

The Heroes and the Villains in the Sidama Liberation Struggle: Undoing the Misinformation.

Part I.

By Halale Xawissa, January 4, 2005.

I. Introduction

Ever since Bushe and Mardia, the ancestors of the Sidama nation, settled in Teelamo, the epicentre of the Sidama civilization and nation building, as they returned back from Dawa in search of better lands for cattle herding and sedentary farming, the society lived in peace and tranquillity albeit minor ethnic conflicts from neighbouring tribes for control of grazing lands. However, the situation changed drastically when the Abyssinian army invaded the southern nations immediately after the 1882 Berlin Conference of the western nations that decided to divide Africa among themselves. The Abyssinian army supplied with rifles and other modern weapons by these rival western colonizing powers, marched towards the south between the late 1880s and the beginning of the 20th century for control of the vast fertile land and other resources owned by the peoples of the free southern nations. These nations waged bitter armed struggle against the occupying forces of King Minelik during this period. Sidama was one of those free nations that waged such a gallant struggle against the occupying forces during this period.

Thus for the Sidama nation, the struggle for liberation began simultaneously with the resistance to occupation. When we, therefore, talk about the Sidama liberation struggle, we refer to the heroic resistances waged by our nation ever since the occupation of our land by invading Abyssinian forces in 1893. It is a blatant lie and a deceptive misinformation to state that the Sidama liberation struggle began after the 1974 revolution. The feuding of different Abyssinian political parties and the military Junta for the control of the Abyssinian empire may have led to the displacement of certain Sidama individuals from their appointed privileged positions in the early years of the revolution, but that can in no way be considered as the beginning of the Sidama liberation struggle.

It is therefore important to once again put the Sidama liberation struggle and the role of its leadership in an historical perspective and undo the misinformation about both the struggle and its leadership regardless of whoever does the misinformation. This is necessitated by the need to provide accurate and non-fabricated information about the heroic struggle of our nation and the role of its leadership to the like-minded political organizations. The deliberate misinformation about the Sidama liberation struggle and its leadership by a group of people who belong to a single family and who try to impose hitherto unknown hegemony and kingship over a society of more than 5 million people and certain individuals who try to assume unwarranted guardianship over this society is acting as a temporary bottleneck to creating a conducive environment for unity and cooperation between the Sidama National Liberation Organization (SNLO) and other likeminded organizations of the oppressed sisterly nations.

Given the current untold sufferings of the peoples of our respective oppressed nations who barely eke out a living, the opportunity cost of the foregone real unity and cooperation among the genuine liberation organizations that represent these peoples greatly increases with any wasted minute. Thus, the urgency for undoing the misinformation is paramount.

This article is organized as follows. The following section presents the history of the liberation struggle and the role of its respective leadership. Section three presents the current state of the struggle while part four exposes the crimes being committed by the TPLF/EPRDF (Tigray People Liberation Front/Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) regime against the Sidama people at present. The final section makes a call to the like minded organizations to find out the truth about the Sidama liberation struggle and create a conducive environment for all of us to forge a realistic and effective coalition to annihilate our common enemies.

II. The Sidama Liberation Struggle and the Role of the Leadership.

2, 1 The encounter with the Ottoman Turks

The first encounter of the Sidama people with foreign powers in modern history was during the 16th century when the Ottoman Turks crossed to the Eastern Sidama highlands during their politico-religious expansion in the Horn of Africa. They took the horn particularly the areas inhabited by the Somalis as a counter expansion to the activities of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries who became active in Abyssinia, the present day northern Ethiopia. The Ottoman Turks tried to expand Islam in to the interior of the present day South Ethiopia using the Red Sea –Indian Ocean route.

Accordingly, the Turks confronted the Harbegona region of Sidama with modern weaponry. However, the gallant Harbe and Harbegona Sidamas never gave into the militarily superior invading army. They fought to their last breath in blocking the enemy from penetrating in to the interior of the Sidama land. Although the author does not remember the names of those gallant resistance leaders in Harbe and Harbegona for the time being, they it was learnt that they were able to effectively mobilize the whole population of the area to confront the invading army. They also made a call for military assistance to the other Sidama regions. As the Sidama central administration was very weak during those days as was the case with the rest of Africa, this request for assistance was sent directly by the resistance leaders. However, the only region that provided heroic assistance to the Harbe-Harbegona people was the region of Gaxaa Qewena. Due to mainly communication problems and various reasons other regions couldn't send their support to assist the resistance. However, the united Harbe-Harbaegona-Qewena front crushed the invading Ottoman Turks and sent them back in disarray. From that time on up until the end of the 19th century the Sidama nation lived in a complete independence, peace and prosperity in the horn of Africa.

2.3 The Abyssinian Conquest

The second major encounter of the Sidama people with the foreign invading army was with the Abyssinian invaders who attacked Sidama in the northern front of Yannase in 1893. The general called Beshah Aboye led the Abyssinian king Minelik's invading army. The then King of Sidama, Baalichcha Worawo, was informed about the encroaching Minelik's army and began to prepare for final confrontation with the invaders. Accordingly, he sent messages for military mobilization and assistance to different regions of Sidama like Hawella, Malga, Harbegona, Hula, Gaaxa, Daara, Aleta and others. However, given the rapidly advancing army of Minelik the response Baalichcha got from the various regions was very slow and inadequate to confront the invading army which had got absolute military superiority by virtue of possessing fire arms and rifles from the European rivals against the Sidamas who had only spears, shields, sticks and arrows directly.

Thus, Baalichcha had no choice. He was forced to make a tactical negotiation with Beshah Aboye that allowed the latter to settle in a small part of northern Sidama until Baalichcha made his own underground preparation for the annihilation of the invading army. Accordingly, Beshah settled in the northern part of Sidama. However, no later than he settled there, his invading army begun to vandalize and loot resources and rape women in the near by villages.

Baalichcha who had already been busy organizing underground attack against the enemy got furious with the news of such evil acts of the invading army. He summoned Beshah and told him that his army was involved in intolerable acts in the area and hence should be divided equally to all the 8 regions of Sidama. The leader of the enemy agreed. As Baalichcha had already agreed with the leaders of all the 8 regions of Sidama to divide the invading army of Beshah equally among themselves, he passed the order to the regions to take their shares. Accordingly all the Sidama regions divided Beshah's looters and finished them simultaneously in all areas after their arrival.

Meanwhile Baalichcha's army chased Beshah's small remaining army and drove them out of the northern Sidama land. Beshah escaped to Shewa with few soldiers and rifles. He went back to Minelik and reported the incident to King Minelik. Therefore, as ingenious as he was Baalichcha chose to confront the enemy indirectly and perfectly succeeded in that. Sidama was liberated and the enemy was defeated!!

However, the liberation was short lived. Minelik's expansion, as it was an African form of scramble for independent southern nations, was carefully planned and systematically backed by the then colonizing European rivals. Therefore, it had to succeed. Different independent nations had already fallen in to the hands of Minelik's army as early as the late 1880s. Thus historic fact left the Sidama people with no alternative. With in a short period of time Minelik sent another well organized and well prepared army to reinvade Sidama. This time the invasion came through the eastern highlands. The invading army was led by Leulseged. Leulseged was able to subdue the Sidama nation with little

resistance because by the time he arrived there all the neighbouring nations were already under the control of Minelik's expanding army.

After consolidating his power in Sidama, Leulseged began a fact finding exercise about the humiliating defeat of the army of his predecessor, Beshah Aboye. However it was not an easy task for him to find the truth as the leaders of all regions in Sidama who were led by Baalichcha during the process of planning and execution of the annihilation vowed not to expose their King's ingenious plans and about what has happened to the invading soldiers. However, Baalichcha was finally betrayed by an Aleta person called Chuuko who informed Leulseged that Baalichcha Worawo planned and ordered the whole process of systematic annihilation of the invading enemy. It was at this point that Leulseged forced Baalichcha to travel to Konso under the pretext of assisting him in his invasion of another independent nation. Although Baalichcha did not believe in the travel he had no choice as he was under the control of the invading army. He was virtually taken to Konso and was killed immediately after he arrived there by the Leulseged's soldiers. However, although his fellow Sidama, Chuuko, betrayed him, his strong animal (mule on which he travelled), Lango, did not. She travelled all the way back to Hanja in Yannase to the home of her owner to bring the sorrow of the death of the King.

Such was the true account of the quality of the leadership of the Sidama anti colonial liberation struggle.

However, there are certain family members and individuals who do not want to believe in this fact about the leadership of Baalichcha. An elderly Sidama from among the family members, who claim to have the right to kingship in Sidama, once told the author of this article that Baalichcha was the villain in the history of the Sidama liberation struggle. I was shocked then and I still am. However, of late I realized that like the Abyssinians he and his family were and are trying to rewrite the Sidama history. One thing the Sidama National Liberation Organization and I as an individual never ever accept is a false history about the Sidama society and about any society for that matter. Time is over to entertain such craps. A nation has got its own true history, its true leadership that up lift it during the times of trouble, and its true identity. A nation like Sidama could not have prospered and survived without these traits. These traits are embedded in the very existence of the society. No body can bring them from no where in 1977 or today and stick them on the society with a plaster. No families or individuals have any right to own the Sidama society in any form of a family partnership or in a sole proprietorship.

We in the Sidama National Liberation Organization, never tolerate fictitious history and any attempt to exercise kingship and/or custodianship over a society of more than 5 million people ever. We know our people. Indeed, we know ourselves and proud of our Sidama identity' We need to preserve our values and distinctive identity which has been and is compromised by 'power mongers' who snatched the liberation struggle from the hands of genuine Sidamas in 1977 after they lost their credibility of their colonial masters. Our people know us. One day all of us will stand before them and they will tell who the heroes and who the villains were and are. That day will not be far if the genuine liberation organizations of the oppressed peoples come together and forge a realistic and

effective coalition. If the liars prevail, however, it may take more time. This provides the murderous TPLF regime ample opportunities to perpetrate further untold suffering to our respective peoples.

2.4 The Liberation Struggle in the Aftermath of the Occupation.

The pattern of brutal subjugation of the Sidama people by the invading Abyssinian army continued in a relative calm until the Italian occupation of the country prior to WW II. The Sidama liberation struggle, however, gained momentum during and after the Italian occupation. The brutal nature of the feudal system that robbed the Sidamas of their complete freedom forced them to take up arms at the historic opportunity of the Italian occupation. Various armed groups began to wage armed struggle to uproot the remnants of the Abyssinian regime from the Sidama land. Notable among these fighters and Sidama freedom leaders were: Yetera Bole, Wena Hankarso, Hushula Xaadisso, Mangistu Hamesso, Lanqamo Naare and Fiisa Fichcho. However, after Italy was driven out of the country by the allied forces during WW II, the Abyssinian rulers got an upper hand once again and were able to temporarily silence the struggle of the Sidama people for freedom. As a revenge to the resistance movement waged during and after the second WW, the Abyssinian rulers massacred over 120,000 Sidamas during this period.

It was during the last decade of Haile Selassie's rule that the Sidamas were able to regroup and wage another relentless resistance struggle against the Abyssinian regime. The heroic resistance movement led by the well known Sidama patriot Takilu Yota, in the northern parts of Sidama, had shaken the foundation of the Abyssinian rule in Sidama until the end of 1960s. Takilu Yota will always be remembered as an icon of freedom for the Sidama nation.

At the beginning of 1970s notable Sidama heroes and resistance leaders formed the first organized Sidama Liberation Struggle that mobilized Sidamas in the scale unknown before to wage an overt armed struggle against the feudal regime. However, following the downfall of the regime in 1974, the resistance movement targeted the socialist regime led by the military Junta. The founders of the first organized freedom fighting in Sidama at the beginning of 1970s were: (1) Amare Gunsa, (2) Yetera Bole, (3) Roda Utala, (4) Gawiwa Siriqa, (5) Fiisa Fichcho, and (6) Teklehaymanot Simano. Amare Gunsa was the first Sidama to be beheaded by the military government while fighting for the liberation of Sidama. His head was taken to Addis Ababa to verify his death to the authorities. Yetera Bole, Roda Utala and Teklehaymanot Simano were brutally murdered by the soldiers of the military regime as were many other freedom fighters.

Although the six heroes mentioned above played a fundamental role in founding the Sidama Liberation Organization there were many other notable Sidama freedom fighters that took the banner of the founders and continued to fight for the liberation of their people. This second group of Sidama heroes were: (1) Ashe Hujawa, (2) Tumato Tula Bankuriso (3) Barassa Gosoma, (4) Dadafo, (Mote of Malga), (5) Gasara Sodo, (6) Kumo Gada, (7) Ginbo Basha, (8) Kafale Kinbichcha, (9) Barasa Jofe, (10) Fiisa Daadaara and

many others. All of these people sacrificed their lives fighting for the freedom of their nation.

The Sidama people of Arbegona, Bansa and Aroessa in the east waged stiff resistance against the military regime and liberated their lands from the Abyssinian regime between 1977 and 1983 under the leadership of the heroes mentioned above. However, they were betrayed by certain individuals who infiltrated and hijacked the resistance movement. As a result the military regime got the upper hand and recaptured the liberated lands. In this struggle over 30,000 Sidamas perished.

In Northern Sidama, the liberation uprisings of Borrichcha and Wotara Rassa gave another shock to the military leadership. In Borrichcha uprising the Sidama denounced the brutal military regime and its policies and took up arms to liberate themselves. However, due to its military superiority the Derg (the Military Junta) was able to crush the uprising in August 1978. Over 500 people were killed during the one day intense fighting on the mountain of Borrichcha and its vicinities. The leaders of the Borrichcha uprising among others were: (1) Barasa Wotiye, (2) Bitre Gamada, and (3) Yetera Koome (an unforgettable Sidama hero who was killed 7 years ago over a minor grazing land dispute with a neighbouring tribe).

The same heroic resistance was met by the military regime in the Wotara Rassa area where the Sidama had shown stiff resistance against the regime. Over 100 people were killed in the Wotara Rassa fighting in 1978. The leaders of Wotara Rassa uprising were: (1) Dadafo, and (2) Agana Jobisa among others.

The Sidama National Liberation Organization is the continuation of such heroic struggle of the Sidama people and as such works to ensure that past historic legacies of the struggle and the heroes are never forgotten or hijacked by any individual or a family group who are power and benefit mongers.

The Sidama people had made tremendous and historic contribution to the weakening and the final down fall of the military regime. However, the fruits of the struggle of the Ethiopian peoples were hijacked by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front that imposed the monopoly of political domination over various peoples of the country. Once again the Sidamas and other Ethiopian peoples were robbed of their human and democratic rights and subjected to untold injustice, economic plunder and exploitation.

(Part II Continues...)

Sidama National Liberation Organisation
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