources. The study clearly indicated that challenging legacies on the development of Wolaitta history such as; the previous political system on Wolaitta people, introduction of Protestantism since 1920s, the nature of subject matter by itself, professionalism, this ideological controversies and less attention given by the concerned bodies. The study under discussion recommends the action to be taken against the challenging legacies on the development of Wolaitta history.*

### I. BACKGROUND

#### 1.1. Introduction

Wolaitta is the people live in an Omo river valley as Omotic language speaking family. The population of Wolaitta is nearly equal proportion with in the present Zone and outside it (8). The historic kingdom of Wolaitta occupied vast territory. However, the present day Wolaitta zone is found between in the North; Hadiya, Kambatta-Tambaro, in the East Arsi and Sidama, in the South Gamo-Gofa and in the West Dawuro zones. Its astronomical area is located between 6° North and 37° East lines of latitude and longitude respectively. Wolaitta agro climate zones include highland, midland and lowland. The Great Rift Valley passes the southern part of Wolaitta, and there are major river valleys such as Omo (Umma), Bilatte, Deme and other smaller rivers. In Wolaitta there are various historical sites. Oral tradition, archaeological excavations and a few written sources trace Wolaitta history to the remote past. The evidence indicates that Wolaitta experienced the Neolithic Period of human evolution (5, 6, 7, 92, 1, 15 and 12).

Oral sources and few written sources conclude the reality on the beginning of Wolaitta civilization that started at Uma (Omo) river was similar to the ancient civilizations of river valleys. The ancient river valleys civilizations which were similar to Wolaitta civilization are: Axumite, Nubian, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese, Indian, Inca, Azetic, some African and some European civilizations. This is because the aforementioned areas based their civilization on River valleys (3). The origin and state formation of Wolaitta began in the Omo river valleys. It is not clearly known exact the date when the first *kawo* (king) begun to rule Wolaitta. However, the oral tradition of the community traces it back to the remote origin. Politically, Wolaitta was organized state having three dynasties; Arujia, Wolaitta-Malla and Tigre. The Tigre dynasty was well written, and the oral tradition tell us similar thing with written sources than other dynasties. From the remote past including Arijia to the reign of king Motolomi in 13<sup>th</sup> century is considered as ancient period in Wolaitta history, and from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the incorporation of Wolaitta to the Ethiopian empire in 1894 was medieval period. From The conquest of Wolaitta in 1894 to present is modern period in Wolaitta history. However, after Wolaitta kingdom incorporated to Ethiopia in 1894, its history faced challenging legacies due to the subsequent socio-political developments (6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 2, 15, 16 and 17).

The first literature that recorded history of Wolaitta existed after 13<sup>th</sup> century, linking Wolaitta, Kawo Motolomi and Abune Tekle-Haymanot together. Since the remote past, Wolaitta people had their own king, who was accountable to the society and *Balimola* (Wolaitta parliament). The separation of power shared between *kawo* (king), *Balimola* (included legislators and executives), *Dana* (administrators/judges/) and other authorities. King was at the top and *Tondiya* at the bottom of the political ladder. Thus, the political history of Wolaitta was well remembered since the period of Wolaitta-Malla dynasty of *Kawo* Motolomi in 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, later on due to

the rise of Muslim sultanates, Orom population expansion and Ahmed Grag, war the state territory was narrowed to Omo River Valley; the original home of Wolaitta civilization. At the time the state name was called *Damotta kawottetta* meaning Damot kingdom. This was because the center for the kingdom was at the tip of Mount Damotta or "Damot." Economically, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wolaitta was prosperous too. However, this state was forcefully subjugated to the Ethiopian Empire by Emperor Menelik-II in 1894. Then, many challenging legacies appeared on its history since 1894 (1, 11, 8, 16, 4 17 10, 12, 7, 6, 3 and 2).

#### 1.2. Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to reconstruct challenging legacies on the development of Wolaitta history since 1894. In this regard, the challenging legacies of the development of Wolaitta history since 1894 were identified.

#### 1.3. Research Questions

- How the challenging legacies had influenced the development of Wolaitta history since 1894?

### 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

**2.1. Design of the Study;** The historical research design was used for this study. Due to its unique nature on challenging legacies of Wolaitta history since 1894 is reconstructed in this research.

**2.2. Description of the Research Setting;** Wolaitta is one of the ethnic groups in Southern Ethiopia with long history having twelve districts and three large self-administrative towns.

**2.3. Subject of the Study;** the population of this study is Wolaitta people, but for obtaining appropriate information for the current study, twenty elders were picked purposively.

**2.4 Sources of Data;** the study used both oral and written secondary sources.

**2.5. Sampling Procedure;** the researcher used purposive sampling for selecting twenty informants for interview due to their deep knowledge of challenging legacies of Wolaitta history.

**2.6. Tools of Data Collection;** the researcher used data collection tools such as interview, document analyses and observation.

**2.7. Data Analysis;** the researcher used historical research method of data analysis and interpretation.

### 3. Discussion and Results Based on Research Question i. The Influence of Political Systems

The study is indicated that history of Wolaitta since 1894 had faced challenging legacies in five different periods based on the developments of country's political events. This is because a history

of Wolaitta faced challenging legacies differently in period of phases. The first phase of 1894 to 1920 that focused only on supremacy of military history of emperor of Menelik II, and its ideology by ignoring the nationalities history of the conquered peoples including Wolaitta. Thus, at this period the history of the nation at large clearly indicated on military supremacy of Menelik II on conquered nationalities as objects. After its incorporation in to the Ethiopian state, the *neftegna* system or *melkegn* rule discouraged the existing local history and tradition by declaring the supremacy of semitic-culture that is the dominance of Amahara culture, language and tradition which laid foundation for the strengthen of the regime, and it destroyed the local history. As a result of this, speaking *Amaharegna* and practicing conquerors culture was considered the concept of modernization by the community. Contrary to this, speaking the conquered language was considered as inferior. Wolaitta history and practice of any of its culture was considered as backwardness.

The old feudal regime, the political and their administrative system eroded the history of the people as well as break the strength and courage of the Wolaitta nationality. It also destroyed their rich and indigenous culture, unity and confidence. Moreover, they have given derogative name to the Wolaitta society by legalizing and legitimatizing the new name for Wolaitta society and associated and taught some shameful practices such as cheating, thieftness, false accusation, disagreement, loyalty to the successive political regime and so on. Therefore, in general the way the Wolaitta society treated by the previous regime greatly influenced and undermined the sense of Wolaitta nationalism, Wolaitanism, identity and history. It was for this reason that the community members always hesitate shout against the conquest of Menelik on Wolaitta laid the firm foundation as one of the major challenging legacies of Wolaitta history.

#### ii. Expansion of Protestantism (SIM since 1920s)

The coming of Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in 1920 up to the occupation of Italy in 1935 was the second phase for the challenging legacies of Wolaitta history. At this period, the missionaries and some of the leading fathers of protestant converts; misinterpreted the bible with the indigenous culture and history of Wolaitta. Thus, the missionary's thought the community that practicing some of their culture is sin and the like. The early converts accepted and believed on such ideology that practicing folklores, hunting, drinking local alcoholic, eating raw meat, smoking and the like became the challenging on Wolaitta history, during the period under discussion.

Most protestant religion followers concluded that the practices of Wolaitta history and identity "as anti-protestant action," and those who practice such activities were communicated. The original culture and history of Wolaitta contradict with the "concocted versions of religion (4)." The protestant religion claimed any practice to preserve its culture, identity and history considered as evil to biblical notion. However, as informants argued it was not the teaching of the bible and the like but the approach of protestant religious groups that discouraged the way to preserve Wolaitta history. Hence, this study showed that some of the non-Christian theory applied to Wolaitta community that discouraged the community to practice their taken history. So that such approach of Protestantism unlike other parts of Ethiopia became one of the challenging legacies on Wolaitta history.

The third phase was the period of Italian rule in Ethiopia, from 1936-1941 that attempted to restore the practice of Wolaitta indigenous culture and claim to Wolaitta history, however, it did not stay long. Even though Wolaitta people loved Italian occupation period, due to their hunting on *neftegna* (northern army holding settlers in Wolaitta), whom Italians considered resistance fighters against Italian rule, at the end era the Italian rule was disliked by Wolaitta. The Italians, originally positive to the indigenous Wolaitta history, however, later around the end of their rule, they segregated including the residential places in Soddo town as residence of blacks and

whites. This is because the Italians suspected the community that there are giving foods and drinks to the resistance fighters of Ethiopia against Italian rule in Ethiopia, and Wolaitta too.

#### iii. The Nature of Subject Matter by Itself

The fourth phase (1941-1974) witnessed the beginning of professional historiography of Ethiopia with focus of pro-semetic and anti-nationalist historiography. During this phase, the development for amateur and professional historiographers on Wolaitta appeared; but the historiography of the period faced many editing by the government and individuals levels. The first amateur indigenous writer to trace a history of Wolaitta was Bogale Walelu. His book entitled *Ye wolamo hizib tarkina barenet endet endetewegede* (A history of Wolaitta People and how the slavery was abolished). In his book, Bogale tried to put a short and concise history of Wolaitta and how slavery abolished from the community. However, his writing was guided by the imperial regime by pushing including using the derogative word of the people; especially the chapter discussing slavery was articulated by the regime. The publishing of the book by itself done after critical proof read of the regime. Thus, it was the footing era for the challenging legacies of Wolaitta history and historiography in which later writers paid a great sacrifice.

The second writer was Abayneh Girma, his thesis title was *The Nature of Administration and Development in Ethiopia: The case of "Wolaitta" Development*. It was a BA Thesis at Addis Ababa University: Department of History in 1971. He thesis focused too only on the work of the governor of Wolaitta; Dejjazmatch Welde Semayat Gebre Weld, who was is from North and one of the supporter of the feudal regime, this does not mean that the specific governor had positive image by the community. In short, the work of Abayneh Girma was designed by the pro-feudal regime of the then period. Thus, this phase in general characterized by designing of the Wolaitta history by the articulators of the feudal regime.

The fifth phase which took place from 1974-1991; even though it witnessed the state liberalization of nationalities' from feudal rule and gave opportunity to write Wolaitta history, it was dominated by professional domination of semitic historiography and continuation for discouraging of Wolaitta history. One of the popular book that was written in 1978 by Abraham Babanto entitled "*Lämlämetua Wolaitta: Tentawenna Yä Zaräyetu*" ("The origin of Wolaita and Revolutionary Modern Wolaita"). This book gives the vivid information on Wolaitta history. However, the title of the book in Amaharic and English don't go together especially, "*Lämlämetua Wolaitta*" and "Revolutionary Modern Wolaita" would have been translated properly by the author. As a discipline history is the important science to study all events of human and environment past, present and future. However, Ethiopian history by itself is full of controversy due to its subjectivity to pro-semetic fixation, bias and lack of sources that developed disloyalty to the subject. Besides to this, marketability of the subject is not benefiting its professionals. Moreover, the discipline is controversial, politicized and exposed for versions criticisms because of its dynamic nature. Thus, due to these and other factors the professionals are not interested to fully utilize their potential.

#### iv. Depressing Professionalism

The post Italian occupation imperial regime witnessed the beginning of professional historiography of Ethiopia with focus of pro-semetic and anti-nationalist historiography. The development of academic history as discipline in the continent of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular appeared recently. Even though professional history started in the 1950s and 1960s in Ethiopia, its scope was limited to north and its focus was political history. It was the reason that why it marginalized the larger but oral society and civilization of Southern Ethiopians and the historical writings of Wolaitta was depressed specifically. One of the negative effects of this is that of the production of limited number of Wolaitta scholars in the area of specialization of history subject. Therefore, shortage of academic

historian who conduct historical research reconstruct the history and culture of the Wolaitta.

Native professional historians, who have done their first and second degree in history were very few in number. Many of these scholars had obliged to left the discipline due to the way they had faced challenges during their study, the political influence, the unprofitability of the market and local and nationwide perception to the discipline and other factors. As a result, their contribution in the area was limited. The only few amateur publications give clue to Wolaitta history, and they also tried their won part to contribute Wolaitta history. Though non-native, the anthropological approach of Remo Chiatti is very distinctive collection of Wolaitta ethno-history. In short the pieces of internal and external writers had their own contribution with their own drawbacks in to the relation of sources and their way of interpretation.

#### v. The Ideological Controversies

Another challenging legacy is the concept of sectionalism among clans of Wolaitta i.e. the larger Wolaitta society is divided in to two major clan groups which is composed of about or more than one hundred clans whose claim is from different origin. The claim of origin led to clan sectionalism which in turn led to various socio-cultural consequences. The controversies among clans and marginalized groups led them to blame the past. In addition, most of the community members concluded that economy is the only means to win the social and political prevalence; hence, they worried for economic development. Some community members' respect, hears, obeys, collaborates, prioritizes and even wants to be assimilated to the outsiders than their own community members to be out of the historical influence, they feel. Thus, sectionalism led the development of the ideology and sense of some Wolaitta members are good for others and disrespect for their own. In short, the ideological controversies among the community had the challenging legacy on Wolaitta history.

#### vi. Less Attention Given by Concerned Bodies

Almost all concerned bodies and stakeholders have less attention to reconstruct Wolaitta history that is one of the challenging legacies. For instance in the sphere of dissemination (publication of scholar and non-scholar papers), awareness, access, marketability of the field, problems of median (translation work to vernacular language), lack of funding historical research and the like have given less attention by concerned bodies. In academic arena of the community; there are no MA and PhD programs to access for local students of history. It must not surprise that local MA level graduates are four in number so far, and no Wolaitta historian got chance to hold PhD degree. This doesn't mean denying the minimum trial of local government of in producing some annual bulletin, a history of Wolaitta to 1974 and a history of land tenure in Wolaitta from 1894 to 1974. In addition, there is promising events for the reconstruction of Wolaitta history such as the pro-indigenous culture constitution and national government direction, existence of higher institutions at locality, growing promising professionals, societal culture to accept new concepts and the like.

#### Conclusion

The state formation and civilization of Wolaitta was begun on Omo River Valley. The kingdom had three dynasties. These were Wolaitta-Malla dynasty, Arujia dynasty and Tigre dynasty. Wolaitta was politically strong, socially unique and economically self-sufficient. However, political, social and economic history of Wolaitta was contested since 1894 due to Menelik's expansion and subsequent developments. Thus, subsequent socio-cultural and political developments such as the influence previous political systems, expansion of Protestantism, the nature of subject matter by itself, depressing professionalism, ideological controversies among clans, less attention given by concerned bodies created the challenging legacies on the Wolaitta history. Therefore, the identification of the challenging legacies of Wolaitta history preserves its history.

Protection of history in the face of global change is the base for future generation. Thus, target of this study is to aware the generation to revitalize the useful historical practices of Wolaitta people. Finally the recommendations of this study to minimize the challenging legacies of Wolaitta history are; awaking the community about their past, using legal means to protect it, establishing advisory body, budgeting for its protection, awards to its propagators, educating the community, working with religious leaders, stake holders and the like must be designed.

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