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## A HISTORY OF WALLO *TEKLAY GIZAT* PRISON (1941-1974)

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### ABSTRACT

This research is a historical account of the Wallo *Teklay Gizat* Prison from 1941 to 1974. The years 1941 and 1974 were selected as the starting and finishing points because both of them are landmarks in the history of Ethiopia. While 1941 marked the liberation of the country from the Italian occupation, 1974 saw the fall of the Imperial regime and the establishment of a military government. The study mainly aimed at giving a comprehensive image of the prison where criminals were exposed to various sufferings. As much as possible, efforts have been made to make extensive use of resources relevant to the subject. Available written materials and documents have been consulted. In addition, I met with many useful informants. In the period under discussion, Wallo was one of the administrative regions of Ethiopia located in the north-eastern part of the country bordering on Tigray in the north, the Republic of Djibouti in the east, Gojjam and Bagemidir in the west, and Shewa and Harerge in the south. During the Imperial regime, the prison was an important institution for detaining convicted criminals. In Dase, which was the administrative capital of the region, the principal prison was known as *Yatikilay Gigatu Wahini Bet*. Although the government issued the general rules of prison establishment in 1944, the jail had existence since a few years after the founding of the town. Initially it was situated north of the Aytayyaf Hall. During the Italian occupation, it was moved to the Robit area and then to the present location of the Wayzero Sihin School. The jail was then transferred to Kombolcha. The prison in Kombolcha was built by the Italians. After a while, it moved to Jame in the south outskirts of Dese. At Jame, prisoners were exposed to severe living conditions and deprived of adequate water supply and food. Poor sanitation, rampant communicable diseases, lack of medical treatment and the poor quality of food led to a high mortality rate. It was from this reason that the Jail was called "*Dam Mellash*" (avenger). This was another important factor that contributed to the increasing number of outlaws who opted for *shifitinnat* instead of going to prison. As the living condition of the prisoners grew from bad to worse, the government decided in 1951 to construct a new jail at its present location near the Borkana River. In 1958, the jail was transferred from Jame to Kombolcha. The other problem in the jails of Wallo province was lack of adequate trained guards. Reports of the period mentioned that the jail was guarded by the *Nech Labash* force until the late 1950s. Moreover, the procedure of adjudication that lengthened the appointment of criminal cases from an average of twenty to thirty times said to have created strong hatred of the prisoners to the government. This is said to be another factor for the growing number of criminals who opted for *shifitinat* rather than accepting the rule of law. To come to the conclusion, the prison had served as symbol of royal absolutism where prisoners were exposed to miserable and inhuman living conditions (i.e. their sufferings from inadequate ration, hunger, sanitation problems, suffocation, torture, unjust legal proceedings and corrupt jurists).

**Key words:** Dam Mellash, Nech Labash, Prison, shifitinat, Teklay Gizat, Wahini Bet

### 1. GENERAL BACKGROUND TO A HISTORY OF THE WALLO *TEKLAY GIZAT*

Following the defeat and evacuation of the Italians, insecurity was a major problem in Wallo. Because of the Italian legacy of hatred and hostility among different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities, there was some difficulty in the re-establishment of provincial administration in the region (Informants: Yimer Woraqi, Ahmed Muhammed, Gebre Hiywot Kebede). The overall situation in the province could be best described as chaotic. Large group of armed bands, which had armed themselves with abandoned and looted Italian weapons, roamed freely in the countryside. These armed bands used the weapons for various criminal acts (Abdu 1997:24).

Informants remember that the general disorder in many areas of the region manifested itself in the burning of houses, looting of animals and properties, and killing of individuals. Above all, robbery and murder were widespread in the Oromo and Afar inhabited areas as well as on the Addis Ababa –Maqalle road (Edmond J. Keller, 1988:73). In the meantime, the responsibility for maintenance of law and order in Dese remained in the hands of the British forces (Yimer Woraqi, Gebre Hiywot Kebede , Nigatu Ali).

Side by side with the process of pacification and stabilization, the Ethiopian government rebuilt its administrative structure in the town. Immediately after the war of independence, Emperor Haile Selassie appointed Liqa makwas Abagaz Chufa of Worre Himeno as the Wollo Awraja Agar tabbaqi. While the main work of reconstruction took place in Dese, similar attention was given to the countryside. Accordingly, Balabbates and yagobez alaqas were appointed in the various localities to coordinate the efforts against the illegal activities of criminal bands and to restore peace Informants (Informants: Zewdu Belay, Yimer Mekonnen ,Sigge Gugesa).

In June 1941, the Crown Prince, Asfa Wosen Haile Selassie arrived in Dese and took over the duties of Liqa makwas Abagaz Chufa and took up the post of governor –general, with Balemberas Mahateme Sillasse Wolde Masqel as his tutor (South Wallo Administrative Office Archive (here after SWAOA, The Crown Prince to Qagnasmach Siyyum Walelu, File Number (here after FN.)212/33; 1933E.C.; Informants: Yimer Woraqi, Assfaw). In that early post-liberation period, the other task of the restored government was to redraw the provincial boundaries.

Likewise Wollo was new artificial creation of the central government which adjusted its boundaries after the war of liberation (SWAOA, A letter written from the Crown Prince’s Office (here after CPO) to Liqa Makwas Abegaz, FN.260/33.1933E.C).

In order to establish effective administration and minimize security problems, another form of boundary adjustment, based on population size of local administrative units, was introduced in 1945/46. Accordingly, Wallo province was divided into 12 awrajas, 31 woredas and 179 Miketil woredas. The 12 awrajas of the region were Ambasel, Awsa, Borena, Dase Zurya, Lasta, Qallu, Raya Qobbo, Wadela Delanta, Wag, Worre Himeno, Worre Illu and Yajju (Perham, 1984: 463). Although the Miketil Woreda gizat was the lowest entity of the Takilay Gizat administration, it was again divided into Chiqqa, Daber and Qabelle (Gote) (Ministry of Interior (her after MIO) Yahager Gizat Minister Mesehet, PP.6-10). To carry out effective administration and maintain law and order in the, the provincial government of Wallo Teklay Gyzat had its own apparatuses. These were the prison, the police, Territorial Army and the court.

## **2. THE WALLO TEKLAY GIZAT PRISON (1941-1974)**

During the Imperial regime, the prison was an important institution for detaining convicted criminals. On 30 January 1944, the government introduced the general rules and regulations about prisons. The duties, powers and conduct of prison officers and warders as well as the obligation and right of prisoners were defined (Ministry of Interior’s Amharic Magazine, III, 1, 1957 E.C., p.20). In accordance with the proclamation, the organizational framework of the institution was laid down and it was put under the direction of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) (Negarit Gazeta, 30 January 1944). In Dese the principal jail was known as Yatikilay Gigatu Wahini Bet. Although the government issued the general rules of prison establishment in 1944, the jail had existence since a few years after the founding of the town (Ibid)

Initially it was situated north of the Aytayyaf Hall. During the Italian occupation, it was moved to the Robit area and then to the present location of the Wayzero Sihin School. It is said that in the early 1940s written request for amnesty was frequently sent from this jail to the Emperor through the Crown Prince. When the request of the prisoners was turned down they organized a conspiracy to escape from jail. Many of them were lastly killed and wounded as a result of a bloody confrontation with the warders. The jail was then transferred to Kombolcha (Abdu Muhammed, p.24).

Although one of the sources informed that the jail was directly transferred to Jame, when the construction of the Wayzero Sihin School began in the 1940s (Informants: Kasa Amede, Gebre Hiywot Kebede, Indale Tesfaye), informants said that it was first shifted to Kombolcha due to the above mentioned incident. The prison in Kombolcha was built by the Italians. After a while, it moved to Jame in the south outskirts of Dese (Abdu, pp.24 and 26).

At Jame, prisoners were exposed to severe living conditions and deprived of adequate water supply and food. Moreover, the prisoners were kept in very narrow rooms. The average size of the sleeping floor of each room was one square meter. The prison officers had brought water from Borkena River by cart, but water was dirty and insufficient for all prisoners. Poor sanitation, rampant communicable diseases, lack of medical treatment and the poor quality of food led to a high mortality rate (Informants: Kasa Amede, Gebre Hiywot Kebede, Indale Tesfaye).

This is evident from the annual report of the Wallo Tekilay Gizat Administrative Office (WTGAA) to the MOI in 1951 which mentions the death of 118 and the serious illness of 90 among the 580 prisoners (Informant: Yahale Gidelew; NAIE, Dr Rowter, medical doctor of Asfa Wosen Hospital to Daj. Mengesha Walde Giorgis, Letter Number (here after LN).91, dated 10 Tir 1943).

It was from this reason that the Jail was called "Dam Mellash" (avenger). This was another important factor that contributed to the increasing number of outlaws who opted for shiftinnent instead of going to prison (Institute of Ethiopian Studies (here after IES, Mengesha Walde Giorgis to the MoI, LN.26/3154, dated 10 Tir 1943).

As the living condition of the prisoners grew from bad to worse, the government decided in 1951 to construct a new jail at its present location near the Borkana River. It is mentioned that the Emperor denoted Birr 170,000 for the construction of the Jail (Informant: Yahale Gidelew).

In 1958, the jail was transferred from Jame. In comparison with the old jails, the new Wahini Bet had better facilities including administration office, a clinic, a store, an archive and a prisoner's room. The floor of each section of the jail was covered with lumber, and the prison accommodated 200 prisoners. Moreover, the new Wahni Bet had a big water tanker, five bath-rooms with boiler, one large and two medium –size latrines and electric light (National Archive and Library of Ethiopia (here after NALE, The CPO to Ministry of Finance (here after MoF), LN.2459/5, dated 10 Tir 1949. It was written order that instruct the ministry of the province to begin the project on the jail's construction at the cost of Birr 170,000. a copy of the order sent to the CPO on 18 Meskerem 1949). Archival sources of the period indicate that the jail was built on land with an area of 60,000sq.km (Ibid, AN.126.14, Daj. Mengesha Walde Giorgis to the Crown Prince, LN.5/8346, Hamile 1950).

Although the government attempted to improve the conditions of the prisoners, the shortage of food remained a problem from the beginning of the post liberation period. Until 1964/65, the daily ration value of a prisoner was 0.18cents. Then the value of the ration rose to 0.25 cents with no change in the quality and quantity of the ration (Ibid, Colonel Goli Zewde, officer of the Dase Wahni Betto Fitawrari Mammo Seyum, LN.534027/59, dated 5 Miyazia 1959).

There were similar problems in all Awrajja and Woreda jails (NALE, Ambaw Tefei, the secretary –general of the Wallo Teklay Gizat Administration Office ( here after WTGAO) to the Director of the Imperial Prison Administration of the MoI, LN.2865/41, dated 5 Miyazia 1951; Informant: Yahale Gidelew). While the number of prisoners increased, the budget for the daily ration of a prisoner in an Awrajja, Woreda and Miketil Woreda jail was 18, 15 and 10 cents, respectively (The reports of the WTGAO to the MoI in the period between 1941 and 1974 are found in the NALE, IES and SWAOA).

In the period between February 1966 and October 1967, for instance, the total numbers of prisoners in the jails of eleven Awrajjas reached 14,731 of whom 9632 were kept in the jail of Wag Awrajja. According to the report of the administration office of the Dase Wahni Bet, the prisoners in Wag had suffered from the reduction of ration between September 1967 and April 1968, and a similar problem existed in Warra Himeno Awrajja from February to May 1968 (NALE, AN.126.14, WTGAO to the CPO, LN.5/4727, dated 9 Megabit 1949).

Random Sample of Annual Ration Budget for Eleven Awrajja Prisoners in Birr( Ibid, Colonel Goli Zewde to the CPO, 2N.89/3465 160, dated18 Ginbot1960)

Awrajja	1956/1957	1958/1959	Total
Ambasel	1,074.40	1,104.00	2,178.40
Awsa	1,016.12	1,104.00	2,120.12
Borena	384.00	756.00	1,140.00
Dase Zuriya	96.20	350.00	446.20
Lasta	-	1,128.00	1,128.00
Qallu	629.26	1,104.00	1733.26
Wadela Dellanta	-	1,008.00	1,008.00
Warra Himeno	974.10	1,008.00	1,982.10
Warra Ilu	1,047.33	1,104.00	2,151.33
Wag	2,690.00	2,088.00	4,778.00
Iajju	1,500.00	1,128.00	2,628.00
Total	9,411.41	11,882.00	21,293.41

As shown in the above table, there was unequal an unfair allocation of money to the Awrajja jails, besides the regular problem of money deficit. If we take Borena, for example, it was one of the Awrajjas where large numbers of criminals, particularly murderers, were kept in its jail without sufficient rations (NALE, The CPO to the Mol.2459/15, dated10 Tir 1949.The WTGAO to the Director of Prison Administration of Mol, LN.2865/41, dated 5Miyazia1951).

A similar problem existed in the Dasse Wahni Bet where the average number of prisoners was eight hundred (Informants: Getaneh Tessema, Habtamu Beashah, Yahale Gidelew). Both informants and archival documents indicate that the ration was provided by a contractor who won the bid at a national level. Accordingly, Abdullah Yusuf won the contract until Assefa Dasta replaced him in 1961/1962. In 1963, Yebeherawi Migib Dregit Aksion Mahibar (meaning the National Food Corporation Union) won the bid (NALE, "Ya WalloTeqlay Gizat Wahni Betoch Astedadar to the WTGAO", LN.1328/52, dated), although it did not bring about a significant change to the life of the prisoners. The other problem in the jails of Wollo province was lack of adequate trained guards. Reports of the period mentioned that the jails of Miketil Waredas, Waradas, Awrajjas and the Taqlay Gizat Wahini Bet were guarded by the Nech Labash force until the late 1950s(Yakatit1952).

The Nech Labash was a Para-military force. It was later called the Territorial Army and one of the defense organizations that the Haile Selassie government established. Its formation was necessitated by the need to absorb and disarm the armed patriots living as outlaws after liberation. Indeed, in 1944, this traditional force was organized in Wallo after the Minister of Pen, Wolde Giyorgis Wolde Yohannes, sent a written order to the Mol for the recruitment of 5000 Nach Labash from the peasantry by the Governor General of the Province(Ibid, Bitwodod Zewde Gebre Hiywot, Minister of the Mol to Fit. Mamo Seyyum, Inderase of Wallo, LN. 12/13659, dated 25 Ginbot1962. Informant: Yahale Gidelew).



After its establishment, the Wollo Nach Labash apprehended bandits, put down rural disturbances and revolts, and guarded government offices, state treasuries and prisons, served as postmen and participated in the collection of taxes. The Nach Labash received grants of land known as Madaryia Maret (Informant: Yahale Gidelew).

In 1958, the Nach Labash developed in to the Wallo Territorial Army incorporating the four traditional military groups: Ali Zamach, Qacha Zamach, the "800" police and the Angach. Ali Zamach is associated with Ras Ali of Yajju, who fought many battles when he was in power in Gondar between 1784 and 1788 (Fekadu Begna, "The Wallo Territorial Army, 1943-1974", Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the Department of History, (Addis Ababa; Addis Ababa University, 1990), PP.49-51).

During that period, peasants from different areas of Wallo were recruited in to this army. Peasant soldiers mainly in Yajju were granted rist gult land for their military services. They and their descendants continued to render service in lieu of land tax on their rist land to the Ras and his successors. Those who possessed such land were known as Ali Zamach and now joined the Nach Labash when it was reorganized (Dessalegn, 1986:9).

Qacha Zamach was organized during the reign of Nigus Michael who recruited cavalry troops from the Wallo peasantry. These soldiers were granted rist land in Ambasel, Borena, Dase Zuriya and Wore Himeno. In lieu of the land tax; they participated in the Nigus and his successors' military operations (Fekadu, Informants: Bogale Teshome, Abate Assfaw).

The "800 police" called the Chaliya force, had been initially part of Ras Mekonnen's army in Harar which was later given to Asfa Wosen, the Crown Prince. In the province, it was named force number "800" since it consisted of 800 troops. Following the end of Italian rule in 1941, members of the force were regrouped and retained the name 800 police (Informants: Bogale Teshome, Abate Assfaw; Wolde Masqel Archive (here after WMA), Tamerat Dammen, governor of Yajju Awrajja to the WTGAO, LN.15712/5, HN.21/39, dated 5 Ginbot 1957).

The Angach force was first organized in 1949/1950. This army comprised of cohorts and servants of local notables such as Daj Hayle Selassie Abba Jabal, Daj Amade Ali, Daj Ayalew Birru and Daj Ali Gabrayyas, some of the servants of the Crown Prince in Dase and in Addis Ababa (Fekadu, pp. 50 and 51; Informants: Bogale Teshome, Abate Assfaw).

The Angach force was always responsible for guarding the Dase palace and the royal stable and, served as a bodyguard for Asfa Wosen whenever he stayed in the province. They were granted maderiya, mostly in Yajju and Ambasel (Informants: Abate Assfaw).

In Wallo, Territorials performed guard duty generally for two months, the maximum being four months in a year (Fekadu, P.52). The Territorials received training annually at Hote, Jawuha (a village town 240 Km along the Addis Ababa - Dasse road) and in Kutabor, 30 Km to the north of Dase (Ibid; NALE, An.092.41, Belay Mersha, Director of the Wtgo the chief commander of the Wallo Territorial Army. The heading of the letter reads "Sile Nech Lebash Wotaderoch Asteddader Innazab Tibbaqa Sira Yatesete yawest Daneb", LN.3259/50, dated 9 Hidar 1944).

According to an informant, it was only after October 1964 that the provincial government began the program of training Wahni police at Hote, Robit and Tita for a period from three to six months. The program was directed by well experienced policemen particularly an officer of the Dasse Wahni bet named Hamsa Aleqa Amare Shifaw. The training was given only to those recruited from the Awrajjas (by which the government enlisted them in place of tired and retired Nach Labashes). The basic requirement was the ability to read and write, complete physical fitness, and a height of one meter and seventy-five centimetres (NALE, AN.24817. It was discussed at a meeting called by Daj Solomon Abereha, Inderasse of the province, on 9 Meskerm 1964; Informant: Getaneh Tessema

Although the government opened the training school, the number of recruits as well as graduates was too small to solve the problem of guarding the prisons. The total number of the first trainees, for example, was 30 but this figure fell in 1974. At the Dasse Wahni bet 30 Territorials, who had been brought from all Awrajjas of the province,

were assigned to guard duties( 42. It is said that while they engaged in such activities, the Nach Labash secretly promised to help the criminals escape from prison. Due to this, the prison officers came up with the idea of chaining all prisoners(Ibid; NALE, Ya WalloTeqlay Gizat Wahni Betoch Astedadar to the WTGAO, LN.1328/52, dated 26 Yekatit 1952.

During the 1940s and 1950s, many of the criminals were sentenced to death. As reports of the time indicate, between 1949 and 1952, among the 2241 prisoners of the Dase Wahini Bet, 352 received the death sentence while 1534 were sentenced to life imprisonment (IES, AN.A1/023, The WTGAO to the Mol, LN.26/3579, dated 9 Magabit 1944, and LN.26/3151, dated 10 Tir 1943. The procedure of adjudication that lengthened the appointment of criminal cases from an average of twenty to thirty times said to have created strong hatred of the prisoners to the government. This is said to be another factor for the growing number of criminals who opted for shifitinat rather than accepting the rule of law (NALE, Ya WalloTeqlay GizatWahni Betoch Astedadar to the WTGAO", LN324/15, dated 21 Meskerm 1949; Informant: Yahale Gidelew, Getaneh Tessema).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The prison had served as symbol of royal absolutism where prisoners were exposed to miserable and inhuman living conditions (i.e. their sufferings from inadequate ration, hunger, sanitation problems, suffocation, torture, unjust legal proceedings and corrupt jurists).

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South Wallo Administrative Office Archive (here after SWAOA, The Crown Prince to Qagnazmach SWAOA, A letter written from the Crown Prince's Office (here after CPO) to Liqe Mkwas Abegaz, FN.260/33.1933E.C.

The reports of the WTGAO to the Mol in the period between 1941 and 1974 are found in the NALE, IES and SWAOA.

### List of Informants

Informants: Bogale Teshome, Abate Assfaw.

Informant: Yahale Gidelew

Informant: Yahale Gidelew; NAIE, Dr Rowter, medical doctor of Asfa Wosen Hospital to Daj. Mengesha Walde Giorgis, Letter Number (here after LN).91, dated 10 Tir 1943

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