

The Kingdom of Wolaita (Ethiopia): Military Organization and War, To 1894

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Wolaita's kingdom traditional military organization, warfare and the value and attitude of the people towards war and bravery. The study starts as an introduction by pointing out the importance of war in pre-colonial Africa and particularly in Ethiopia until a centralized Ethiopian Empire created at the end of the 19th century. After brief introduction and account on the background of the study area and the kingdom's historical background, the study shows that the kingdom had well organized military organization; military trainings and the people had great value, attitude, and attention towards war and bravery at the time of the kingdom. The kingdom's security and expansion to have the present territory was largely depended on its traditional war mechanisms besides other peaceful means. The study sums up the discussion with final conquest of the kingdom and its incorporation into Ethiopian Empire by the forces of Menelik II, which was superior in terms of modern firearms, and experience after bloodiest resistance that prolonged for more than seven years and took the life of thousands from both sides. The study points out that the strong resistance of the kingdom using traditional weaponry by itself was a sign of Wolaita kingdom's traditional strong military organization and system of war.

Key Words: Wolaita Kingdom, War, Military Training, Bravery

1. INTRODUCTION

Africans in pre-colonial period before the second half of the nineteenth century utilized various mechanisms in state

building and state survival. They practiced acts of conciliation, persuasion, ritualizing, negotiation and mediation to achieve co-existence and survival. Diplomatic understanding, terms and recognition of protections and agreements were also instruments to achieve mutual benefits particularly in areas of trade and aspects of territories. Dynastic marriages were also other tools of diplomatic practices to establish cooperation and assistance in time of crisis between peoples, or polities. ^[1]

However, several studies in the field indicate warfare has significant effects for state development and existence in all parts of the world. Particularly war has been greatly essential in determining Africa's past. It has been both the cause and effect of larger political and socio-economic changes. This proves to the fact that a strong military organization was main issue in state safety and consolidation in pre-colonial Africa. ^[1]

Many Literatures contend that military competition played significant role in the state building. The famous statement, which expresses, "War made the state, and the state made war", has coined this argument. ^[2] Each African state had its own inherent organizational and administrative principles, military discipline and order. ^[3]

In Ethiopia, which is part of the Sub-Saharan Africa, war had played also significant role in making up of states, nations and building of the Ethiopian empire. Wars were common events in Ethiopian history. Territorial expansion, controlling long distance trade routes, raiding to capture slaves, competing for

political authority and disputes over various causes such as religious issues were the main factors for internal wars. Ethiopians conducted also external wars to defend themselves from foreign invasion. [4] This seems the reason why the Portuguese writer Almeida in the 17th century wrote about Ethiopians, “In war they are reared as children, in war they grow old, or the life of all who are not farmers is war”. [5]

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the Ethiopian kingdoms and polities saw strong determinations by their rulers to expand their borders, centralize and consolidate their power at the expense of others. [6] This process of expansion and centralization carried out mainly through the means of warfare. Because of these frequent wars, polities’ and states borders, territories were unstable, and states of different sizes appeared in many parts of the region. In the meantime, the stronger neighbors swallowed the weaker ones and on the way, the number of polities changed and eventually one strong empire appeared that unified all polities in Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century. [6]

At the same time when all Sub-Saharan Africans fell under the Europeans colonization yoke, Menelik II who was the King of Shoa (1865-1889) and Emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913) created the Ethiopian Empire by incorporating the southern, south western and eastern principalities, peoples and polities through war and peaceful subjugation methods. [7] In the first half of the nineteenth century, there have been more than five provinces in the northern and central part of the Abyssinian kingdom. There were also many polities, principalities, and kingdoms in the southern region that were found at different level of socio-political development which were later, incorporated into the northern Abyssinian kingdom. [6]

The Ethiopian and expatriate scholars have made several researchers and produced a bulky literature about the northern and central provinces internal and external wars, their organization, diplomatic

relations and methods of wars. [8] Nevertheless, regarding the southern regions there is scarcity of studies and knowledge gap about their traditional military organization, their methods of territorial defence and attacking before their conquest by Emperor Menelik II. The kingdom of Wolaita, which is the concern of this paper, was one of those southern kingdoms conquered by Menelik II in 1894.

Indigenous scholars and others have conducted researches and produced some literatures and theses mainly on the history of Wolaita people. Some of the studies we can mention about Wolaita are Fancho and Eyob, 2014; Wana Wagesho, 2006; Demise Moja, 2007; Adane Ayza, 2016; Asela Gujubo, 2012; E.Paul Balisky, 2009; Remo Chiatti, 1984 and others. However, these and other materials explore the history of Wolaita people, their origin, and socio-economic and political development and largely focused on the people’s military resistance against the conquest of Menelik II and the history after conquest in 1894 to the period of the Imperial regime (1974).

Although they describe the bravery of the Wolaita people and their struggle against their rivals and enemies as passing references, there is no in depth study on the nature of the Wolaita military organization, their attitude and value towards war and bravery, and their system of territorial defence at the time of the kingdom. The present study aims to fill this gap.

1.1. Objectives of the study

The principal objective of this study is to examine the Wolaita kingdom’s traditional military organization, traditional warfare and territorial defence system and to fill the knowledge gap in the study area.

Specific objectives are to:

- Explore the Pre-conquest Wolaita traditional military organization
- Examine the military training the Wolaita youth passed through their age, territorial defence and counter attack system of the kingdom.
- Examine the military armaments of the Wolaita kingdom

- Analyze the People of Wolaitas' value and attitude towards war and bravery at the time of the kingdom.

1.2. Methodology

The data we used in this work were collected in 2017 and early 2018. The two main types of data collected and used are oral information and other secondary data. The researchers gathered the oral information from selected key, elderly and knowledgeable informants. Other Secondary data sources employed were published books, academic writings and magazines. The researchers utilized data gathering techniques such as interviews, focus-group discussions, investigation of academic literatures and magazines. The collected data were interpreted using descriptive analysis method.

1.3. Geographical and Historical Background

Wolaita Zone, which is the study area of the present article, is one of the thirteen Zones of the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) of the Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia. The administrative seat is Wolaita Sodo found some 380 kms of Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia. ^[9]

Wolaita shares boundaries in the south with Qucha and Boreda, in the west with Dawro Zone, in the north with Hadya, Kembata and Tembaro Zones and in the east with the Sidama Zone. The Wolaita Zone astronomically is located at 70 north 370 and 45' east. Natural physical features such as rivers and lakes also depart Wolaita Zone from its neighbours. ^[10]

Wolaita during the time of the kingdom was divided into seven administrative regions locally called *Lapun Danna* (seven head of sub-states). They were Kindo, Koysha, Sore, Boloso, Damota, Duguna and Humbo. Mixed agriculture integrated with farming and animal husbandry, trade and handcrafts productions were the major economic activities of the Wolaita kingdom. ^[11]

The Wolaita tradition well remembers the kingdom as most organized and ruled by strong kings since the 13th century. For this tradition, the kingdom was ruling vast territories starting from the present area of Wolaita up to the central and northern areas of the country. Kindo Didaye one of the twelve districts or *Woredas* of Wolaita Zone, is the area of origin of the people and the Wolaita kingdom. Its territories diminished to the present area because of different factors among which the Oromo people's migration and the challenge from the neighbouring rival peoples and states were the main ones. ^[10]

Sources indicate that before the conquest, four dynasties ruled over the kingdom of Wolaita. However, only the two dynasties: the Wolaita-Mala dynasty, which ruled from 13th to the end of the 15th century, and the Tigre dynasty that ruled from the 16th century until 1894, the time of conquest, are well remembered by Wolaita tradition. Wolaita is composed of more than one hundred clans. ^[12,13]

The Wolaita kingdom was formed by various groups of peoples who came from the surrounding regions of Kambata, Hadya, Sidama, Dawuro, Gofa, Koyra, Qucha, and from far areas of Amhara and Tigray regions traveled to the area because of trade, war, marriage alliance and other reasons and settled in Wolaita. ^[14,15] Eike Haberland and affirms that Wolaita is a 'melting-pot' of diverse population that embraced Wolaita language, culture, and assimilated into Wolaita people. ^[16]

Although the exact time of the beginning of Wolaita kingdom started is not known due to lack of evidence, it seems logical to suggest that sometime between twelve and thirteenth centuries the Wolaita Malla dynasty was re-established and consolidated. Moreover, many writers consider this period as the period of the beginning of the Wolaita kingdom. ^[17-19]

As said above, the people of Wolaita developed a state structure through a process that engaged immigration and integration. Sources unanimously agree that

before the conquest by the Abyssinians in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Wolaita was one of the most strongest and organized kingdom in the south that was ruled by its own dynasties. [17-19]

Among the kings of the Wolaita Mala dynasty, informants and written sources concentrate on the achievements of the famous king Motolomi who reigned from c.1251 to 1298. Wolaita tradition recalls him as the most strong and expansionist king. He was the first to expand from the homeland Kindo to north and establish capital at Damot hill. In addition, some written sources and oral tradition maintain that during his reign the territories of the kingdom stretched out from Lake Rudolf in the south to Bulga of Shoa in central part of the Abyssinian kingdom. [20,21]

The period of the Tigre dynasty is a landmark in the history of Wolaita. The territory of Wolaita took the present shape in the period of this dynasty and it was eventful period. The Tigre dynasty expanded the kingdom from core area of Kindo to the four directions of the surrounding areas. They have utilized different mechanisms to preserve their survival and expand their territories. These are marriage alliances, mediation, and negotiation and war. [20,21] The focus of this paper is the kingdom's traditional war mechanism and organization.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Military training

The people of Wolaita gave much honour and attention to war. It was a social and political responsibility of the male population of the kingdom. According to my informants, the people of Wolaita learned about military activity and strategy of warfare by observing black ants that hunt termite searching early in the morning and bringing the hunted termites at evening. From early child hood Wolaita teenagers exercise the art of fighting first by participating in hunting. Next, they learn hunting by riding on back of horses. [21,22]

At the time of Wolaita kingdom, the society practiced different types of horse riding. The first type was known as *Sholawa Tuwaa*. This type of horse riding was moving rapidly like lightning and attacking the enemy. *SondePretewa* was the second. This type of horse riding is used to ride on slopes when the enemy is hiding on lower ground fortress. The third type was *Aderasuwa*. This type of horse riding used for tuning the activity of the enemy and its area. The last one is called *Germamuwa*. This was is used to go around the enemy holding place and to stand up on the horse's back on two legs frightening the enemy and observe the situation of the enemy to find weak side to enter through Wolaita. [18]

Besides, they had also various kinds of body trainings and youth games that strength their body and help them in time of hunting and war. The first one is *Salute*. This kind of training is making repeated jump up to the sky. This exercise helps the youths to climb up horse without using stirrup in time of war and sudden attack of wild animal or an enemy. [22]

The second kind was *Bahia*. This game is like a triple jump and helps the infancy to jump up ditches and escape the snare and trap of an enemy. The third type of game or training was termed as *Bate*. This kind of game is a training of wrestling among childhoods. Wolaita at the time of the kingdom usually fought carrying two spears and one sword. When fighting intensify and they utilized all spears and when wounded enemy took away their all spears, this exercise help the Wolaita warrior to wrestle with the enemy, lay down to ground and cut off genital by the sword. The other kind of training was called *Habelue*. When one leg is injured and his Achilles tendon is injured, this training helps the warrior to move jumping by one leg only. [22]

The circumcision ceremony in Wolaita culture would take place when the infancies age reach above fifteen and they are able to eat meat and drink butter adequately. When a circumcised young is

healed from his wound, he would go for hunting with his friends and if he killed big wild animal such as buffalo, he would be called *Qaxxarabacaallaa*. This stage shows that the child passed from childhood to adult hood stage and was ready for fighting. [23]

In addition, there was an annual hunting program in the month of January that was organized by the sponsorship and order of the *Kawo*/King of Wolaita. Every abled adult was taking part in this hunting program and those who hunted or killed dangerous wild animals such as elephant, lion, tiger, and buffalo, were given awards by the king and appointed as *TorraGadawa* (War Leader) and *ShankaGadawa* (Hunting Leader). [23]

There was also swimming race prepared annually in the River of Milke on a special place called *ZamoZerewa* (Zamo Dam). Those who were winners on this race were selected to be ready for war. The people of Wolaita generally practice various military trainings to make them fitting to war such as in *sholatuwaa*, *sondepiriixtuwaa*, and *yaareeyedaa* (wrestling, high and triple jump, throwing and swimming). [23]

2.2. Territorial defence and traditional war system

The Wolaita had their own defense force, which was not stand by but a traditionally trained army that came forth for war on the call of the king. Daily there was an equestrian known as *Wosha Para* assigned on border areas to tune up and look around standing on mountainous or high place. When any challenge came from border area, the kingdom's border protection officials of the *Zuma* (area) kindled fire called *Guuliyaa* in Wolaita. When the assigned *Woshi Para* (equestrian) saw that fire and smoke, immediately reports to the palace using the traditional method of transferring message saying *Guyyee Guyiyawu Waassa* (run, tell to the people behind you). [18,26]

After the border threat news reach to the king, instantly the king who was the commander in chief of the army makes

meeting with *Torra Gadawas* (War Leaders or Commanders) and orders mobilization. Then, the mobilization order would be transferred to the people by using traditional breath and drum music instruments locally called *Nagiriitaa*, *Kambbaa* and *Uldduuduwaa* and promptly the people would march to the war front. [26]

Immediately as the news of the king's launch of war heard, the Wolaita women prepare provisions and supply to the army. There were special meals prepared for wartime that can stay for several days so that the army on fighting could use for many days. One of the food items prepared for such time is *UncchaaKomppuwaa*. This food is as oblong pan bread prepared from *Enset* (false banana) which inside it mixed with butter and spices to preserve for long days. So there were butter and spices inside it, it was full of energy. Another food item prepared for such time was the rubbed and roasted barley locally called *BanggaeaShasha* or in Amharic language (the official and widely used language of Ethiopia) known as *YegebsQolo*. Besides, *Bangga Buraatwaa* that was also prepared from barley roasted and grained and heavily immersed with butter and pooled with spices and salt to preserve for long time. [18]

The Wolaita artisans also were producing different equipment used by the people for war purposes. The *Wogachiya* (smith) produced important war tools like *Tora* (spears), *Gondoliya* (shields) and swords. The *Dagalla* (tanners) made leather goods like saddles, various kinds of leather strips, ropes and *Irapaniya* (a material used as mattress) and many other goods. They also prepared traditional medicines and the material *Dabale Danccuwaa* or in Amharic was termed as *Meqenet*. They used it as bandage to tie up wounds of fighters with traditional medicine. [17,18]

The people used various kinds of traditional weapons mainly spears, shields and swords and traditional defence mechanism. The Wolaita at the time of the kingdom had more than twenty-four types of spears. They armed also two types of

shields; the first one was known as *Para Gondoliya*, which was relatively small and was carried by cavalry army. The second type was termed as *Tiniga*, which is bigger in size than the first one and was armed by the infantry. They also hold a sword to use it at a time of hand-to-hand combat and to cut off the sexual organ of the enemy. [18]

Besides, the Wolaita used to dig ditches, trenches and planted sharpening bamboo rods on border area grounds so that the army of the enemy could not easily crossed their borders and invade them. Some of the trenches, which were dug by their kings in the border area, are still existed. They had a traditional technique of grouping their cavalry army and quickly riding on the enemy and attacking the enemy infantry and cavalry. The Wolaita traditional army used another traditional war device of beating dried cattle skin to originate unpredicted and sudden sounds and perplexed the horses of the enemies. [14,17,26]

Those who remained home from battlefield with permission and awareness of the kingdom rulers would take care of the tilled land of the people that were at war; and fulfil other social responsibilities in their respective villages. Traditional religion dignitaries served in prayers and prophecy in order to make the defence and attacking of Wolaita successful against the enemy. [18,26]

The kingdom of Wolaita using the above traditional military exercise, organization and strategy was able to protect its territories and independence for long time. Not only defended their autonomy and land but also expanded their territories in counter attacks. Wolaita oral tradition recalls well particularly five Wolaita *Kawos* of the Tigre dynasty named *Kawo Sana* (1707-1748), *Kawo Ogato* (1759-1799), *Kawo Amado* (1782-1819), *Kawo Damote* (1819-1845) and *Kawo Gobe* (1845-1890) for their consolidation and expansion of the kingdom. [17,24]

As hinted above, the famous king of the Wolaita Malla dynasty, King Motolomi

who reigned in the 13th century had extended the territory of the kingdom from the homeland area of Kindo to Lake Rudolf in the south and to Bulga of Shoa in central part of the Abyssinian kingdom. He was the first to establish capital at Damot peak. According to the Wolaita informants, the above-mentioned kings expanded their territories to regain the former regions that were conquered by King Motolomi in thirteenth century. [17] King Sana after he stabilized the kingdom had fought with the nearby rival peoples and states of Hadiya, Arsi Oromo, Guji Oromo, Sidama and Kembata, and extended the frontiers to the present areas of Ofa, Humbo, Sore, Boloso and Damota. [19]

King Ogato (1759-1799) had built his palace on the hills of Damot, had drove out the Hadiyas in the north from the present territories of Humbo and Abaya, and conquered more additional lands. He had built a stronghold around his palace at Damot hill to defend him from invaders and had built defence trench in around Sore Mashedo. [13]

King Amado, who reigned from 1799 to 1834, was son of Ogato. He was also another expansionist king that constructed trenches in the boundary areas. Among the trenches he built, the largest one was stretched from Qucca, south of the kingdom, to the Bilate River, found in south east of the kingdom and it was about sixty seven kilometres long. [13]

The next warrior king was King Damote (1819-1845), inheritor of King Ogato. King Damote was aspiring to consolidate the territories he received from his ancestors. He had dug a trench from Wurmuma to Bolosso, had fought with Qucha, Boroda and Dawro in south and west directions, and expanded his territory against these polities and peoples. Yet, he was not wise and diplomatic, instead of doing in collaboration with the people; he attempted to achieve it by force without convincing and motivating the people to do it like his predecessors. [10]

2.3. The value and attitude of the people towards war and bravery

From the beginning of the state foundation in Kindo area, Wolaita is a warrior society. Demise Mojja quoting Altaye Alaro writes, "Historically, the making of Wolaita kingdom was a result of bloody wars and alert defences." [17,25] The Wolaita society gave great privilege to brave person. In the society a brave person who performed especial adventure at war was locally known as *Woraattiyaa* (hero). When a brave person showed unique heroic performance in either killing an enemy or capturing, his trophy would enable him to get awards from the *Kawo*. He would receive *Kallachaa* (horse) and *Gadiyaanne Gaachchaa* (land with servants or slaves). The king would allow the person to run until he stops and would grant all the land he runs over and stands as a land of his clan. He had also a chance to marry from the king's family. [10,18]

Besides, the king would invite him to drink with him a distilled honey by *Buudaa Eessaa* (Horn of Buffalo). He was respected and appreciated by the community and was allowed to put *Beleca Dundda* (silver jewellery) on his ear which was a sign of bravery. He painted his chest with red soil mixed with butter. When he was going on the road to the king to show his booty with chanting, every woman particularly those who were going to market would cherish him congratulation and smear butter over his head. [18,26]

Those Wolaita heroes who had a skill of administration had a chance of appointment on high administrative positions. Thus, in Wolaita bravery and brave persons had played significant role in consolidating and defending territories against their aggressive neighbours and achieved the present size and shape of Wolaita land. [26]

When a brave man dies, the society would murmur using special song just touching their spears to spears and shields to shields, taking out their *Bisa Shohuwape* (sword from the sheath), and chanting. In

addition, the trophy of the hero, if it was a wild animal or an enemy whatever it is, a symbol of it would be hanged on a wood on a major road and every person that walked over that road would see it and admire the hero. The people would murmur for their hero saying:

WalooleeWaloolee

AshohooyaaselowaaSeloo

Dabaabawudaaddaara

Allagawuayifiyaaara

Meaning: Oh death snatched us our hero who was public speaker in courageous manner, a fearless dueler and a spear thrower to enemy, oh our superman. [26]

When a *Worattiyaa* (hero's) wife dies the people, chant and murmur:

Olawu Odolchchaa Kooriyaaro

Bangгаа Buraatuwaa Shinqqiyaaro

Trans. Oh death took away our woman that prepares a horse for fighting and *Yegebes Chuko* (barley flour assorted with butter) for the fighter. [26]

On the graveyard of Wolaita hero, a memorial statue which was a stone pillar or stele would be erected which bore the image of *Attumatetta* (male genital organ) that was called in Wolaita *Tossaa Shuchchaay*. [26]

In addition, the king grants awards and gifts such as cattle, slave and land when the people repulsed the invaders and occupy land of enemy. On the other hand, the society and the king were strictly condemning those who remained in home refusing to go to war while the king was launching for a campaign and those that withdrew from war front. If a man caught a person who was hiding in home instead of going to war or a man that retreat from front, that person would be given as a slave to the person that caught him. [12]

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the people of Wolaita repulsed back repeated invasion of the Emperor Menelik forces under his generals and inflicted heavy casualties and damages using their own traditional military organization and war strategy starting from 1887. The people made its final resistance,

which was one of the bloodiest wars of the whole expansion under the leadership of their last king *Kawo Tona* in 1894 against the conquering army of Menelik, which was commanded by the Emperor himself and his most known generals were participated. [17,26]

In the war, the kingdom of Wolaita resistance was defeated, mainly because they were using traditional military weaponry whereas the army of Menelik II armed with firearms. In Menelik's expansion and victory, modern weapons had played pivotal role. Besides, the army of Menelik II also outnumbered the Wolaita army. Thus, the long stayed Wolaita traditional military system and organization that helped the kingdom to survive for hundreds of years was lastly broken, and the kingdom incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire. [27-29]

3. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from this work that war had significant role in the course Wolaita's kingdom history and the people had at the time most organized traditional military organization and defence mechanisms. Besides, the people during the time of the kingdom had given special place to war and bravery. However, scholars have not studied this aspect of the kingdom adequately. This article has attempted to fill this gap.

Beside utilization of negotiations, agreements and dynastic marriage alliances, war had important part in not only keeping the security and autonomy of the kingdom, but also in expanding the territories of the state. The Wolaita were one of the warrior peoples in the region, and under the leadership of their warrior kings of the Tigre dynasty, they occupied most of their present territory mainly by the means of war fighting against their rival neighbours of Hadiya, Arsi Oromo, Sidama and Dawuro.

The various kinds of traditional military trainings given to Wolaita childhoods starting from their earlier age up to their maturity in areas of hunting,

wrestling, javelin throwing, swimming, horse riding and running helped them to be skilful in war techniques, strong, and fitted for any type of combat.

The society and the kings appreciated bravery and a brave person who performed unique bravery action in war or hunting. Heroes awarded various gifts from the king such as land, slaves and other grants. Therefore, warfare helped many individuals to accumulate wealth and gain privileges from the society. At the same time, the Wolaita society and the king disgraced those who hide and retreat from war and sentenced to harsh punishments. Fulfilling the military service request of the kingdom was taken as an obligation of every male member of the kingdom. Every other members of the kingdom including women had their own contribution and duty in time of war in preparation of provisions and taking care of the land of those who marched to campaign and fulfilling other responsibilities.

The Wolaita military resistance and repulsion of Menelik's generals repeated aggressions, which were armed with modern firearms with backward traditional weapons for more than seven years, showed the strength of Wolaita military organization and the people. The Wolaita's resistance was finally crushed and incorporated into Ethiopian empire in 1894 after the bloodiest war under the command ship of Emperor Menelik himself and participation of more than ten his most experienced generals and army that was armed sophisticated and advanced guns. This proved how much the kingdom's military organization was strong except lack of guns.

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