

Revenge Fantasies Against *Neftegna*¹ as a Challenge of Protecting Cultural Heritage: Case Study of Wolayta Sodo Museum, Ethiopia

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Abstract: Protection of cultural heritage in Ethiopia has been tough for several reasons. Previous assessments identified salient challenges such as scarcity of resources, shortage of facilities, lack of expertise, deficient budget for the sector, legal holes regarding regulatory role, illicit trafficking & the existence of multiple ports, inadequate awareness about heritages at local communities, poverty, and weather variabilities. This case study had been conducted to examine the impact of social movements on cultural heritages. It emphasizes the demolition of a former satellite palace of H.I.M. Hailesilassie I by local communities with the intention to revenge their grievances of alleged identity suppression. The demolished palace used to serve as a cultural heritage store of Wolayta Zone Museum. Demolition of the palace, besides being historically a valuable house which according to UNESCO was a heritage itself, made heritages that were contained inside, vulnerable to assorted damages. Peoples' perception of historical facts and themselves has briskly endangered heritages. The study uncovers narratives of emergent identities have catastrophic impact on cultural heritages.

Keywords: Wolayta Yalaga, Ethiopian heritage, Neftegna, Heritage destruction, Revenge.

INTRODUCTION

The Ethiopian kings had a custom of establishing mobile courts and satellite palaces. They approach their communities at where they live and sit for hearings. They listen to cases and serve justices on the spot (Ayenachew, 2014). H.I.M Hailesilassie I, as had his preceding kings, had satellite palaces in the peripheral provinces of the country. To name some, Yirgalem (kibre-mengist), Wondo-Genet, Goré, and Wolayta Sodo were just few. These satellite courts are mostly lodges now, while the Wolayta palace is knocked down to the ground. The study site, Wolayta Zone Museum, is in Wolayta Sodo Town, Southern region of Ethiopia.

Hailesilassie's palace in Wolayta Sodo was constructed at the heart of the city inside the historical Wolayta Qawo compound. The compound consists of several government administration offices, the Qawo Tona Museum, the Wolayta zone cultural heritage collection and other facilities. Hailesilassie's palace in the compound was unique for one important reason. It was built by special bricks and exceptional design. Despite its durable construction and fine design, it had

been burnt down and destroyed to the level of irreversible status.

This case study presents the cross-sectional assessment on the status of Wolayta Sodo Museum. Key informants were interviewed to explore the development of historical narratives and social movements in the community. In-depth interviews and group discussions with culture experts, social activists, political analyst, and government official has been conducted to assess the structural hate against neftegna and the nature of social movements in Wolayta. Debates and discourses of identity politics have been retrieved and reviewed from video archives, to assess their implications on cultural heritages. The aim of this study is to envisage opportunities of heritage conservation and administration. It targets to devise a perspective that can embrace destructive narratives of history, out of the botched properties, and social movements to optimize the thoughts, values, and facilities of heritage protection.

NARRATIVES OF HISTORY AND THEIR DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES

The colonial thesis in Ethiopian multi-nationalities politics, as (Berhanu, 2023) discussed, brought about hate for 'neftegna'- perceived as equivalent to colonial rulers, who were mainly ethnic Amhara Ethiopians (Desalegn, 2023); including H.I.M. Hailesilassie and the Monarchy, more broadly. Destroying all the heritages and values of the monarchical era is therefore considered as decolonizing traditional identities and values; thereby revenging the 'colonizers' – the other black skinned traditional indigenous community in the

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¹The literal meaning of *Neftegna* is *musketeers*. It originates from *neft* – i.e., gun & '-gna' is suffix indicating the gun-holder. The 19thc. musketeers were peasant soldiers mainly from Amhara, who collect customs & tax for the central government. Today, Neftegna is a code name for ethnic Amharas, targets of massacre and ethnic cleansing, (Berhanu, 2022).

same country (Birara, 2023). Thus, erasing the neftegna legacies in the country has been a great political deal for four decades now. The hate to 'neftegna' has been a standard attitude in Ethiopia in these times (Berhanu, 2022). The government policies supported the fictitious victimhood narration of nationalities' history. The new narratives of the common past developed wretched attitude and devised revenging mechanisms. Accordingly, erasing the neftegna legacy from both literature and physical structures has been undergoing (Borkena.com, 2019). Borkena reported the demolition of Ras Mekonen statue in Harar Hospital by radicals. Wolayta Sodo lodge is one among others where a beautiful building destroyed and ruined.

The demolition was undertaken by the *Yalaga* – i.e., local youth movement, in the town. This movement started to quest self-administration at face value. However, its manifestations and characters revealed the hate that drives to retaliation. It is backed by colonial theory of understanding identity and history. The notion has been the country's ethno-nationalist political policy frame that has been developed against Ethiopian Emperors, Kings, and their legacies.

NARRATION OF WOLAYTA HISTORY AND ITS ABSURDITY WITH NEFTEGNA

Wolayta elites believe that the Ethiopian monarchy or neftegna system oppressed them. In the wars between wolayta king (Kawo) Tona and Emperor Menelik II, the latter had victory. Wolayta elites narrate losing the war as an embarrassment to each Wolayta, and even made the incidence a chronological boarder. They call the time before 1894 as "pre-colonial Wolaita" (Yimam, 2020) (BakaaliyaTube, 2021). They claim Wolayta was great kingdom that had its own currency, military, government structure, distinct psychosocial make up and self-sufficient economy that aptly enables to proclaim it an independent nation (Eyob & Francho, 2014) (Hailu, 2019). According to these scholars, the forceful unification of Wolayta to the Ethiopian empire not only culminated the age-old Wolayta kingdom, but also degraded the 'nation/country' status of Wolayta to a small *Awraja* (district) under Sidamo Province– and now, zone. The contemporary quest of Wolayta for a *Region* status bases on this historical background. The spirit is '*we make Wolayta great again!*'². However, the

fierce process in delivering the request made the movement more destructive than it needs. The movement went aggressive to the scale of disengaging anything Ethiopian as (Wodajo, 2022) argues, where it contains anything with the monarchical touch.

Wolayta nationalism led by figures such as Assefa Wodajo repeatedly made speeches using derogatory names to monarchs that have been intended to mobilize the youth called *Yalaga* (BakaaliyaTube, 2021). Such public figures provided random information about atrocities during Qawo Tona and drove the youth movement destructively. Purposively, Wolayta's history has been narrated focusing only on a maximum of ten years that show conflicts; and the rest of thousands of years is left blank (Birara, 2017). Because the movement pioneers are politically motivated & they want only the period that helps them play the victimhood³: which prepares the youth for revenge (Aga., 2023).

There are many materialized publications in this regard that have been considered as 'the History of Wolayta'; including the books that are written by the direction and sponsorship of Wolayta zone culture & tourism office itself. Periodicals of the zone heritage and tourism office, EPRDF's monthly "New Vision - አዲስ ራዕይ" magazine, pamphlets, and training modules... altogether target on mobilizing the people for hateful actions. Such publications and productions are usually called "consciousness raising sources"⁴. These publications ignited the movement that ultimately destroyed the office's property. Because presentation of movement narratives was pre-designed by politicians where their derogatory terms against a targeted community, and eliminative thoughts were used as manuals of guiding & informing the movement. Currently, it is massively shaping the history of the people and their proud kingdom.

Accordingly, history of Wolayta is framed in a way that enables each Wolayta to feel the oppression by

²The rationale for Wolayta's quest for Region Status, today, is its 'sovereign nation-state' status before the 1894 unification to the Ethiopian empire. Proponents of the movement believe Wolayta had been great kingdom before; and therefore, must resurge.

³The mass doesn't know victimhood is a choice in the play book of ethnic politics. That is what elites who don't have the stamina and perseverance to create agendas opt as an effortless path. I still doubt if they ever have learnt anything even after they sat on the ashes of their self-destroyed scarce resource.

⁴Developing a certain consciousness doesn't necessarily need truth as a justification. It only needs a common understanding of an idea. The reality that consciousness stands for can be constructed. It has little to do with historical fact. Hence, the aspired consciousness has been 'victimhood'; and supporting narratives have been generated. So long as victimhood is claimed, there has to be a victimizer - there comes the zombie word 'Neftegna'. Hence, the drive is not truth or reality; instead, it is the aspired consciousness; and anything that is believed to bring it up, has been written, told & applied.

Neftegna system, that they accuse, have abolished the kingdom of Wolayta (Eyob & Francho, 2014) (Hailu, 2019) (Solomon Berhe Tedla, 2018). On the other hand, scholars argue that ‘even though the war between Qawo Tona and Menelik II was concluded by Menelik’s victory, it never forced Wolaytas to destroy their native kingdom, neither had the Menelik army enslaved or taken trophies’ (Ayenachew, 2014). Rather, (Berhanu, 2023) argues that Menelik placed Tona back to his throne so that their kingdom stays intact; and advances his enquiry on how that can be perceived as Wolayta’s humiliation? Scholars like Tensay Hailu, on contrary write accusations on the victory of Menelik II against Tona. (Hailu, 2019) argues the defeat of Wolaytas by Menelik II forces was followed by massacre, plunder, and massive enslavement. On contrary, chroniclers and independent writers of the time such as Paulos Gnogno and Alexander Vulakovich present their primary accounts describing the emperor as the first king in Africa who costed much of his regime’s energy to stop slavery (Kebede, 2007) (G., 1984).

Review of bureau publications indicate that much of the weight has been given to hating the *Neftegna* [Amhara] than the History of Wolayta. Hating Amhara and calling it names, such as ‘neftegna, settler (ሰፋሪ), comer (መጠኑ)” (Aga., 2023) and demonizing the monarchical era and the kings bent malevolent consequences on both the blamed category of people and the plaintiff. (Wodajo, 2022) argues that Hailesilassie is a descendent of Menelik II and is therefore the same neftegna, whose legacies must be erased. Consequently, as informants told, the local youth people being mobilized and lead by hate to Amhara, went to the place chanting anti-Neftegna slogans and destroyed it. They revenged the neftegna system by burning the house that their parents had sweet memories of judicial hearings and more functions.

The key informant, a senior person who used to be a government officer during Hailesilassie mentioned his memories regrettably. They attended social functions with the presence of his Majesty Hailesilassie I. The informant tears down while walking with the researcher around the knocked down house and see grasses and trees grown at the wrecks of the house & between cracked surfaces of the floor. He curses the generation that knows only how to destroy establishments. The senior man hardly catches up the consciousness on which much has been invested on. He underpins the responsibility of the same generation that destroys

facilities to take care of heritages that are more vulnerable today than any previous time.

Demolition

The Wolayta community knocked down a crucial facility that could have safeguarded bared cultural heritages, at the least. They burnt down a water & fire-proof house built with cavity-wall structure. According to the national building code of India, “a wall comprising two leaves, each leaf being built of masonry units and separated by a cavity and tied together with metal ties or bonding units is called a cavity wall” (Standards, 2016). The structure is made in a way that the two leaves behave as one structural unit, and the space between the leaves is either kept as a continuous cavity or it is filled with waterproof material or a non-load bearing insulating material.



Photo 1: Destroyed storage (Former H.I.M Hailesilassie I lodge in Wolayta Sodo).

The outer wall is built with solid bricks. It helps keep the rainwater out, and simultaneously, adds to the wind load resistance of the entire wall. To make sure that the entire wall structure is stable, the brick outer leaf is kept tied to the inner leaf with the use of wall ties. The wall ties can be metal bars or plastic bands permanently fixed into the mortar of both block and brick, according to engineering sources (Prasad, 2023). In the wolayta lodge case, the tie is unique. Long solid bricks are applied as wall ties, instead of the ones found in literatures.

Cavity wall is the most conducive design of constructions for storing collagenic and organic cultural heritages (Birara, 2017). Cultural heritages are generally, organic, and spoilable with exposures to weather variability - humidity, temperature, and agent hosting – parasites and microbes. (ibid) All of these are

minimized and controlled in suitable infrastructures [such as the cavity wall], while otherwise can aggravate the issue.

Advantages of Cavity Wall

- The two walls (leaves) erect keeping the narrow space between them open, which prevents the moisture intrusion from the outer leaf to the inner leaf. The space between the leaves absorbs the moisture, in case if the moisture penetrates the outer wall, and drains back to outside. Even though the outside wall can be wet, the inside wall stays dry and avoids fungi, bacteria and insect reproductions that can decay things inside the house.
- Cavity walls are the best for temperature control in rooms. Construction technologists experimented that the air in the cavity wall acts as a non-conductor of heat and hence minimizes the transmission of heat from the outer leaf to the internal face of the interior leaf (Patel, 2019). This is what in other terms called 'fireproof'. Cavity walls give good thermal insulation keeping warm in winter and cool in summer.
- They offer a good sound insulation property and gives protection against efflorescence.

These properties of the destroyed house could have prevented the dangers that the cultural heritages in the museum are facing today. No matter how important the cavity-wall house, people destroy it to revenge Neftegna; and got back to a house made of grass – by the design of the medieval era. Now, the cause of heritage damages in the current museum are identified to be mainly moisture, direct sun light, dirt and insects that grow at the disadvantage of a house made of wood and grass. Because the current storage has no safeguarding and conditioning equipment at all. The house has no electric supply, hence, no energy power devices inside.

The Current Museum Storage

Wolayta zone cultural heritage collection is entirely made of fire sensitive, water leaking, insect hosting and generally dangerous components. It is possible to conclude, a house in the most dangerous form to be a heritage storage. The storage house is in the middle of a farm where rodents and insects can easily move in between. The roof has so many openings that allow rainfall & directly bathe heritages. The opposite side of

the farm, just six meters away from the heritage store stands the town's water reservoir. If the water tank blasts, the museum storage is vulnerable to be washed away.



Photo 2: The current heritage store on the left & water tank on the right.

A discussion with a group of experts and officials revealed that people are proud to destroy the cavity wall house and construct the original traditional wolayta house for keeping the cultural heritage collections. However, preserving one's cultural identity would have not been at the cost of opportunities that could have optimal protection and development.

Damage of Heritages in the Current Museum

The traditional house made heritage collections vulnerable for several dangers. Predominantly, it has no moisture regulating mechanisms - built in or installed. Every season of the year has varying room humidity that directly affects heritages. Rodents and insects are as dangerous as the microbes to destroy skin and textile products. Potentially, fire can completely turn the house and collections into ash; there is no fire extinguisher. The water tank Infront of the collection door has the same probability and effects.

Humidity

Ventilation has been limited to manual operations – moving heritages outside the house to keep them dry, out of intense humidity in the room. This has been the periodical operation by the museum experts and volunteers to sustain the life of heritages in the store.

Insects

There are insects that feed and hybrid on organic materials. Under poor inventory of statuses and proper preservation of these organic and collagenic heritages, even more dangerously, in highly oscillating humidity, are found in sever condition. Such items had to be plastic-coated in their dry condition unless their room



Photo 3: Cultural heritages affected by moisture in a bad storage.



Photo 4: Damage of cultural heritages by insects.

humidity is controlled and kept sterilized. The greasy substance in leather products [collagen] hosts micro agents that eat the item and decay it.

Looking at the other Side of the Fence

Narratives of social movements and emerging identities can be designed in harmonious and embracing frame that avails the future from the past. In this perspective, the Wondo-genet palace of H.I.M. Hailesilassie I, can be comparatively discussed to espouse lessons and propose future interventions in other contexts. Wondo-genet lodge is established in same ways as Wolayta lodge amid a beautiful scenery near twin hot springs. Today, the Wondo genet lodge is a prominent domestic tourist attraction and amongst the best-preserved satellite palaces of Hailesilassie I, in the country. Both lodges, the wolayta and Wondo-genet, were the emperor’s private properties duly; and transferred to the respective province governments later. However, people in Wondo-genet were interested to renovate the rooms of Hailesilassie and use as sources of income, instead of destroying it. Today, this lodge allows guests to rent and stayover in Hailesilassie’s bedroom, paying 1,500 birr – perhaps a price equivalent to a 5-star luxury hotel room in the

capital city. The lodge administrator explained that considering the emotional attachment of the Rastafarian community that resides in the nearby town called *Shashemene*, was a brilliant business formula, in addition to preserving the heritage per se.

The Wondo-genet lodge not only preserved for renting Hailesilassie’s rooms, but also opens it to visitors. Visitors pay money as well; and the money goes back to add values to the collection so that the collection can be attractive and protected. Wondo area community (Sidama people) chose to preserve and innovate the lodge for crucial reasons. Nonetheless, that does not necessarily mean they love/don’t hate Neftegna/Amhara or H.I.M. Hailesilassie. In fact, Sidamas also expressed their hate to Neftegna multiple times. It is just a difference in choice. Arguably, no one hates neftegna more than OLF and TPLF; albeit both never destroyed the boarding schools in Welega and Mekelle, that were constructed by Menelik II and H.I.M. Hailesilassie I.

CONCLUSION

Social movements that are stirred by political spurs, especially when victimhood is their historical narrative,

result in destructive consequences. Social movements of this orientation destroy establishments of the past regimes and make heritages vulnerable for various disasters.

The movements to request & attain a certain status of self-administration could have been undertaken with justifiable contemporary causes; instead of efforts to instill a victimhood consciousness that ultimately erupts to vengeance. The choice of victimhood as a narrative and revenge as a correction measure were both fantasies that combatted themselves with ricochet consequences.

The case of H.I.M. Hailesilassie's Wolayta lodge is a testament of how revenge fantasies are dysregulated ways to become a complete loser. Revenge is a psychological issue that this study hardly deals with. But people were observed chanting victory songs and parading around the city square after demolishing the structure. The fact that enjoyed them while it was hurting themselves is the sum of fantasies. That had no harm to the people they intended to harm at all. Destroying a house that the wolayta people own, after all, can hardly harm any Amhara guy, or Emperor Hailesilassie. Damage of Wolayta's precious cultural heritages primarily erases Wolaytan cultural legacy. Because these cultural heritages are at the verge of dying for the deprivation of their suitable facility. Owning both positive and negative aspects of history and moving forward to make better future could have benefitted all a lot.

Social movements about emerging identities and reconstruction of the past with destructive narratives is a fatal challenge that cultural heritages are facing now. Governments need to enforce international laws of protecting cultural heritages. It is UNESCO's primary mission and as a signatory state, the duty of Ethiopian government, to protect historical monuments, statues, and sites from both natural and human disasters.

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