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## Causes for Personal Naming Shift in Wolaita and its Effects on Identities of the Nation

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### Abstract

This study mainly focuses on assessing the major causes that resulted in the naming shift in Wolaita. It also investigates the consequences of the current naming shift on the identities of Wolaita people. In the past, Wolaitas gave their children the names of their indigenous language and culture. However, most Wolaitas stopped giving those names to their children. The naming shift is a reflection of a big cultural and social change. For this study, qualitative method of research design was used. To achieve the objectives, an interview was administered to 30 informants, 15 elders-who are above 50 years old and 15 adults-who are between 18 to 50; they were selected through purposive sampling. Results show that the reasons for naming shift are collective effects of different elements. Most Wolaitas do not give their children their indigenous names mainly because of the influence of the old political system in Ethiopia. Wolaitas were discouraged, discriminated and were even insulted, because they had their indigenous names. Since then, having Wolaita names made them embarrassed and feel less valued. The discrimination, as a result of having their indigenous names affected them in getting job and getting other advantages. Some give their children other names due to religious ideologies. Globalization also has a great influence on the naming shift in the nation. The language's limitedness in space, expecting that their children will gain more advantage if they get Amharic or western or Biblical names, are all the factors contributed for the shifting.

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The current division in race and ethnicity in the multicultural and multinational Ethiopia does not encourage giving indigenous names. Thus, the study concludes that giving Wolaita's children Biblical or Amharic or western names can mask and finally destroy its identities. Finally, based on the discussions and conclusions, recommendations are forwarded.

**Keywords:** Wolaita; Wolaita personal names; Wolaita culture; shifts in Wolaita naming; indigenous names.

## **1. Introduction**

Ethiopia has more than 80 nations, nationalities and peoples. The Wolaita people are one of them. Wolaita is a nation existed many thousand years ago. Its population is more than 3 million. Most of Wolaitas live out of their home land, Wolaita Zone - which is located in southern part of Ethiopia; it is 300 kilometres away from the capital Addis Ababa. The name "Wolaita" represents the Nation, the land and the language. Wolaitas are heroic people who had their own kings and administrative system for a long period of time (until the unification to the current Ethiopia). They were the top warriors. There were more than fifty different kings at different times from different dynasties (Aruujjiya, Wolaitta Maallaa and Tigire Maallaa) in Wolaita. Wolaitas are very proud of their land, their language and their widely known culture.

In Wolaita when a person's name is called or written, his or her father's name comes first and the individual's name comes next. For instance, if an individual's first name is Baraanaa and his father's name is Biibisoo, his name is written or called as: Biibiso Baraana; it is the same as saying Biibiso's Baraana. During a talk, when a person calls somebody's first name only, say Yallisee, and that person is not easily identified, the listener will ask saying, whose Yallisee? (In Wolaitattoo: O Yallisii?) Then one responds: Dalgga Yalliso. This is a unique characteristic of Wolaita's naming.

Naming is part of this culture and the representation of one's socio-cultural characteristics. It is cultural heritage and identity. Reference [2] says that names usually convey messages to the society at large, providing many facts about the identity of the named person. In the past, personal naming had a great place for Wolaitas. Now a days, the names that most Wolaita's give to their children are the names that do not represent the nation's language or culture. Long ago, it was possible to identify a person from Wolaita by hearing his/her name because the personal names given in the past were names that directly symbolize the Wolaita people. Currently, most personal names that many Wolaita people specially the young and children do have do not represent their nation's culture. May be their fathers'/mothers'/grandfathers'/grandmothers personal names do for some. Others' names totally do not represent their nation's culture. Most of the personal names that Wolaitas give to their children are names that were not practiced before. Most Wolaitas abandoned their culture specially giving their children indigenous Wolaita names. In support of this, Reference [3] states that indigenous cultural practices of Wolaita are highly deteriorated. This deterioration includes the naming practice, too. The way they give and select personal names is severely affected. They do not have the love and strong feeling to their culture that their forefathers had. This shifting in the naming patterns of Wolaita mark yet another philosophical transformation in their lives. This new thinking has so many consequences on the nations identity. Though a significant amount of literature has been written on Wolaita language and culture, relatively no study was conducted on

Wolaita personal Naming shift.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

This study aims to investigate whether the current Wolaitas give their children their native names and the major causes for the shift in Wolaita's naming and what kind of consequences this shift may have in the indigenous culture and identity of this nation. The study also tries to examine whether Wolaitas change their indigenous names to the other culture in the present time.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### ***3.1. Design of the Study***

This study has used a qualitative research design to investigate the causes for shifts in Wolaita's naming and its consequences. This research design is chosen because it makes easier to show the beliefs, ideas, understandings of participants. Reference [4] describe qualitative research as involving "... an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." Another scholar, [1] also explains " The way in which people being studied understand and interpret their social reality is one of the central motives of qualitative research." Therefore, because the researcher wanted to see the deep rooted practice, believe and understanding of the sample population, he chose this research design. While the participants of the study are indigenous Wolaita people, the sample population is indigenous people of Wolaita Zone who are native speakers of the language. The researcher selected 30 samples 15 elders who are thought to be very knowledgeable and 15 adults that the researcher believed to have a very good understanding about Wolaita's culture.

### ***3.2. Description of the Research setting***

This study is conducted in Southern Ethiopia, Wolaita Zone. Though 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 [3], Now Wolaita is limited only to twelve Woredas and three city administrations. This zone is known for its indigenous cultures. Reference [6] states that Wolaita is among 56 Nations and Nationalities in Southern Ethiopia commonly known by its indigenous culture, beliefs, traditions, rituals, civilization and social identities. Wolaita is located 330 kilo metres away from the capital of Ethiopia. In terms of ethnic boundaries, Wolaita is bordered by *Hadiya* and *Kambata Tambaro* in the north, *Boroda* and *Kucha* in the south, *Sidama* in the East, *Dawuro* in the west and *Arsi Oromo* in the north-east. Thus, we can say it is the southern central part of Ethiopia. Astronomically; the region is located within the tropical region at 37<sup>0</sup> 45' East Longitude and 7<sup>0</sup> north Latitude [3]. Wolaita Zone is one of highly populated areas in Ethiopia.

### ***3.3. Sampling Technique and Tool of Data Gathering***

The researcher used purposive sampling technique for this study. An interview was administered to 30

informants, 15 elders-who are above 50 years old and 15 adults-who are between 18 to 50; They were selected as a sample from Sodo Town and four Woredas of Wolaita Zone. The elders selected are well known by their community and are thought to have a better understanding and knowledge about the culture and language of Wolaita. The adults were selected to reflect their beliefs and perceptions on the naming shift in Wolaita.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

In this study, the researcher used qualitative method of data analysis. The data collected through interview is better presented qualitatively. Then, the result is presented in a narrative approach by describing the data obtained through interview. The recorded interview was carefully analyzed in the results and discussions part.

## **4. Results and discussions**

Personal names are names that are used to distinguish one person from others. The act of naming is linked with one's culture and language. As [5] states in [7], among many African cultures a name tells a lot about the individual that it signifies, the language from which it is drawn and the society that ascribes it. Thus, a name carries a lot of meaning with it. It has a strong interpretation of the culture, practice, preferences, customs, important features and events in a nation.

In the face to face interview, one of the interviewed elders believes that Wolaitas are not giving their children their native Wolaita names. Most names being given for the newly born babies are taken from Bible. The informant clarified that if a person is from protestant religious groups, most of the time he/she will give the baby a name from the Bible. The same is true for Orthodox followers. In this religion the parents may give the baby any name, but the priest (who is called the baby's spiritual father) will give a name that is highly connected to that religion.

Another interviewed elder indicated that the ancient time governing system in Ethiopia was one of the elements that contributed the lions share to harm the beautiful culture of our nation. The system highly discouraged all other cultures and languages but promoted the culture of the then rulers. The then rulers were small-minded, and they did not recognize that the varied cultures are beauty for our country and each culture is unique and indigenous heritage of the country. The informant explained that during the times of Hailesilase and Minilik, other languages and cultures were not given any attention. All people of Ethiopia were forced to speak the language of the then rulers who were holding guns. Nor did The Derg regime give a room for other cultures and languages. Reference [3] also shares this view in his article:

"The *Derg* (military) regime that replaced the imperial regime also gave little room for the revival of Wolaita culture. It discouraged the practice of local culture as backwardness and obstacle for national unity and social progress".

Another interviewed elder elaborated that the first and the most worst thing that contributed not only for the naming shift, but also for weakening the indigenous culture in this nation is the previous northern inhuman ruling system. The interviewee explained that *we were made not to speak our mother tongue when we were in*

*the high school. Even I was punished for speaking Wolaitato-my mother tongue in the school compound in my own land. They wanted us to speak Amharic and to have Amharic names. They looked down on our indigenous names and our language. They insulted us for holding Wolaita names. Since then, most people started to have Amharic names, and started to speak Amharic language though they were not good at it. Also there was there was bias in all affairs in the society. If you have Wolaita name and if you do not speak Amharic, you are negatively treated at that time. As a result, many people preferred to have Amharic names and speak Amharic.* He added that another factor that contributed for naming shift in Wolaita is religious groups' influence. This takes the largest part in contributing for the naming shift. Most names that people give to their babies are more of Biblical names like: Bamlak (in God's support), Misgana (Praise be to God), Kalkidan (Covenant), Maranata (The second coming of Jesus Christ), Bereket (Blessing) and etc the informant exemplified. [8] shares this idea saying "Generally Africans value their names. A traditional African name is a religious mark of personal and human identification".

Another adult interviewee explained that Wolaitas are not giving their children their native names in our time. There are several reasons for this. I think the first one is, in recent years, having Wolaita names is perceived as ruralism or foolishness. People feel that having Wolaita native names is less valued than having other names (Amharic). Some people think that giving their children Western names or Amharic names is some sort of development and modernization.

Names are names, the informant continued, they are given to identify a person from others, but having Wolaita names are considered as backwardness or unmodernized in the community.

This adult made clear that the shift in naming can affect the culture and identity of Wolaita in a serious condition. Many Wolaitas especially those who are in towns cannot speak a clear Wolaitato, and their being Wolaita may be identified by their fathers' or grandfathers' names or not at all. Thus, in the far future, this can destroy the identity of this nation.

One of my adult interviewee, female respondent, said that at present time, people do not give their children their native names because they think that Wolaita native names as old fashioned, and other names such as Western and Amharic as modern names. She also mentioned that most of the names given are more of Biblical; for instance my daughter's name is "Bereket" she said which means "Blessing". She elaborated that in the past, some people used to change their fathers' or their own native names. For instance, Leemana (Wolaita native name) to Limenih (Amharic), Baraana (Wolaita native name) Birhane (Amharic), Imana (Wolaita native name) Imaneh (Amharic), Mallaqu (Wolaita native name) to Melaku (Amharic). This change/shift of native names will result in destroying the identity of the nation in the future, the interviewee said. You will not be able to identify Wolaitas by their names.

One of the interviewed elders recognizes that globalization, religion and Lack of awareness (arbitrary naming) are the major factors that contributed for the naming shift in Wolaita. Most of people do not worry about their culture; they do not consider it when they give their children a name. Simply they give any name probably somebody suggested or they heard. The same elder added saying, "If we take even the famous Gifaataa Festival

of Wolaita, most people are stopping celebrating. The reason is obvious; it is the protestant religious leaders' wrong teaching. They taught the people as this festival is worshipping devil, but this is totally wrong. In support of this, [6] states that it was started before many hundreds of years ago as a bridge between the accepting of New Year and sending-off the old one. In fact, Gifaataa is Wolaita's New year festival-which Wolaitas had been celebrating many hundred years ago, until the emperors covered it and forced to celebrate only Meskel festival which belongs to Orthodox religion. Now we can say the Gifaataa festival of Wolaita is endangered. [6] also states that ... the wrong political ideology of Menelik, Haileselassie and Dergue wrongly mixed them up and cultivated Meskel celebration with the expense of Gifaataa.

The interviewee who is thought to be the oldest of all respondents listed three major factors (mentioned by others) that contributed as a cause for Wolaita's naming shift saying: "In my opinion there are three major factors that contributed for destroying Wolaita's indigenous naming. The first one is the influence of the ancient Ethiopia governors. The then rulers wanted to have one religion, one culture, one language for all where there were more than 80 nations, nationalities and peoples. Those who couldn't speak Amharic, and do not have Amharic names were highly discriminated at the time. To escape from the discrimination due to having native names, Wolaitas preferred to have Amharic names. Thus, this affected the people psychologically, and the result continued until the present time. Until recently, many Wolaita job-seekers are enforced to change their Wolaita names and hide their identity to increase chances of being hired by employers (especially out of Wolaita Zone).

The second factor the interviewee mentioned was religious ideology. As Wolaita's majority are protestant religion followers, they liked to have names taken from the Bible. This also dominated the Wolaita's indigenous naming practice. Therefore, now a day most names of Wolaitas originated from the Holy Bible.

The last factor the interviewee mention was lack of different literature in Wolaita language. When people read fictions for example, they name the character that impressed them, or a character with a good quality. In Wolaita language there are very few literatures; thus, there is no chance for Wolaita readers to have books in the language. As a result, they will now have opportunities to give their children Wolaita names.

A few people are trying to give their children Wolaytato names like: Anjjoniyo, Siyoniyo and the like. They give these names not because they are very interested in giving Wolaita names, but because they these names look like Italian names; they cannot be easily comprehended by the Wolaitas themselves. The interviewee further explained that if it is continued in this way the identity of this nation will be surely masked.

One of the interviewee addressed saying: "I think most people give their children other names because they don't want their children to be easily known that they are Wolaitas". For Example I am from Wolaita; if I seek a job, and I apply for a vacancy in other place out of Wolaita while I have got identifiable Wolaita names, I have very less opportunity to be hired since I am not from their Ethnic group. This is (informal task) and it is obvious. I know one of my friends who was Wolaita went to apply in A college. He is originally from Wolaita; however, in his CV, in front of his birth place, he wrote the name of the place where the institution is located. In his interview he spoke the same. Fortunately, he passed; he could be hired in the institution. This is why many people do not want to name their children Wolaita names. They think that having Wolaita name their children

will not be advantageous; rather they will be harmed. They fear that their children will be influenced by this kind of racist and narrow minded people in different societies in Ethiopia. This is clear there is a discrimination when seeking job. Many suffer from the same reason. We are in a society where people are discriminated by their names or races or colour; rather than their character, skill and knowledge they do have.

The informant added that most of us hear Amharic or English in mass media. We hear our prime Minister (Hailemariam Dessalegn) speaking in English or Amharic on ETV/radio. People think that naming and speaking in language which is widely used is more beneficial. For whatever reason, they stop giving their children their indigenous names, they bury their identity.

Based on the above discussion, it can be summarized that the shift on Wolaita names is the result of the different combined influences. These influences left a scar on the identity of the nation.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1. Conclusions**

Derived from the results and discussions of the study, the following conclusions have been reached. Most of Wolaitas are discouraged giving their children their indigenous names. The reasons for this are collective effects of different elements. The major ones are: the influence of the past emperors time; the influence of religious ideas; globalization, giving less value for own culture; fear of discrimination in the old political system and current condition in the multicultural and multinational country; the language's limitedness in space; expectation to gain more economic advantage if they name in widely used languages. Some Wolaitas even changed their names in to Amharic names to escape from discrimination. Since the time of ancient inhuman governing system, it is a fact that having indigenous Wolaita names make them embarrassed and feel less valued. Wolaita's naming shift as the result of the above reasons will have a serious effect on the nation's identity. The indigenous names of the nation will be masked and destroyed. The nation's feeling about their identity, culture and language will be weakened. The future generation of the nation will have very less opportunity that makes them consider their identity as Wolaitas. Since naming is part of culture and language, it will has negative effects on tradition, culture and language of the nation. Lack of mass media and Literature in the nations own language affected its language and culture.

### **5.2. Recommendations**

1. Wolaitas should give their children their indigenous names with the aim of enhancing their indigenous tradition, culture and language to surpass their identity from generation to generation and attach the sense of Wolaita identity. This will teach the young generation to be proud of their culture and customs.
2. Wolaita Zone Culture and Tourism Office and other concerned bodies should create awareness for youths and name givers that naming provides an important element in constructing ethnic and cultural identities and this kind of naming practice is seriously affecting Wolaita's culture.

3. The future name givers of this nation should know their indigenous Wolaita names, and this is part of their identity.
4. People in specially Protestant religious groups should know that giving children Wolaita names is not sin, but it is the reflection of the culture of this nation.
5. Wolaitas should promote and preserve their culture thorough giving their children Wolaita's indigenous names.
6. Employers should never discriminate looking at a person's name and ethnic group when screening for a job post, but they should evaluate everyone in his/her performance.

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