

DISCOURSES ON THE INFLUENCE OF PROTESTANT RELIGIOUS GROUPS ON INDIGENOUS WOLAITTA CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This research is intended to analyze protestant religious groups' influence on Wolaitta culture and its effects on the practice of indigenous culture. Wolaitta (region) have its own unique and indigenous culture since time immemorial. Wolaitta culture includes both material and non-material cultural practices. In order to investigate the influence of protestant religion on wolaitta culture, this study used oral and written sources. Primary sources of data are intensively used to validate the reliability of the information to reach on conclusion. Secondary sources were also used to support the study scientifically. From the data collected from primary and secondary sources, the distorted areas of religion and cultural practices are depicted under data collection and analysis. The study clearly indicated that Wolaitta-protestant religion followers consider that the practice of Wolaitta culture and traditional practices as wrong. Consequently such belief of Wolaitta-protestant groups discouraged the practice of indigenous culture in the community. based on the conclusion of this study Wolaitta-protestant groups are expected not to distort culture, and they must preserve their culture for the generation.

Keywords: Indigenous, Influence, Wolaitta-Protestant Groups, Wolaitta Culture.

INTRODUCTION

The Wolaita is one of the fourteen Zones of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State of Ethiopia. Its capital Sodo is found in Southern Ethiopia some 300 kms south of Addis Ababa through Butajira-Ulbarag-Halaba Highway. It has twelve districts and three relatively larger towns; Areka, Boditi and Sodd. Before its conquest and annexation into the Ethiopian empire in 1894, the State of Wolaita was divided into *Lapun Danna*(seven head of sub-states) and *Hosipun woysa* (eight administrative units). The head of the state and the government was *kawo* (king). It was said that the empire of Wolaita extended its territory from Lake Turkana in the south to Jamah River in the north making Mount Damota its political headquarter.

Since the reign of *kawo* Amado and in the successive periods in the eighteenth century, the geographical bounders of Wolaita were; the Woranche Maxxuwa (an oath tree beyond the Bilate river which exist till in the main land of Sidama as a living eye witnesses) in the east; initially the Gojeb river but later the Omo river in the west; the Sana river near the Donga Mountain,(now located in the Kambatta-Tambaro) in the north-west man made ditch near Adilo in Badewacho in the north and Lake Turkana in the south (1, 3, 13, 17, 19, 23, 24). Currently, Wolaita is surrounded by five rivers and a lake:- the *Bilate* River in the east, the *Omo* River in the west, the *Saware* River in the south-west, the *Deme* River in the south, the *Saké* River in the north and Lake *Abaya* in the South-East. In terms of ethnic boundaries *Hadiya* and *Kambata-Donga-Tambaro* in the north, the *Sidama* in the East, *Boroda* and *Kucha* in the south, *Dawuro* in the west and the *Arsi Oromo* in the north-east encircled

Wolaita. Astronomically; the region is located within the tropical region at $37^{\circ}45'$ East Longitude and 7° north Latitude that passes *Boditti* town, northern Wolaita (1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, 24). Wolaita have experiences of four climatic types; *géziya* (cold), *barguwa* (moderate), *gara* (hot) and *bazua* (dessert). Hence, Wolaita claim four ecological zones. Moreover, the Wolaita divide the year into four seasons; *balguwa*- the rainy season that occurs from June to August. The second one is *offinta*-the wet season September to November. The third season is *boniya* the dry season that extends from December to February. The fourth season is *badhesa*-semi-rainy season that occurs from March to May. In this season, the last month meaning in May there is no rain traditionally, however, if the rain rains in this month the people believed that it is bad weather conditions and they consider it is the punishment of creator. Besides, Wolaita people divide the seasons on to two: *balguwa* (June to October) and *boniya* (December to May). Apparently, the Wolaita is predominantly middle plateau which contains numerous streams, rivers, and several thermal hot springs with boiling and steaming water. Similarly, there are at least five mountains elevated more than 2,000m above sea level namely *Damota* (3000m), *Tefa* (2950m), *Kindo* (2650m), *Afama* (2300m), *Humbo* (2300m), and *Duguna* (2275m) (ibid).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The early history and culture of the *Wolaita*, there are diverse speculative arguments among scholars. *Wolaita* oral traditions, explorers and travelers accounts, ethnographic, linguists and other works had developed several perspectives on them. In fact, such variations have emanated from lack of written sources. One can say that too little attention has been given to this region until recent times. Accordingly, to trace the origin, direction of expansion and early settlement patterns of the *Wolaita*, there are two radically different arguments (13). The first group of scholars wrote that there was a proto-*Hamatic* division in large areas of northeastern Africa from which they believed that the Sidama (in which the Wolaita were included) have descended. The *Hamites* are Europeans, belong to the same major branch of human race as to the whites, and they crossed the Red sea from south Arabia in Asia and finally settled in the Horn of Africa. The immigrant *Hamites*, who controlled Ethiopia and the Horn before the coming of the semites. Wana Wagesho, amateur writer of Wolaita history stated the origin of the Wolaita is the Middle East (Eden, Tigris, Euphrates etc). He explains the ancestors of the present day Wolaita people came through Babel-Mandab from Asia and settled in the Omo valley, particularly in a place called Kindo. In general, the advocates of the Proto-*Hamatic* theory speculate that white racial stock migrated into Africa together with their civilizations and intermingled with the indigenous black African people. Hence, they committed to link any indigenous African civilization to the Hamites (2, 13, 17, 19).

Parallely, some scholars have come to disprove the "*Hamatic* theory." According to these writers, Africa is the cradle of human kind and it is from Africa that human beings moved to other continents. One of the noted advocates of this theory, Mesay Kebede suggests that "Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, is a home of great civilization and contributed much to world civilizations." By and large, their arguments are based on recent archaeological findings by the Lucy family and many others (23). To substantiate their view, they claim certain places in Ethiopia, especially south and south western regions of Ethiopia as the origin of Wolaita. Thus, it is more sounding and logical to say that the Wolaita are indigenous to Ethiopia particularly to Omo valley or Damota Mountain area and took the present shape through wars and treaties (2). Similarly, oral traditions on the origin of *Wolaita* people and the scholarly works do not overlap. All trace its origin to be around the Omo valley. This area is also considered as the home of *Omotic* speaking peoples. Bahru

writes, “the Omotic-speaking peoples derive their name from their location on both sides of the Omo River. Situated exclusively in southwestern Ethiopia, they (Omotic peoples)...the evolution of highly organized polities.” It is also believed that the Omo valley people of Wolaita are the ancient in the region. Likewise, *Lapiso G. Delébo* remarks the existences of different Wolaita-Gamo peoples in the *Omo* valley from ancient time to 1270 A.D (19). Furthermore, the largest portion of literature on the Wolaita, portray the idea that their ancestor had lived in the vicinity of the *Omo* River. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the people of Wolaita are indigenous to the land of *Kindo* as well as *Omo* River (2, 12, 19).

The term Wolaitta represents the people, the land and the language. Wolaitta have two main the clans of ‘Malla and Dogalla’. Malla is ruling clan and dogalla is clan practitioners of rituals. The history of Wolaitta is very old; however, the written history appeared in the thirteenth century. There are three dynasties; Arujjia dynasty, Wolaitta-Malla and Tigre. Thus, Wolaitta had its own civilization and indigenous culture from the remote past. The religion operation in Wolaitta has been studied by scholars and writers (4, 5, 8, 14, 15,16, 17, 18, 20, 23). However, the sensitive issue of Protestantism influence on Wolaitta culture has not yet addressed by any researcher and so on.

The necessity of safeguarding culture of Wolaitta is significance which must be recognized by the protestant religion followers. By incorporating multi-disciplined knowledge and methodologies. It is possible to save the culture of Wolaitta from protestant religion influence. Geographical proximity to Wolaitta villages and the basic information on protestant influence on Wolaitta culture enabled this study to be conducted. In this regard, this study has done with the collaboration of all concerned bodies. However, the conquest of Menelik, the expansion of Christian religion and globalization brought many cultural changes in Wolaitta. The long lived Wolaitta kinship political administration was abandoned and replaced by new type of the administrative style of the Abyssinians. In addition, indigenous cultural practices of Wolaitta are highly deteriorated. Thus, the administration introduced by Menelik and its subsequent factors especially Christianity teaching of protestant religion discouraged the cultural practices of Wolaitta. It introduced new administration style which dominated by northerners and some socio-economic change that led to cultural dynamism of Wolaitta (5, 17, 19, 23, 25). The revival and blossoming of Wolaitta culture observed during Italian period. The post-Italian period of centralization policy brought a negative impact on the socio-cultural conditions of Wolaitta. The imperial administration provided inferior position for the local culture so that it denied any room for development of any nationalities culture in general and Wolaitta culture in particular.

The *derg* (military) regime that replaced the imperial regime also gave little room for the revival of Wolaitta culture. It discouraged the practice of local culture as backward and obstacle for national unity and social progress. The other factor that discouraged Wolaitta culture is the influence globalization. Indeed, all factors had their own contribution for the discouraging of Wolaitta culture, the basic and lion share emanates from the teachings of the protestant missionaries, especially local missionaries (2,13,14, 16, 17, 21, 26). Even though the culture of Wolaitta was highly discouraged by the policies introduced after the conquest of Menelik, and other subsequent socio-cultural developments in the area, post-1991 government provided the opportunity to preserve and practice their culture. In this period, there were a lot of advantages given to the community to practice their culture but it was not fully materialized (2, 9, 12, 13, 22, 15). Since the introduction of protestant religion to Wolaitta in 1920s and the expansion of the protestant religion after 1991, the influence on Wolaitta culture became very serious. Thus, the 1991 constitution allowed the freedom for religion in Ethiopia at article eleven that has its own contribution for the expansion of

protestant religion which dominated Wolaitta community. On the other, the opportunity for culture development and freedom is also stated in 1991 constitution article forty two. This article is considered as bad by most followers of protestant Christian religion and its leaders of Wolaitta (6).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Ethiopia, as part of the states that adopted the convention done little to safeguard the culture of its people. It has been frequently mentioned as the mosaic of culture. This is also true for the Wolaitta in which much of safeguarding activities of its culture are not yet done. Wolaitta is an Omotic people live in Southern Ethiopia. Wolaitta has glorious traditions and rich culture. The natural surroundings, folklores, art, crafts, social-ceremonies, and social-way of life, the architectural masterpieces, music, and dance, customs and languages .All these go to make Wolaitta as tourist paradise. Wolaitta is a storehouse of indigenous knowledge appeared on pots found in the region as early as the thirteenth century. The caves of Wahu, Moche-Borago, Arujia, Akirisa and others date back to the very ancient time. The travelers provide us the survey of Wolaitta in the nineteenth century to document the wealth of indigenous culture in the area. Thus, Wolaitta culture is unique and indigenous heritage of the country. Wolaitta, a land of geographical diversity, blessed with a long history of rich civilization and indigenous culture. It is a potential heritage with a wide variety of attractions ranging natural to social beauties and the like.

Traditional cultural practices of Wolaitta reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community, spanning generations Wolaitta society has positive cultural practices that are beneficial to all members, such as those which sustain society, provide cohesion and solidarity, and promote development in its broad sense. On the other hand, there are also practices which may be harmful in the community such as female genital mutilation. Harmful traditional practices have persevered individuals and communities. Hence, change should be advocated for without posing threats or by making people feel they should abandon what is important in their culture. There are cultural institutions (*gutara, chaqua, chacha, gimua, dala, uma, sofiya, dagua, zayiya*), dance, music, eating, drinking, language, claim of genre, religious and spiritual practices, medical treatment practices, artistic expression, dietary preferences and culinary practices, resource management, housing and its construction, governance, leadership, conflict resolution, power relationships, everyday life practices and other practices not listed above.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Many cultural practices of Wolaitta had faced a great challenge from the protestant religious practices. Thus, this study was conducted in South Ethiopia of Wolaitta. The focus of the study was how the protestant religion discouraged Wolaitta culture and the possible suggestion for this was identified. The information for the study was mainly for the followers of protestant religion groups in Wolaitta and the community members as well as written documents.

AIM OF THE STUDY

Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze the impact of protestant Christian influence on the community and indigenous cultural practices. The major festival celebrated annually is gifatta festival. Wolaittans have great heritage in their language and history of the medieval time.

Hence its diversification is to be analyzed in view of the impact of protestant Christian influence.

Specific Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to demonstrate protestant religion influence on Wolaitta culture. The specific objective are the following:-

- ❖ To explain the influence of protestant religion on Wolaitta culture
- ❖ To identify whether all protestant religion followers oppose practice of Wolaitta culture
- ❖ Whether the Wolaitta indigenous culture practices contradicts imposed teachings and practices of protestant groups.

Hypothetical Background

The hypothesis of the study is to indicate the application of Protestantism in Wolaitta community is totally different from its application in Ethiopia and elsewhere. This is because the early followers and teachings of missionary were focused on existed socio-economic way of life. In 1920s Ethiopia in general and Wolaitta in particular the ruling aristocracies exploited the people, and mostly the lower class of the community welcomed the teachings of Protestant-missionaries, which gave the hope for them. Besides, the early followers whose ideology influenced the later generation up to present considered that protestant Christian religion is the liberating religion for them from the existing socio-economic way of life. This situation intensified the early believers to oppose any cultural practices whether it is important or not. Then after the successive protestant Christian religion groups accepted this ideology as morally wrong practice. This ideology has highly diversified Wolaitta indigenous culture.

Research Questions

- ✓ How the Protestants did influenced Wolaitta culture?
- ✓ What areas of Wolaitta culture diverted by the protestant Christian religious groups?
- ✓ Is there a contradiction between protestant followers and the practice of Wolaitta culture?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Descriptive Research Design; This research method is employed with qualitative approach by describing and explaining the collected information through tools for collection of data so as to answer the research questions.

Population and Sampling; This research is conducted in Wolaitta of South Ethiopia. In this study the research included 60 participants through purposeful sampling among the study population. The selection criteria are based on accumulated experiences and up on the consent of the participants in twelve districts and three larger towns (Areka, Boditi and Soddo) of Wolaitta zone. From each districts and towns four elders, among them two informants from protestant and two non-protestant followers were selected. Hence, it is stratified sampling to obtain data from all levels and groups.

Sources of Data; The study used both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of data were oral informants of protestant and non-protestant followers of the community.

The written materials of published and unpublished, official, public and private (from some individuals) documents were used. The official documents were taken from Soddo-Zuria district head office, Wolaitta zone Culture, Tourism and Government Communication Affairs, Soddo-Museum and Wolaitta Nation Culture and Heritage Association. Most published books and theses are found from Tarpeza Library (dominant Protestant library in Wolaitta), Orthodox Christian church shops, Catholic library of Konto and Addis Ababa University Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Tools of Data Collection

a. Interview; Key-informants were selected from each district and town. The informants were asked suddenly to take true information on the issue under discussion. Knowledgeable and experienced informants about the indigenous culture of Wolaitta were asked. Semi-structured and structured questions were asked the informant. Note taking and recording was conducted to gather full data based up on the consent of the participants.

b. Focus Group Discussions; the group discussion of four individuals made the appointment for the market day of each locality and discussed on the issue. The participants for focus group discussion were those who were provided individually. The varied religious backgrounded informants enabled to provide the information which is vital to conclusion of this study. The informants' interest and ethical issues were considered.

c. Document analyses; The study was conducted by reviewing the available documents and needed to make connection between different factors that enabled protestant religion to influence Wolaitta culture. This method used to cross check and triangulate the data obtained through interview and focus group discussions. In this case data which found in different institutions by various forms are used.

Research Tools and Instruments for Collection of Data

a. Observations; even though the researcher had experience of observing the protestant religion influence on Wolaitta culture, systematic observations throughout the study area were also used to investigate whether the protestant religion influences the cultural practices of Wolaitta or not.

b. Ethnographic Survey; in this method the influence of protestant religion on Wolaitta culture and cultural practices surveyed. As a result, this study is employed ethnographic analyses to get a deep insight on protestant religion influence on Wolaitta culture. This study can aware the community about the factors that affect their indigenous culture and knowledge.

Method of Data Analyses and Interpretation

After collection of oral and written data, it was analyzed and interpreted systematically. In the process of analyzing and interpreting raw data was sorted out into the category they belonged and give meaning to data obtained from sources through narration, ethnographic analyses, thematic organization and triangulation that used for reliability of information obtained orally or from written materials.

Analysis of the data

Wolaitta's culture is the most diverse and rich patrimony and also is an important component of individual and collective identity. It contributes to the cohesion of its people and plays a fundamental role in the integration of the community by creating links between different groups. However, they are not identified, listed, promoted, preserved and are made open to tourists. But this immense and invaluable patrimony is fragile, and it is estimated that in the past Wolaitta has lost a great part of its cultural values. As a result of past political impacts, wars, negligence, vandalism, globalization, pollution, urbanization, deforestation, over-exploitation of resources, environmental changes, natural/human activities threaten Wolaitta culture. The data analysis reveals answers for above stated research questions.

Answer to Question 1

According to the informants, one of the reasons for the conversion of Wolaitta community to protestant Christian sect was the conquest of Menelik and its subsequent socio-economic and political development. Before the expansion and annexation of Wolaitta kingdom by Menelik, Wolaitta people believed traditional religion based on their *eqqa* (goddess) and *sharechua* (magician or messenger of the spirit). They also believed in *ayana* (spirit). According to the community belief, there are two *ayana* (spirits); *lo'o-ayana* (good spirit) and *ita ayana* (evil spirit). The people also believed on the existence of *Salo-Xossa* (heavenly-God) and *xalihia* (god of evil). Good spirit emanates from *Salo-Xossa*, and the evil spirit emanates from *xalihia*. They worship both *Salo-Xossa* and *xalihia* to get any service. The *yarishua* (sacrifice) is made for them when it fulfills their demand or distracts their property. However, this traditional religious belief was mostly converted to Ethiopian Orthodox Christian (state religion of Ethiopia for long period) belief after the conquest of Menelik. Thus, the northern who settled in Wolaitta were the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religion; among them especially the *melkegna* (taxi-collector) exploited the life due to the existence of land tenure system. So the community in Wolaitta thought that the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religion was the main actor to the policy of Menelik's conquest and annexation as well. This situation enabled the community to connect anything religious activities to conquest and land tenure system of the then period. This was one of the basic reasons for the conversion of Wolaitta people to protestant religious groups.

Answer to Question 2

The early teachings of the protestant Christian religion focused on modern education, healthcare and equality of human being. Their teaching was also simple and reachable to lower class/mass of the society, who claimed Orthodox Christian religion as political, conserve and feudal religion. Therefore, these and other factors enabled the community to look for protestant religion as actor of their hope for liberation. The main reason for this is the early teaching of missionaries, the communities' perceptions on the existed socio-economic factors of 1920s. Even though the opportunity for promotion and development of culture created in post-1991 period, the protestant religion expansion had adverse effect on Wolaitta culture. For instance, the marriage, funeral, mourning, circumcision, folklores, public ceremonies (*Gifaata, Genua, Shanka, Sofia, Gimua, Dalla, Uma, ya'a* and the like), clothing and wearing, clanship, social class, riding-horse, having some heritages (like spear, shield, music instruments and others) the existence of *Gutara, Garua, Chucaa-cacha* and others were discouraged by the teaching protestant religion. Thus, Even though the researcher is the follower of protestant religion, he has observed it is a serious challenge for Wolaitta culture

and even identity survival. Hence, this study taken investigated the solution protestant religion groups, leaders, teaching and the like have diverted Wolaitta culture.

Answer to Question No 3

Protestant Christian religion has a seriously influenced Wolaitta culture. Even though Protestantism is a recent (1920s) phenomena in Wolaitta, its followers considered the practice of cultural activities as illegal, immoral and sin of the protestant religion sect. Most protestant religion followers concluded that the practices of Wolaitta culture such dancing, singing, clothing, drinking, hunting-smoking, folklores, marriage, mooring grief, funeral, circumcision, existence of clan category, new year *gifaata*, social class, having war instruments, horse raid, music instruments and other cultural practice as anti- protestant action, and those who practice such activities were exterminated from the religion. The original cult Woliatta groups contradict with the concocted versions of religion. The protestant religion groups claimed that even if its members practice at least one of the indigenous cultural practices, it excommunicate the individual or group from the sect. In addition, it states the practices of the indigenous culture are considered as *ahizab* (non believer of Jesus/God) or who do not know the creator. It is for this reason that the most protestant groups of Wolaitta community contradicts for non practice of indigenous Wolaitta culture in their life. However, few protestant Christian followers of the community argue that the teaching of the protestant religion biased against the culture of Wolaitta. For instance, the teaching of the same faith in other parts of the country does not oppose their respective culture unlike in Wolaitta.

According to informants the actual teachings of the bible as well as the ideology of protestant religion don't contradict with practice of indigenous culture. However, it is the interpretation and teaching of some religious educators and leaders in Wolaitta that discouraged cultural practices. For instance, they even oppose the naming of individuals by Wolaitta language because this language is not the Holly language and using this language for the naming ceremony is considered as evil and sin. As result, the protestant religion followers name their children with *Amaharegna* (Amharic) or the place or other names in Israel as well as biblical words. If somebody name children by indigenous Wolaitta word such person is considered as opposing of Jesus/God or creator or the contradiction of the Holy Bible. Therefore, a lot remains to be done to preserve Wolaitta culture for future generation; unless it will face great challenges from different factors. Protection of culture in the face of global change is thus becoming a major concern for decision-makers, stakeholders and citizens in many countries. In other words, aim of this research is to revitalize traditional cultural practices of Wolaitta by setting up an environment in which traditional cultures can be identified, documented, enjoyed and promoted. All concerned bodies, especially the local administration of Wolaitta zone are responsible for the preservation of its culture. As a result, one can argue that this article is important to commence preserving and introducing Wolaitta culture to Ethiopian society as well as to the wider community of the world.

CONCLUSION

The main theme of this article is to prove the influence of protestant religious groups' on indigenous Wolaitta culture and its practice. Therefore, this study proved the influence of protestant religious groups' on Wolaitta culture, and the mechanism strategy to preserve cultural practices in Wolaitta. The preservation of Wolaitta culture has economic importance for the tourism industry, generating revenue and many of the jobs in the tourism sector linked

to it directly or indirectly. This brings sustainable cultural development. From academic point of view, this study instigates researchers and project designers like archeologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians, tourism managers and others to launch further studies on this area, and such kind of study create more awareness for domestic and international tourists about the culture of Wolaitta. Moreover, it addresses the issue of promoting traditional practices of culture in Ethiopia.

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