



**Afriques**

Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire

2009  
Varia

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*Aperçu historique sur une communauté musulmane des hautes-terres chrétiennes du Šäwa : les Wärğəḥ*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://afriques.revues.org/1944>  
ISSN: 2108-6796

**Publisher**

Institut des mondes africains (IMAF)

Brought to you by Institut de l'information scientifique et technique



**Electronic reference**

Deresse Ayenachew, « A historical overview of the Wärğəḥ Muslim community in the Christian highland of Šäwa », *Afriques* [Online], Varia, Online since 03 November 2016, connection on 31 January 2017. URL : <http://afriques.revues.org/1944>

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# A historical overview of the Wārǧəḥ Muslim community in the Christian highland of Šäwa

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## Introduction

- In 2012, Ato Kedir Mussa, 81 years old, a renowned Muslim Wārǧəḥ, resident of Rogge, recounted the peopling of Šäwa by three different communities as follows: A family had three sons named Wārǧəḥ [Muslim], Amḥara [Christian], and Oromo ['pagan'], whose lives depended on the blessings of their father. One day, their father asked Wārǧəḥ, the first-born, to hunt an antelope for him and to prepare sweet food so that he would bless him. His wife heard the wish of her husband for his first-born. But she loved her Christian boy, Amḥara, more than Wārǧəḥ and Oromo. While Wārǧəḥ went out to hunt, his mother prepared food according to the will of her husband in favour of Amḥara before the return of Wārǧəḥ. Amḥara dressed himself with a goat skin to resemble Wārǧəḥ, and his old father blessed him, saying: 'You shall be the king over all Ethiopia', and he went out to fulfil his destiny. When Wārǧəḥ returned from hunting, he prepared food for his father. But his father was surprised and told him how his brother had maneuvered to take his blessing. The father asked his sons Wārǧəḥ and Oromo to follow Amḥara before he crossed the river; but if he had already crossed it, he warned them to return, promising to bless them too. The two brothers were angry against Amḥara and hastened to follow him, but he had already crossed the river. They returned to their father and he blessed Wārǧəḥ, saying: 'You shall become a trader and wear white clothes'; and to his last son, Oromo, he said: 'You shall breed cattle, drink their milk, and dress yourself in their skins.'

- 2 This legendary account, based on the biblical model of Isaac and his sons, Esau and Jacob (Gen 27: 1-47), interprets the peopling of Šäwa by Muslim Wārǧəḥ (ወርጃሕ)<sup>1</sup>, Christian Amḥara, and ‘pagan’ Oromo through a divine division of duties; and for the better use of available resources and peaceful co-existence of the whole community, it attributes a common ancestor to the three neighbouring communities. It answers some of the questions one can ask about the peopling of Šäwa, its religious diversity, and the maintenance of a Wārǧəḥ identity in this region from its first appearance in the written sources in the 12th century up to now.
- 3 The Wārǧəḥ are commonly described as inhabitants of the lowlands in south-east Šäwa. Known from the *Chronicle of Šäwa* in the 12th century,<sup>2</sup> they seem to have been powerful enough at that time to prevent Amḥara people from conquering their land. First described as cattle breeders and skilled soldiers, they appear in the textual documentation from time to time and eventually became traders converted to Islam. Today, the Wārǧəḥ form pockets of Muslim communities in Šäwa. Did the actual Wārǧəḥ have any historical and tribal relationship with the ancient inhabitants of the Muslim kingdom of Šäwa? When did this community settle in Šäwa? How do they narrate their survival in the face of the cultural pressures from Christian Amḥara, Islam, and then Oromo? Why could the Wārǧəḥ not persuade their Oromo neighbours to convert to Islam? What are the main archaeological monuments that distinguish the Muslim Wārǧəḥ from the Christian community in Šäwa? These are the questions this article addresses and attempts to answer through an analysis of the historical written sources, oral traditions recorded in present-day Wārǧəḥ communities, and data gathered from archaeological surveys in some Wārǧəḥ villages in 2012 and 2013.

## Brief overview of population interactions in Šäwa

- 4 Šäwa is an historical region of Ethiopia which designates two different political and religious entities: a Muslim sultanate attested at the turn of the first millennium of our era up to the 13th century; and a part of a Christian kingdom from the 13th century which grew out of conquests against Muslim sultanates. Due to this duality, the location of the Šäwa territory is still unclear. Historical documents of the medieval period point identify different or evolving locations for Šäwa. For example, the account of the military campaigns of Amdä Šeyon in 1332<sup>3</sup> presents Šäwa as a territory situated south of the district of Täg<sup>w</sup>älät, but its southern limit is vague.<sup>4</sup> In the 15th-century history of kings, the majority of the northern highland of Šäwa is under the jurisdiction of a governor entitled *Šahäfä Lam*,<sup>5</sup> (lit. ‘writer of a cow’). Francisco Alvarez (chaplain of the Portuguese embassy that visited and stayed at the court of King Lebnä Dəngəl between 1520 and 1526 ) included parts of today’s Täg<sup>w</sup>älät, Mänz, Gədm, Anšokya, and Bulga districts in the provincial administration of *Šahäfä Lam* of Šäwa.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the natural frontier of Šäwa to the north was the Wänčät River that borders with the province of Amḥara, and to the south the Kässäm River was probably a natural frontier between Šäwa and Fätagar.<sup>7</sup>
- 5 The Šäwan highland was at the crossroads of dynamic population changes in medieval Ethiopia. According to recent archaeological investigations, it seems that at least part of the Šäwa people belonged to a well-organized society practicing ‘pagan’ cults before the introduction of Islam and Christianity in the region. The megalithic culture of Mänz presents elaborate mass graves built between the 8th and the 10th century.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the *Chronicle of Šäwa*, dedicated to the history of this Muslim sultanate, testifies that the

Šäwa territory was dominated by a strong Muslim sultanate established in this province from the 9th to the 13th century under the authority of the Maḥzūmī dynasty.<sup>9</sup> Besides, there is also an indication that the Christian community had gradually penetrated north of the Šāwan Sultanate, particularly into the districts of Täg<sup>w</sup>əlät, Mänz, and Gədm.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the pre-13th century Šäwa appears very different from the image we have of this territory after the 13th century. At the end of 13th century, two Muslim kingdoms clashed in a struggle to dominate the region. The old Muslim sultanate of Šäwa and the rising Ifat sultanate under the leadership of Umar Wälasma fought violently. Umar Wälasma defeated the Šāwan sultanate, which resulted in a weakening of Muslim power in Šäwa<sup>11</sup>.

- 6 The collapse of the Šāwan sultanate had probably paved the way for easy penetration of Christian communities in Šäwa. In the 13th century, the Christians had already been in a position to establish small pockets of Christian communities in Šäwa.<sup>12</sup> In subsequent centuries, Šäwa became one of the domains of the medieval Christian kings of Ethiopia, as has already been described by Marie-Laure Derat.<sup>13</sup> Many ruins of royal churches and camps bear witness today to the strong evolution of Šäwa in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries as one of the centres of the Christian kingdom.<sup>14</sup>
- 7 In the early 16th century, the imam of the Muslim sultanate of *Barr Sa'd ad-Dīn*, Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīmāl-Ġāzī, nicknamed *Grañ* by the Christians, won a spectacular victory at the battle of Šəmbəra K<sup>w</sup>əre in March 1529, which curtailed the domination of the Christian kingdom from Šäwa.<sup>15</sup> However, his victory was not to last long. He was defeated in 1543 by King Gälawdewos (1543–1559). The violent clashes of these rival Christian and Muslim kingdoms collapsed their powers over the Horn of Africa. Consequently, it opened a way for the easy penetration of pastoralists, particularly the Oromo people, which permanently changed the demographic situation of the Horn in general. The Šäwa province was overwhelmed by the 'pagan' Oromo people, except for its inaccessible part of the territory, its highlands. It is probable that Šäwa remained under the control of 'pagan' Oromo until the middle of the 19th century. The re-Christianization process of Šäwa had begun during the territorial expansion of the Christian dynasty of Mänz that ascended in the end of the 17th century.<sup>16</sup> However, amid the 'pagan' Oromo and the expansion of the Christian Šāwan kingdom, it is said that a Muslim community named Wārgəḥ had survived all these historical dynamic changes in Šäwa.

## Written sources on the Wārgəḥ: From herdsmen to traders

- 8 The first available document that records the people of Wārgəḥ is the *Chronicle of Šäwa*. This Arabic document, which includes a chronological list, was copied in a 19th century Arabic manuscript along with the *History of Walasma* and the *Tārīkh al-mulūk*.<sup>17</sup> Enrico Cerulli copied the text from a manuscript belonging to a private collection in 1936 and translated the document into Italian in 1941. The document presents a long list of the Muslim sultans of the kingdom of Šäwa. It describes the internal power struggles and the end of the Maḥzūmī dynasty. It remains the sole primary source giving detailed information regarding this kingdom.<sup>18</sup> It also draws attention to the first military combats between the Amḥara and the Wārgəḥ in 1128. According to the *Chronicle of Šäwa*, the Wārgəḥ were successful in defending their territory from the southward expansion of the Amḥara in this early period. As it records:

It was the flight of the Amḥara from the land of Warǧiḥ in the month of *ṣafar* of the year 522<sup>19</sup> [5 February – 4 March 1128].

9 The same document records that in about 1280 there was a violent clash between the Šāwan and Ifat Muslim sultanates to dominate the region. The Ifat kingdom decisively defeated the Šāwan sultanate. Tis placed Muslim kingdoms and chiefdoms under the domination of Walasma' dynasty's authority for subsequent centuries.<sup>20</sup>

10 The Wārǧəḥ are also mentioned in the account of the military campaign of King Amdä Şəyon in 1332 against Sultan Şabr-ad-Dīn I, leader of the Ifat sultanate. The Wārǧəḥ fought once again against the expansion of the Christian king. In this account, they are described as herdsmen, and more specifically as camel keepers, to whom Sultan Şabr ad-Dīn planned to assign the Christian king if he refused to convert to Islam:

If he [King Amdä Şəyon] refuses to convert to my religion [Islam], I will render him up to one of these herdsmen which are called Wārǧəḥ to make him a camel keeper.

<sup>21</sup>

11 Further on, the author confirms this first opinion on the Wārǧəḥ. They are herdsmen and experienced soldiers:

The people of the Muslims and the people of Gäbäl, who are herdsmen, heard that I [King Amdä Şəyon] sent my troops to fight in another country, and I was left alone with young troops, inexperienced in war, and they came to fight me from the border of Fəñşate to the border of Bəqul Zar those they call Wārǧəḥ and Gäbäl, strong in war and in battle: from the border of the river Həwaš up to Zäbər, there were Muslims, and also the land of the Christians, the Tag<sup>w</sup>əlat, and the land of Zəga and Mänzəḥ, all these allied and surrounded me.<sup>22</sup>

12 The last mention of the Wārǧəḥ in this text follows the same typology, adding only that they were finally defeated by the Christian king:

He [King Amdä Şəyon] sent once again his troops, and they destroyed the people of Wārǧəḥ, because they are really evil, they do not know the Lord and do not fear men, since they are shepherds of cattle. The king's troops passed them to the sword, they took their women as prisoners and raided their cattle, their sheep and their asses, and they returned to the king.<sup>23</sup>

13 In the post-16th century period, both internal sources and European travellers' accounts hardly mention the Wārǧəḥ. Pedro Paez, in his *História da Etiópia*,<sup>24</sup> resumed the description of the military campaigns of King Amdä Şəyon in 1332 against Şabr-ad-Dīn:

[...] he sent his men and they destroyed the land of Oorgueh putting all to the sword and taking many cows and sheep.<sup>25</sup>

14 Later, the Wārǧəḥ were described as Muslim tribes of Oromo or as Muslim traders. The Italian explorer, A. Cecchi, supports this idea when he narrates his encounter with a man called Turro-Wariyo around 1880. Turro-Wariyo was the chief of the Muslim community of Wārǧəḥ. Cecchi identified him as a merchant from Oromo origin and he precised even his physical and his commercial ability:

He [Turro-Wariyo] was small, robust and solid and fat. He had a shrewd and calculative character [...].<sup>26</sup>

15 We will see later that Turro-Wariyo is recognized as the chief of the Wārǧəḥ in the Wārǧəḥ local tradition.

16 The history of Wārǧəḥ is a piece of Ethiopian history that is still little studied. Only a few scholars have discussed this topic, and then fragmentarily. The Wārǧəḥ are described as inhabitants of the lowlands in the south-east of Šāwa as far as the Awaš River valley.<sup>27</sup> Tadesse Tamrat suggests that the original homeland of the people of Wārǧəḥ was

around the eastern Awaš River,<sup>28</sup> and Ulrich Braukämper agrees with Taddesse Tamrat by placing the Wārǧəḥ on his map to the east of the Awaš River.<sup>29</sup> In his dissertation, Ahmed Hassen incorporates the Wārǧəḥ as one of the confederacy of the medieval kingdom of Ifat (1280–1415) that encompassed the lowlands of Šäwa, which extended as far as the frontiers of the Adal kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

- 17 In the most ancient texts, the Wārǧəḥ were described as herdsmen who looked after cattle and camels. Later, in the 19th century, they became prominent merchants.<sup>31</sup> Militarily, the Wārǧəḥ were also identified as fierce fighters, particularly against the expansion of Christian kings. It seems, from their resistant spirit, that Christian and even Muslim traditions regard the Wārǧəḥ as ferocious and pitiless people. Though there is no clear attestation in the historical records, scholars unanimously agree that the people of Wārǧəḥ have been Muslim since the early 14th century,<sup>32</sup> and they relate the Wārǧəḥ with people called Gābäl/Gābäh.<sup>33</sup> However, written historical sources do not specify whether the Wārǧih people were devoted Muslims; rather, it is certain only that these people were under strong Muslim influences.<sup>34</sup>

## Impacts of Oromo expansion in Šäwa

- 18 According to Taddesse Tamrat, due to the pressure of the Oromo expansion, the Wārǧəḥ had been separated into two different regions in the 16th century: a first group occupied north-west of Dəre Dawa, to the east of the Awash River; and the second group settled in the highlands of Šäwa.<sup>35</sup> Historians explain that the Oromo expansion towards the north was provoked by pastoral demographic and environmental pressures.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, the *gāda* system—an age-group system where each group has its own tasks with a cycle of eight years for each stage—was not only a socio-political system; it also had strong economic interests. In the *gāda* system, the stage of *butta* (booty) war reflects the economic interest of the Oromo people to move and to conquer new territories: the subsequent stage of the leadership of *gāda* was determined by the territories occupied and the *butta* collected from non-Oromo people.<sup>37</sup>
- 19 Though the Oromo expansion faced strong resistance from different societies, its economic impact permanently drove out non-Oromo peoples from their geographical locations and obliged them to flee to different parts of the kingdom. Apparently, it also forced many to change their livelihood: farmlands were transformed into grazing lands, and non-Oromo pastoralists lost their herds in favour of the Oromo.<sup>38</sup> Thus the herdsmen would have been obliged to leave behind their pastoral life for another way of life owing to seasonal raids by the *gāda* military. The Wārǧəḥ were probably one of a few remnants of this historical contingency and most likely, it is at this period that they changed their lifestyle from camel keepers to traders.
- 20 As a result of a long interaction and integration process, the current Wārǧəḥ Muslim community in Šäwa is claimed to be of Oromo stock from the Gālan clan.<sup>39</sup> But the Wārǧəḥ themselves firmly reject this view. According to them, they had been overwhelmed numerically and gradually assimilated into Oromo culture, but they still claim that their Wārǧəḥ identity is preserved through Islamic values in Šäwa.<sup>40</sup> Trying to distinguish between tradition and history is a difficult task today. Most of the recent studies dealing with Wārǧəḥ history focus on an ‘ethnacist’ approach that certainly prejudices its historical studies. And it is evident now that the fragmentary sources on the Wārǧəḥ are not helpful in understanding the historical processes of this community.

## Local memories on the history of Wārǧəḥ in North Šäwa

- 21 For this reason, we decided to investigate the oral history of the Wārǧəḥ Muslim community to record the way they present their past while living in the middle of Christian people. Oral memories were collected between 2011 and 2012, in collaboration with different local cultural offices and informants,<sup>41</sup> in 13 Šäwa villages named after their founders' name: Abdällo, Sheikh Allahbil, Qäre (Šäno), Čatu, Toṭose, Mähammude, Gālan (Aqaqi), Dalätti (Säbäta), Qärsa, Siba Däga, Tiğri Tärača and Rogge. Local traditions consider that the Wārǧəḥ have more than 20 clans in this province, but the villages themselves are not clan-based; rather, they testify to settlement areas of Wārǧəḥ.
- 22 According to this oral tradition, the Wārǧəḥ would have arrived in the early 16th century in the highlands of north Šäwa. Their origin was from two directions: from the east in the region of Harar; and from the north in the region of Təgray. In the latter case, they are commonly called Təgray/i Wārǧəḥ, according to the information collected by A. Cecchi and published in his account in 1880. Cecchi narrates that 'the descendants of the two Muslims of Təgray were refugees here [in Šäwa] during the time of Mohamad Grañ<sup>42</sup> [Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġazī] [...].' This information was interpreted as a sign of the active involvement of Wārǧəḥ in long-distance trade, and *Tiğiri* (rich according to the local memory of Wārǧəḥ Tiğri Tärača, Rogge, and Dalätti) would have evolved through time to *Təgre* or *Təgri* owing to recent historical events. Our informant Sirage counts 12 generations of his family having inhabited the village of Siba Däga. These 12 generations lead us back to the 16th century.<sup>43</sup> Another informant narrates that the Wārǧəḥ settlement preceded the settlement of Oromo at the village of Tiğri Tärača.
- 23 Most of the villages we visited consider that the Wārǧəḥ in Šäwa began their southward migration from a place called Abdällo, derived from Abdella[h], located to the west of Šäno town, 80 km north of Addis Ababa. Abdellah is said to be the founder of the first Wārǧəḥ village. Abdellah is a repeated geographical place name in current Šäwa. Primarily, the chronicle of the Šäwan sultanate mentions many names of sultans called after Abdellah at different periods of time. Between 1193 and 1194, a sultan of Šäwa bore this name: 'The reign of Sultan Abdellah was in the year of *hijera* 590.'<sup>44</sup> Two other sultans named after Abdellah are mentioned in the internal power struggle in 1234 and 1279, respectively.<sup>45</sup> The second Abdellah was a contemporary of King Yəkuno Amlak (1270–1285), who ruled the Christian kingdom at the time of the end of the Šäwan Muslim sultanate.<sup>46</sup> Tadesse Tamrat refers also to another famous Sheikh Abu Abdellah, who negotiated a peace agreement with King Wədəm Rā'ad in 1299.<sup>47</sup> He further locates, from local tradition, the place of the gathering of the two chiefs' delegates around the current town of Šola Gäbya, where there is still a church named Abdälla Giyorgis.<sup>48</sup> However, Tadesse seems uninformed about some other places, such as a local administrative area (*kebele*) and a river<sup>49</sup> named after Abdellah and a church of Abedellah Giyorgis (actually renamed Čäbl Giyorgis) situated 30 km to the west of Debre Berhan. Furthermore, the chronicler of the military campaign of King Amdä Şeyon (1314–1344) reports the death of a certain Abdellah considered as 'their ruler whom they revere as a Bishop'.<sup>50</sup> It is obvious here that the name Abdellah had a remarkable place in the local memories of both Christian and Muslim communities in Šäwa.

- 24 The legendary attachment of the Wārǧəḥ to the Muslim sultanate of Šäwa would mean kin recognition of the Šäwan Islamic legacies after its long collapse. There is also good reason to suggest that the Wārǧəḥ were one of the polities in the kingdom of Šäwa because they were well remembered in the chronicle of the Šäwan sultanate as defenders of their land against the expansion of the Amḥara in 1128. Nevertheless, the oral traditions do not mention Abdellah as their sultan or sheikh. They link only the aforementioned place of Abdelloh/ah with the homeland of Wārǧəḥ people.

## Alliance of the Wārǧəḥ and the Christian kingdom of Šäwa

- 25 The Wārǧəḥ believe that their identity survived owing to a peaceful strategic alliance with the Christian kings of Šäwa and their unprecedented trading abilities in the kingdom. The Christian Šäwan kingdom established in the end of the 17th century at the village of Aganča (in Mänz) reached the territories located south of Däbrä Berhan<sup>51</sup> in the early 19th century. The local traditions in Toṭose recount that the conflicts between the Wārǧəḥ with the local chiefs of Oromo intensified during the southward expansions of the kingdom. As a political strategy, it seems that the Wārǧəḥ would have allied with the new expanding Christian kingdom of Šäwa to protect their prominent role in the great caravan trade of this period. The oral tradition maintains the first alliance was made with King Šahlä Šölase of Šäwa in the early 19th century.
- 26 According to oral traditions from Toṭose as well as Čatu, the founder of the Toṭose Wārǧəḥ would have been a fugitive descendant of Abdelloh/ah, called Abdure-Lottu. The story goes that Abdure-Lottu was a chief of the locality of Abedällo and Čatu under the authority of an Oromo chief named Wake-Šoru. The two chiefs were in a strong rivalry to consolidate power over this area. Abdure-Lottu, the chief of the Wārǧəḥ, abducted the wife of the son of Wake-Šoru, the Oromo chief. This act would have exasperated Wake-Šoru, and Abdure-Lottu was forced to flee from his homeland, Abedällo. Abdure-Lottu founded a refuge at the court of King Šahlä Šölase (1813–1840) of Šäwa. Later, King Šahlä Šölase granted to Abdure-Lottu a vast area in Toṭose, where he founded the Wārǧəḥ village.
- 27 It is possible that the two local chiefs of Oromo and Wārǧəḥ were in conflict due to the expansion of the Christian Šäwa kingdom in this area. Toṭose was located on the great caravan trade route of the 19th century. This route was of interest to the Christian Šäwa kingdom in its efforts to gain economic control of the area, with a rebellious Wārǧəḥ community to isolate the contending Oromo chiefs. As it is narrated in their traditions, the Wārǧəḥ were not only trade agents of King Šahlä Šölase but they also collected information for him about the lands and peoples beyond the reach of his authority. The Tiğri Tärača local traditions remember an important alliance with King Mənilək of Šäwa (1865–1889). They say that the local governor of the area decided to move the Wārǧəḥ from Tiğri Tärača to a nearby village, but the elders went to appeal at the court of Mənilək, King of Šäwa (1865–1889). The king heard the appeal and sent a message to a local governor, saying: ‘Don’t you know that the Wārǧəḥ pay an annual tax of one Thaler for each mule? And I command you: “Don’t touch their lands”.’<sup>52</sup> This proclamation of King Mənilək saved this community from eviction and paved the way for the permanent settlement of the village of Tiğri Tärača, which today numbers around 200 inhabitants.

- 28 The alliance reached its zenith when King Mənilək agreed to resettle the Wārǧəḥ in Dalätti. When Addis Ababa was established in 1879, Rogge, the famous trade centre located at the foot of Yärär Mountain, was totally deserted in favour of the new capital.<sup>53</sup> At this time, the chief of Wārǧəḥ Ture-Waryo called upon the support of King Mənilək, saying his people needed an urgent substitute of land because the shift of the trade route of Wārǧəḥ had ruined the livelihood of his people. King Mənilək thus granted the resettlement of the Wārǧəḥ in Dalätti, today the major part of the town of Säbäta.<sup>54</sup> In 1881, queen Ṭaytu Beṭul, the wife of Mənilək II, invited the Wārǧəḥ to settle at Enṭoṭto for the enhancement of trade in the area.<sup>55</sup>
- 29 Furthermore, the Wārǧəḥ in Dalätti are proud in exalting the contribution of this people. According to them, one rich Wārǧəḥ man lent 12,000 thalers to King Mənilək II to support the defence budget against the Italian colonial aggression in 1896. This legendary account is an excellent example to demonstrate to what extent every Ethiopian was involved in winning a war that became a landmark for the independence of Ethiopia and shed a new inspirational light for the freedom of colonized Africa.
- 30 The oral traditions thus demonstrate largely the economic contributions of the Wārǧəḥ in order to guarantee good relationships with the Šäwan kings. The attachment to the Šäwan kingdom seems mutual, though the Wārǧəḥ traditions did not highlight any of the benefits. The establishment of Wārǧəḥ villages along the trade routes was due not only to economic reasons but also to a search for security for the community. The trade routes were secured from any commercial annoyances by Šäwan soldiers, and there was always a garrison near the caravan markets. Thus, the Wārǧəḥ used this military presence to strategically maintain their trade activities and the security of their community.
- 31 Another unique feature of the Wārǧəḥ in Šäwa is their Islamic confession despite the domination of the Oromo and the Christian Amhara. They secretly maintained their Muslim confession: they had no visible mosques in their villages, praying in the *käläwa*, a house reserved only for family or village worship. *Käläwa* was probably established as a local institution to help Muslim traditions survive within the community. According to the local traditions, Islam was reinforced after the council of Boru Meda in 1878, which provoked the persecution of learned Muslims from the province of Wällo during the reign of King Yoḥannəs IV (1870–1889).<sup>56</sup> A number of Muslim sheikhs established their centre of Koranic learning in Wārǧəḥ villages such as Abdällo, and Ṭoṭose. Many Muslims fled the persecution and took refuge in different places; one of these places was in the vicinity of Abdällo at a village called Čatu.<sup>57</sup> Sheikh Mohammed Sirag was one of the refugees in this area. The local people commemorate Sheikh Mohammed Sirag not only as a spiritual father (*wäly*) but also as a sheikh who opened a Koranic learning centre for surrounding Muslim children of Abdällo, Čatu, and Šagura. Similarly, another group of sheikhs was said to have established an Islamic learning school at the village of Ṭoṭose.
- 32 Among these Wārǧəḥ villages, Muhamude is said to have been the main Islamic learning centre of the community in Šäwa from the middle of the 19th century. There were about 500 *därässa* under three *ulamas* (Hajji Hussein Qadi, Sheikh Muhammed Dulame, and Sheikh Mohammed).<sup>58</sup> This village was founded by a certain Mohammed, who came from Harar before Imām Aḥmad b. Ibrāḥim al-Ġazi in 1529. Other traditions recount that the Wārǧəḥ settlement in this village was 10 generations before, which means in the middle of the 17th century.

- 33 Other prominent erudite men like Hassan and Jemal followed their Koranic school in the famous Islamic centre of Däwe,<sup>59</sup> renowned for its strong Islamic learning from the 18th to early 20th century.<sup>60</sup> Muhamude was believed to be the second Däwe for its Koranic learning centre.<sup>61</sup> Our informant, Ato Hassan Ahmad, narrates that the graduates of the school of Muhamude played a pivotal role in the revival of Islamic learning among the Wārǧəḥ people, and he added that when travelling with Wārǧəḥ traders, they were agents of Islam in different regions in the Oromo Gibe states, Gurage and Aymalal<sup>62</sup>.
- 34 Although the original Wārǧəḥ language is still an enigma to scholars, their traditions defend the existence of their own language before it was assimilated into the Oromo language.<sup>63</sup> Merid Woldaregay, without providing any evidence, supposes they were of Semitic origin.<sup>64</sup> The Wārǧəḥ successfully attempted to consolidate their Islamic traditions, but they supposedly conceded their vernacular language in favour of the Oromo language. Today, the Wārǧəḥ people in Šäwa speak Oromo, with Amharic as a second language. This historical shift is perhaps one of the strategies they used to retain their particular Wārǧəḥ traditions.
- 35 The Wārǧəḥ community defends the notion that they are still distinct from the Oromo and the Amḥara in Šäwa. For the Wārǧəḥ, Islamic tradition was an identity tool against the Christian Amhara. One can wonder how the Wārǧəḥ managed to escape from the massive Christianization policy of the Manz-Šäwa dynasty while traditional Oromo believers were converted in their entirety to Christianity. The response to this question is not easy, but the probable explanation is that Wārǧəḥ religious thought had been long established within the community. On the exterior, they demonstrated and engaged in Oromo traditions while they kept their Islamic traditions at home through the use of the *käläwa*, the home-based mosque.

## The Wārǧəḥ funerary stelae

- 36 Another identifying feature of Wārǧəḥ people in the Christian highlands of Šäwa is their unique funerary customs. Their cemeteries are located near every village and hold a number of small stelae displaying different types of signs and symbols. The main stela sites are in the villages of Qäre (Šäno), Čatu, ȚoȚose, Siba Däga, and Dalätti. Remarkably, the Wārǧəḥ cemeteries we visited throughout our research present similar kinds of representations. The surroundings of the villages of ȚoȚose and Muhamude conserve many megalithic stelae.<sup>65</sup> Most of the stelae measure about 50 cm in width and 60 cm in length, which we may designate as miniature/dwarf stelae compared with relatively the very long funerary stelae of south-west Ethiopia. We can distinguish three kinds of stelae –namely, the collar, the phallic, and the anthropomorphic stelae, which have features similar to the south-west stelae (well described by Roger Joussaume).<sup>66</sup> In the Wārǧəḥ tradition, the funerary stele is named *lahd*. In the south-west Ethiopian megalithic culture, it seems that the word *lahd* identifies specifically a stele with a collar.<sup>67</sup> The phallic stele style adds a slit from above. The anthropomorphic stelae of Wārǧəḥ can be divided into two groups: the first presents a rectangular stone sculpted to show a neck as a head; the second group displays a human figure. All funerary stelae of Wārǧəḥ are decorated with various symbols and signs. These signs bear some important similarities to the stelae of Țiya and Sidama and those in north Šäwa. On the two sides of the anthropomorphic stelae, we can distinguish two or three cut marks.

- 37 The signs and symbols on the Wārǧəḥ funerary stelae do not seem to be linked with the funerary customs of Islam. They may reflect the cultural legacy of pre-Islamic practices of the Wārǧəḥ community, which serves now as one of the identity features of the community in Šäwa. Above all, the similarities among the stelae in the cemeteries of the Wārǧəḥ are evidence of the existence of an apparently systematic communication network, despite the scattered locations of the Wārǧəḥ villages in Šäwa.

## Conclusion

- 38 The local traditions reconstruct the origin of Wārǧəḥ as being in the north and east. From our research, it seems that the settlement pattern of the Wārǧəḥ was oriented southward. In the middle of the 16th century, the Wārǧəḥ established their settlement in Abdällo, where it would have been the legacy of the Muslim sultanate of Šäwa that collapsed at the end of the 13th century. Gradually, the Wārǧəḥ community expanded and then settled in Toṭose, Rogge, and finally at the end of the 19th century in Dalätti. Their settlement pattern followed the great caravan trade routes. The local traditions seem to reconstruct the major sites of Wārǧəḥ according to their own particularities: for example, Abdällo and Toṭose are viewed as the homeland of the Wārǧəḥ people in Šäwa; Muhamude is remembered as an Islamic learning centre; and the great market in Rogge is seen as the centre of Wārǧəḥ traders. It is worth mentioning here that the Wārǧəḥ in Šäwa do not have a single ancient monument, unlike their Christian counterparts. Even mosques were small and built within the villages, invisible to their Christian neighbours. In Toṭose, the Wārǧəḥ community reminds us that the Italian occupation period (1935–1942) was essential for the beginning of the establishment of mosques in north Šäwa.
- 39 As we have tried to show above, Islam among the Wārǧəḥ has been reinforced since the end of the 19th century. The arrival of Muslim refugees who fled the persecution of Yohannes IV played a leading role in the revival of Islamic learning among the Wārǧəḥ. Thus, the Muslim faith of the Wārǧəḥ seems limited and was a late development in Šäwa. If this hypothesis is correct, they were more dominated by the ‘pagan’ Oromo cultures; and that is why they could not persuade their Oromo neighbours to convert to Islam. Some researchers view the Wārǧəḥ not only as trade agents, but as agents of Islam among western people.<sup>68</sup> However, the religious position of the Wārǧəḥ throughout the historical record shows that Islam was not sufficiently institutionalized to influence even their own neighbours. Furthermore, the Wārǧəḥ funerary stelae do not follow the burial customs of Islam. The miniature collar, phallic, and anthropomorphic stelae, with their three or six round, rectangular, triangular signs seem related more to the megalithic cultures of south-west Ethiopia and north Šäwa than to Muslim burial customs. Presumably, the Wārǧəḥ in Šäwa integrated more easily into ‘pagan’ Oromo cultures owing to the former’s thin ties to Islam. However, these stelae served well to portray the identity of the Wārǧəḥ community in the Christian-dominated highlands of Šäwa.
- 40 The Wārǧəḥ settled near trade centres when forming their villages, and they were capable of moving to follow the security and the changes connected with changes in trade routes. Finally, though sources are unclear in precisely locating their territory, the Wārǧəḥ’s unprecedented merchandizing ability, their attachment to the monarchy for the security of their community, and their mastering of others’ cultures have helped them to prove that tenure of fixed territory is not the only way to maintain identity.

## Figures

- 41 Some funerary stelae of the Wärgəḥ

Figure 1: Prayer in front of an ancestral tomb



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 2: Anthropomorphic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 3: Anthropomorphic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 4: Anthropomorphic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 5: Anthropomorphic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 6: Phallic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 7: Phallic stelae



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 8: Stelae with different signs and symbols



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 9: Stelae with different signs and symbols



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 10: Stelae with different signs and symbols



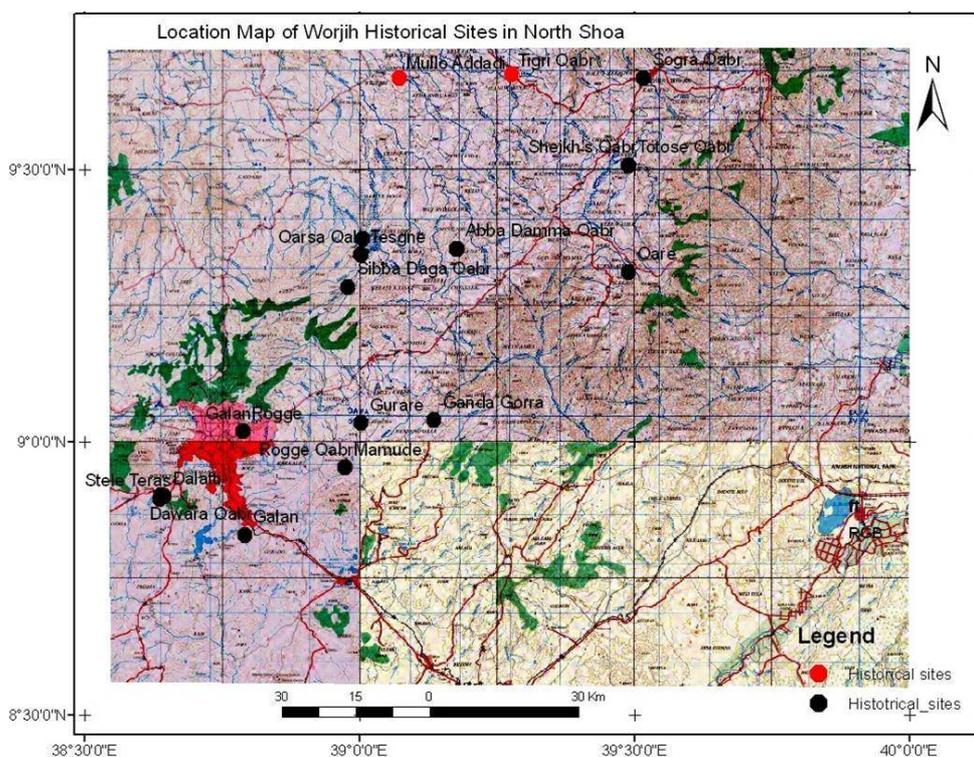
Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 11: Stelae with different signs and symbols



Photo Deresse Ayenatchew, 2012.

Figure 12: Location Map of Worjih Historical Sites in North Shoa



I express my sincere thanks to my friend Ali Gebeyehu for his excellent help to realize this comprehensive map of the distribution Wārġəḥ in north Šäwa. He is a Lecturer of GIS at Debre Berhan University.

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## NOTES

1. There are different variants when writing the term Wärgəḥ. Enrico Cerulli uses Wärgih/ወርጃከ based on the Arabic text of a chronicle dedicated to the Muslim Sultanate of Šäwa حورج (10th–13th century) (E. CERULLI, 1941, p. 8, 10, 18, 42; see also E. CERULLI, 1932, vol. 1, p. 15). Paolo Marrassini employs ወርጃከ/Wärgəḥ when referring to the Ge'ez text of the account of the military campaign of Amdä Šəyon I against the Ifat kingdom in 1332 (P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 54). There are other post-16th century variants, such as ወርግከ/Wärgəḥ, ወርጃከ/Märgəḥ, or ወርጃህ/Wärgih as James Quirin used it in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (2010, p. 1145). See also Wärgəḥ Cultural Association Committee, *History of Wärgəḥ*, 1993, Addis Ababa, mimeographed paper, 67 f.
2. The so-called *Chronicle of Šäwa* is a concise chronology of the main events in the Muslim sultanate of Šäwa between AD 1063 and AD 1289/90. See E. CERULLI, 1941.
3. Manfred Kropp suggests the document dates to the reign of King Lebnä Dəngəḥ (r. 1508–1540) (M. KROPP, 1983–1984, p. 57). But P. Marrassini supposes it to be from the 15th century (P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 93; see also M. KROPP, 1994, p. XVIII or M.-L. DERAT, 2013, p. 35–49).
4. M. KROPP, 1994, p. 9; P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 57.
5. J. PERRUCHON, 1893, p. 111 and 153. These chronicles are also dated to the 16th century by M. Kropp (M. KROPP, 1983–1984, p. 53).
6. C.F. BECKINGHAM, G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, 1961, p. 257.
7. U. BRAUKÄMPER, 2003, maps p. 103–104; R. BASSET, 1897–1909, p. 112–113, 214.
8. F.-X. FAUVELLE-AYMAR *et al.*, 2008, p. 329–398.
9. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 212.
10. E. CERULLI, 1941, p. 22–23.
11. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 212.
12. P. MARRASSINI, 1993.
13. M.-L. DERAT, 2003, p. 51–84.
14. DERESSE AYENACHEW, 2009, p. 255–346.
15. P.L. STENHOUSE, R. PANKHURST, 2003, p. 71–74; M. KROPP, 1988, p. 11–12. See also A. CHEKROUN, 2013.
16. S.E. EGE, 1996; F.-X. FAUVELLE-AYMAR, B. POISSONNIER, 2012, p. 191–225.
17. E. CERULLI, 1941, p. 6, n1.
18. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 207–208.
19. E. CERULLI, 1941, p. 10, n4.
20. E. CERULLI, 1941, p. 15; J.S. TRIMINGHAM, 1976, p. 62–63.
21. P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 54–55; M. KROPP, 1994, p. 7.
22. P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 56–57; M. KROPP, 1994, p. 9.
23. P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 184–185; M. KROPP, 1994, p. 71.
24. The Portuguese missionary Pedro Paez wrote his *História da Ethiópia* in 1614–1615 (see H. PENNEC, 2003, p. 249–257; P. PAEZ, 2011, Introduction).
25. P. PAEZ, 2008, p. 476.

26. A. CECCHI, 1886, p. 488.
27. G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, 1965, p. 37.
28. TADDESSE TAMRAT, 1972, p. 42.
29. U. BRAUKÄMPER, 2003, p. 102.
30. AHMAD HASSEN, 2007, p. 62-67.
31. J. PERRUCHON, 1889, p. 122, 191-192.
32. G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, 1965, p. 37.
33. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 10; J. PERRUCHON, 1889, p. 122, 191-192; AHMED HASSEN, 2007, p. 64.
34. J. PERRUCHON, 1889, p. 122; TADDESSE TAMRAT, 1972, p. 42; AHMED HASSEN, 2007, p. 62-67.
35. TADDESSE TAMRAT, 1972, p. 42. This historical event had the same impact on the people of Argobba, who were separated into northern and southern Argobba (see V. STITZ, 1975; TESFAYE HAILU, 2000; AHMED HASSEN, 2007, p. 39-44).
36. MERID WOLD AREGAY, 1971, p. 156.
37. ASMEROM LEGESSE, 1973, p. 74-76.
38. MERID WOLD AREGAY, 1971, p. 201-205.
39. According to a handwritten document on the history of the Wārǧəḥ, compiled by the Wārǧəḥ Cultural Association Committee, Addis Ababa, 1993, fol. 25.
40. *Ibid.*
41. The members of this field work were Deresse Ayenachew, Wossen Shiferaw (University of Debre Berhan), Tsegaye Wordofa (Oromia, Cultural Anthropology Officer), and Habtamu (North Shoa Tourism Development Officer). I am also grateful to the young Feysal who helped me to discover the Wārǧəḥ villages and made available to me valuable local documents of the Wārǧəḥ community.
42. A. CECCHI, 1886, p. 489.
43. Informants: Sirag Said, 85 years old and Sultan Abdo, 62 years old. The former recounted the genealogy of his decedents in the presence of the elders of the village of Dägagora.
44. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 212.
45. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 219.
46. E. CERULLI, 1971, p. 219.
47. TADESSE TAMRAT, 1972, p. 131.
48. TADESSE TAMRAT, 1972, p. 131; see also his additional note 2 on the same page.
49. DERESSE AYENACHEW, 2012. The river is located in the *Käbäle* of Aman-Gult, the birth place of *ras* Gobena Dači ጎበኛዳጌጌ (1821-1889), the renowned Oromo military general of King Menilek II (1889-1913).
50. P. MARRASSINI, 1993, p. 165.
51. GEBRE SELASSIE, 1966, p. 13-14. The ruler of Šäwa Wässän Säḡäd (1805-1813) established the Trinity Church of Däbrä Bərhan on the ruins of the medieval church of King Zär'a Ya'eqob (1434-1468).
52. Informant: Kedir Imam, 62 years old, resident of the village of Tigri Tärača.
53. HABTAMU ZUBER, 2007, p. 25-28.
54. Informant: Yassin Adem, 72 years old, resident of Daletti and a renowned merchant, now retired.
55. HABTAMU ZUBER, 2007, p. 25-28. On this issue, important remarks are also added in this thesis.
56. HUSSEIN AHMAD, 2001, p. 36.
57. Informants: Tuhir, resident of Čatu village; Sheikh Hussein Umar, an Argobba man and resident of Shäno town, who is known for his knowledge of the history of Islam in Ethiopia and the local story of the Wārǧəḥ community.

58. Informant: Hassan Ahmad, 51 years old, a well-informed man who claims to be a descendant of Sheikh Ahmad Dulame.
59. One of the famous districts that was responsible for the expansion of Islam in Wällo and other places of the country. It is located today in the Oromo Zone in the Amhara region, 40 km to the east of Kämissé town.
60. MOHAMMAD SEID, 2008, p. 65-80.
61. Informant: Hassan Ahmad.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Wārǧəḥ Cultural Association Committee (1993), *History of Wārǧəḥ*, Addis Abeba, mimeographed paper, 67f., Addis Ababa, 1993, fol. 25.
64. MERID WOLD ARAGAY, 1971, p. 24.
65. F. ANFRAY, 1982, p. 43-221. See also F. ANFRAY, 1983, p. 508-518.
66. R. JOUSSAUME, 1995, p. 98 and 83-106. For example, R. Joussaume classifies stelae in Ethiopia as phallic, anthropomorphous, collar, *historiées*, masked, tambour, and ramified stele with sword. See also R.P. AZAÏS, R. CHAMBARD, 1931.
67. R. JOUSSAUME, 1995, p. 98 and p. 83-106.
68. J. TRIMINGHAM, 1976, p. 186; HUSSEIN AHMAD, 2001, p. 36.

## ABSTRACTS

The Wārǧəḥ Muslim community constitutes more than 22,000 people in Ethiopia. They live in diverse parts of the country, but the largest number of Wārǧəḥ are found in north Šäwa and near Dəre Dawa. In north Šäwa, the community of Wārǧəḥ has established scattered pockets of villages between Däbrä Berhan and Säbäta towns. Linguistically, they speak Oromo and also Amharic. Fragmentary medieval Ethiopian historical sources describe the Wārǧəḥ as inhabitants of the lowlands of south-east Šäwa. They were herdsmen, particularly camel keepers. Post-16th century sources record that the Wārǧəḥ transformed their way of life to become traders following the great medieval caravan trade routes. Due to their resistance against expansions, they were described as warriors and a ferocious people. For the purpose of this paper, we have gathered oral accounts from 13 local villages of north Šäwa to identify how these people reconstruct their history and to understand how all these villages networked with each other to endure the waves of dynamic religious and population movements of these periods. Funerary stelae were also surveyed to determine whether their styles could be related to the megalithic cultures of south-west Ethiopia.

La communauté musulmane des Wārǧəḥ représente un peu plus de 22 000 personnes en Éthiopie. Ils vivent dans diverses parties du pays mais le plus grand nombre habite dans le Nord Šäwa et près de Dəre Dawa. Dans le Nord Šäwa, la communauté forme des poches éparées de villages situés entre les villes de Däbrä Berhan et Säbäta. Ils parlent aussi bien la langue Oromo que la langue Amharique. Les sources médiévales éthiopiennes, fragmentaires, présentent les Wārǧəḥ comme les habitants de régions de basses terres situées au sud-est du Šäwa. Ils sont décrits comme étant des pasteurs, plus précisément des chameliers. La documentation écrite postérieure au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle considère que les Wārǧəḥ ont transformé leur activité, devenant commerçants le long des grandes routes caravanières. Du fait de leur résistance à l'expansion chrétienne, ils sont vus comme des guerriers féroces. Dans le cadre de cet article, nous avons réuni des récits oraux

recueillis dans douze villages du nord Šäwa afin d'analyser comment ces communautés reconstruisent leur histoire et comment tous ces villages sont liés les uns aux autres pour faire face aux différentes vagues religieuses et aux mouvements de population qui ont secoué la région au cours de la période médiévale et après. Les stèles funéraires ont également été recensées afin de déterminer si leur style pourrait être lié aux cultures mégalithiques du Sud-Ouest éthiopien, ou non.

## INDEX

**Geographical index:** Éthiopie

**Keywords:** Islam, Šäwa, Stelae, Wārǧəḥ

**Mots-clés:** stèles

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