

Review

Prophets and prophecy as a response to crises: Prophet Esa in traditional religion of Wolaitta (1920-1928)

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This article explores the socio-political and economic context of Prophets and prophecy in Wolaitta, with specific reference to the Prophet Esa and his prophecy, which emerged in the context of traditional religions of Wolaitta, from 1920 to 1928. The article examines how the prevalence of crisis related to socio-political and economic influence, and the factors that determine who has access to such influence, can impact on perceptions of 'spiritual insecurity' in African communities. Often such perceptions and insecurities are expressed in prophetic terms. The article argues that prophets and prophecy is a manifestation of such expressions of socio-political and economic insecurities, as it does not occur in a vacuum but can be located in a socio-political and economic context. In this regard, the conquest of Wolaitta by Menilek's force in 1894 and the subsequent domination of the northerners resulted in the prevalence of series of socio-political and economic crisis in the area. After conquest, the oppressive social system known as neftegna-gebbar system was institutionalized in the area, leading to existence of maladministration, social inequality and injustice and economic exploitation. The Orthodox Church was serving as instrument to maintain such oppressive system. The infectious disease of the 1920s worsened the situation. Internally their traditional religion failed to be responsive to such crises, and also the people have been exploited by their religious functionaries. It was in this socio-political and economic context that Prophet Esa emerged and most of his prophetic and reformist messages are direct responses to the crisis. The arguments raised in the article are based on the author's critical engagement with relevant primary and secondary sources. The former includes information obtained from the systematic interviewing of knowledgeable individuals, while the latter consists of books, articles and thesis. These sources are critically examined and carefully cross-checked for their reliability.

Key words: Prophets, prophecy, Esa, traditional religion, Wolaitta.

INTRODUCTION

Among indigenous societies in many regions of the world, the phenomenon, "prophet movement" emerged

in a certain socio-political and economic context. East Africa, including Ethiopia, is not exceptional to such

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kind of phenomenon. Eastern Africa has a long history of prophetic movements and cults, some linked to indigenous or "traditional" deities and spirits, some to Christianity, and others to Islam. These movements were reported from the earliest periods of colonial administration and missionary endeavor. Some were recognized as being efforts to overcome drought, famine, and other natural disasters; others were considered to be anti-European, often as atavistic manifestations of "heathen superstition," and as destructive of the "order" brought about by colonial administrations and therefore to be put down by force. It has often been held that these movements were early examples of "resistance" to colonial overrule, but many were in existence long before the Europeans arrived. Although some have indeed been part of resistance movements, all have been more than mere responses to colonial rule and have been concerned also with divisions and conflicts within and between local societies and their various elite and commoner groups (Kustenbauder, 2008; Isichei, 1995).

This indicates that prophets and prophecy play a big role in the religious life of Africa. And, before the advent of Christianity, Prophets 'had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress' in African traditional religious settings. The crises that led to circumstances of social stress can better understood through analysis of the socio-political and economic context of a certain society. This is because the socio-political and economic influence, and the factors that determine who has access to such influence, can impact on perceptions of 'spiritual insecurity' in African communities. Often such perceptions and insecurities are expressed in prophetic terms. However, the socio-political and economic contexts that influence prophetic messages differ from region to region and also differ in historical time and space. Thus, any attempt to make historical sense of prophet movements and their effects on communities in Ethiopia has to be approached from a perspective that takes the socio-political and economic context of Ethiopian society, in different historical time and space, into account.

In this regard, the people of Southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, have faced a series of socio-economic and political crises. Historically, the most significant event was the conquest by the Ethiopian Empire in the 1894, equated by the Wolaitta to the Amhara or *Nefteгна*. This event is equated by some scholars as colonization. As a result of the conquest, the people of southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, were forcefully 'incorporated' into the quasi-feudal political-economic structure of Abyssinia. In the Wolaitta story, the conquest was described as the root of all evil. The result of invasion and conquest was: subjection to the *gabbar* system and linked with this economic exploitation and oppression; the abduction (e.g. when new Amharic governors were appointed) of innumerable people as slaves, servants or carriers, only a few of

whom were able to return; famine, disease and a growing sense of hopelessness and resignation, engendered by a total absence of justice. These things not only caused the number of the local population to shrink but shook their whole culture to its roots (Donham, 1986).

Notwithstanding this empirical situation, the academic attention accorded to this aspect of Ethiopian history is staggering. This is particularly the case regarding the emergence of prophetic movements in traditional religion as a response to crisis. However, this is not to deny that voluminous amount of literature has been produced on specific religious institutions, mostly by the institutions themselves, some by the state and some by social scientists. But what is missing in the previous work is an adequate relational analysis of the impact of crisis in the making of prophetic movement. Review of the literature of the past 25 years on the relationship between Christianity and African religious traditions by Meyer (2004: 455) clearly illustrates the gap on the issue.

Moreover, bibliography can illustrate the gap. Particularly Abink (2016) offers important installment of a scholarly bibliography in social science and history on Ethiopia and Eritrea. This and other volumes (see Heery, 2004) contain the titles that were gathered in the course of other research work and writing over the past years. While many of scholarly works that appear in the index of religious studies are concerned with Christianity and Islam, even those works that are dealing with traditional religion remain silent on the role of religious leaders in time of social stress. Moreover, almost all of research works that deal with traditional religion are carried out by anthropologists and other social scientist than historians. Thus, they do not show the changes and continuities in traditional religion of a certain society through time and space. This gap is particularly glaring as far as the emergence of prophetic movements in traditional religion in time of certain social stress is concerned. None of the scholarly works in the bibliographic lists appear with the title related to prophetic movements either in Wolaitta or Ethiopia at large. This indicates that scholarly works give little attention regarding the emergence of prophetic movements in the context of traditional religion of Ethiopia in general and Wolaitta in particular. Of course there are literature dealing with traditional and other universalistic religion in Wolaitta. A few of these studies mention prophet Esa and his reformist ideas in passing, and do not provide the detail information; Hitherto, there have been misrepresentations in the discussions with regard to Esa's teaching (Balisky, 1997). Moreover, almost all of them were monographs and remain inaccessible for scholars.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and evaluate how far and to what extent the prevalence of certain crises and the resultant social stress shape the prophets and prophecy within the context of traditional

religion. It did so by exploring the socio-political and economic context of prophets and prophecy in Wolaitta, with specific reference to the Prophet Esa and his prophecy. A brief survey of the context of my scope of study will therefore suffice for understanding the impact of crisis in the making of prophetic movement. The methodology employed includes the close examination of people's oral tradition through the systematic interviewing of resourceful informants to supplement the available literature. Their testimonies were carefully cross-checked and systematically analyzed through qualitative research methods.

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF WOLAITTA

It is essential to know, first of all, the religious background of Wolaitta because practically all the crises that the people of Wolaitta encounter, as every traditional society, and solution to the crises have been ingrained in the people elements of traditional religion. They interpret it in terms of their religious world view. And, just like other African traditional society, Wolaitta people are followers of traditional religion before the advent of Christianity and other universalistic religions.

As far as Wolaitta religious worldview is concerned, the belief in spirits and other natural objects dominates their daily life. Balisky (1997:32) said that in the Wolaitta worldview the spirits are real in everyday experience as natural objects are. This Wolaitta sacred worldview articulates a physical and spiritualized universe and does not distinguish one from the other. Also, the "spiritual beings" can change into "physical beings" in order to interact with the human being.

The Wolaitta believe that *alame* (world) did not come into existence of its own volition but was created or brought into by somebody known as *medhaga* (Eternal creator). For Wolaitta people the concept of Supreme Being whom they call *Saluwa Tossa* or sky God occupies an important place in their everyday life. This is revealed in their daily conversation proverbs like *Tossi Gikko* (if *Tossa* so willed), *Tossi Eres* (*Tossa* knows everything) etc. Whenever a group of people or an individual plan to do something and agree on the details, the saying *Tossa sheno Gido* (if *Tossa* so wished) or *Tossi maddiko* (if *Tossa* helped) follows. These sayings appear seemingly in daily conversations. Informants claim that He is equivalent to the God of Christians and Allah of Muslims.¹ Indeed, this name is used now by almost all religions in Wolaitta. The Christians especially adopted the old name, *Tossa*, and used it in the *Wolaitigna* (Wolaitta language) version of Jesus Christ or as an equivalent to Jesus Christ. Thus, it is logical to accept the general assumption that *Tossa* must be old in this society, i.e. the name and the worship of this God is age-old.

However, in the Wolaitta religious view, apart from the belief in the existence of *Tossa*, there is the belief that

there are of *ayana* (lesser divinities or deities), who are believed to be intermediaries between God and man. *Ayana* are easily approachable.

Nevertheless, such kind of contradiction also exists in traditional religion of other African countries (Lambek, 2000; Kapferer, 1997). The African, and for that matter the Wolaitta of Ethiopia, have *ayana* of different realms of influence and fall into groups. The *ayana* (deities) are the representatives of God on earth. The *ayana* are there to receive offerings and sacrifices on behalf of God. *Ayana* in Wolaitta concept carry out petitions to God and at the same time interpret God as well as the ancestors to the people. The Wolaitta view their *ayana* as means to an end. Their popularity waxes or wanes if they are responsive or unresponsive to human demands.

Moreover, just like in other African countries, it is notable that before the advent of Christianity in Wolaitta, there were personalities who functioned under superhuman and supernatural influences as seers, diviners, medicine-men in African traditional religious settings. And Prophets 'had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress' in African traditional religious settings. Onunwa (1990) observed that, prophets occupy important position in African traditional religion just as priests. Prophets had appeared in the past particularly in circumstances of social stress. Since the history of the traditional religion has not been written, it has not been possible to record the development and rules of the prophetic ministry in the faith. A reconstruction of the ministry of prophecy in the traditional religion may not necessarily fit into the biblical or Islamic concepts and understanding of prophecy (P. 58).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF WOLAITTA

Overview of socio-political and economic context of Wolaitta before Conquest

To clearly understand the events that led to crisis in the 20th century and the subsequent emergence of Esa's prophecy, providing historical background of Wolaitta is important. Wolaitta is a socio-political entity situated on the Southern part of Ethiopia, sharing borders with Gamo Gofa to the west, Hadiya and Arsi to the east, Sidama to the south and Kambata to the North. The history of Wolaitta, with its own unique civilization, is very old.

The people of Wolaitta developed a state structure between the 12th and 13th centuries through a complex process that included among other immigration and integration. Until the advent of Wolaitamallas, who are said to have established organized administration, the pre-historic inhabitants of Wolaitta were alleged to be ethnically of Badia, Badigadala and Arujjia origin. In the course of time their ranks got swollen with the arrival of

migrants from different parts of the Horn of Africa. Some hold that there were three dynasties. However, the commonly held view is that the Wolaitta state had two dynasties; the first dynasty flourished under the name of Wolaitta-Malla which ruled until 15th century. The second dynasty that ousted the former emerged around 1500 under the name of Tigre. Tigre dynasty remained in power until the destruction of Wolaitta as kingdom by Abssynian force under the leadership of Menilek in 1894. Until the conquest in 1894, the kingdom had highly developed system of government with a constitutional monarchy at its head having the Balimola or the National Council. The Balimola had two houses. The first house had Eight Members which was known as the Hospun Balimola (Eight Balimola) with four years term in office, whereas the second house had 54 members which was known as Ishatamane Oydu Balimola (54 Barimola) with two years term in office. Alaro (1993) argues that "the system had executive, legislative and judiciary apparatus in which all offices were held through election." Thus, the political structure of Wolaitta shows that the kingdom was very organized. Captain Stigand (1969), who visited Wolaitta in the first decade of 20th century, illuminates the advancement of the people as, "The Wollamu [Wolaitta] appear to have reached a very advanced state of civilization for an African tribe, until just lately, entirely cut off from the outer world." The extent that the Wolaitta, with traditional weapon, defended Abyssinian army under Menilek, which was armed with modern weapon (sponsored by Europeans) for years also indicate how much Wolaitta state had sophisticated and organized political entity.

Wolaitta had also well organized and self-sufficient economy; agriculture is the main-stay of economy followed by trade and craft technology. By using plough technology, the people of Wolaitta produced variety of crops which is more than enough to feed the whole people of the state. With regard to trade three items of currency were put into use in Wolaitta- the *shaluwa*, the *Karetta* and the *Marchuwa*; *Shaluwa* was a kind of thread spun by women. *Karetta* was "a thread like material but dyed in different colours" and the *Marchuwa* was a thin iron bar and "was used for no other purpose but buying and selling". Stigand (1969) notes that, They possess money and hold markets (great steps in civilization and commerce)." Scholarly and travel accounts doubtlessly mention that Wolaitta was reputed for being a land of plenty, with rich fertile lands and evergreen mountains with a number of natural and cultural heritages. Indeed critical scrutiny of the motives and results of Menilek's conquest of Wolaitta provide reasonable justifications for resourcefulness of the region. One of the widely accepted scholarly interpretations offered to explain Menilek's motives for the belligerence is the fertility of the land of Wolaitta. They explain that there was a famine during 1888-1892 in northern Ethiopia and the fertile land of

Wolaitta attracted Menelik as a source of food supply (Henze, 2000). Moreover, the confiscation and plundering carried out by Menilek and his army after conquering Wolaitta in 1894 is also clear manifestation of the prosperity of Wolaitta. Sources indicate that Menilek and his army carried away 36,000 heads of animals to Addis Abeba without counting those slaughtered during the occupation of Wolaitta and the other goods plundered; the conquerors took away anything which seemed valuable. French journalist, Gaston Vanderheyem, who escorted Menilek in 1894 on his expedition to Wolaitta was the first to give a vivid account of the various aspect of Wolaitta; and all of his account clearly indicates the prosperity of Wolaitta (Alaro, 1993).

Thus, before 19th century, the Kingdom of Wolaitta had a highly developed and organized socio-economic and political system. The 19th century, however, brought alien rule to Wolaitta, destroying the age old state and its political system. The conquest and its aftermath will be discussed briefly below.

The conquest of Wolaitta by Abssynians In 1894 and the ensuing deep crises

As explained earlier, the Wolaitta Kingdom, with its well developed and organized structure, maintained its independent existence for centuries. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian Empire state under Menilek destroyed such a developed and organized kingdom and its structure. Before the drama of final campaign of conquest in 1894, the Wolaitta resistance and Menlikes's aggression continued for a number of years.

According to informants, Menelik sent five successive expeditions led by his war generals from 1887 to 1894 but failed to defeat the Wolaittans.ⁱⁱ However, other sources argue that the first assault against Wolaitta began in 1890 and the battle which decided the fate of Wolaitta was fought from December 1 - 16, 1894, which was one of the bloodiest massacres in Menelik's conquest. According to Zewde (2002), the war between Tona and Menelik was "one of the bloodiest campaigns of the whole process of expansion". Prouty (1986) also expressed her dismay of conquest as, "... Menelik's Christianizing-colonizing objective was achieved but at a terrible cost."

Thus the last quarter of the 19th century was a period of dramatic political and historical importance for the peoples of the Horn as elsewhere in Africa, because of the international imperialism and Abssynian feudal colonialism. The Abssynian kingdom under Menelik was armed and directly or indirectly encouraged by European colonial powers in their own interests, and in its efforts of colonial partition, at the expense of southern populations, including Wolaitta.

The nature of conquest and making of the empire state is considered as act of "feudal military colonialism" (Cerulli, 1956; Alaro, 1993; Chiatti, 1984).

Indeed the most agonizing aspect of Wolaitta conquest is that they were massively massacred and mutilated by the Abssynian army who combined traditional barbarous practices of castration and mutilation of their enemy and superior firepower. For this reason, the physical, moral, and psychological damage done by Menelik to his colonial subjects seem to have been worsed than that of other colonial powers in the Horn of Africa. One could simply compare human and material lossesⁱⁱⁱ, to mention only a few, in the war against the Wolaitta in 1894 with other contemporary colonial wars and battles in the region. The state expropriated almost all the Wolaitta land which it distributed to soldiers, to the Church, officials and the nobility. In other words, the Wolaitta lost a considerable number of their population, their property (cattle), and following their defeat in 1894, their independence, dignity and land, their representative institutions were destroyed and their culture marginalized.

After the conquest of the kingdom of Wolaitta, the new military authorities partitioned the area into 44 military governors, the garrison center being at Soddo. They possessed the land, the labour, and the politics which were maintained by the two main machines of empire building, the armed settlers (*neftegnas*), who were Orthodox Christian group, and the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The local people were assigned to each of the land owners as *gebbars* (a system of servitude imposed by victors over the vanquished). Thus the most significant manifestation of *nefteggna* power in Wolaitta was the initial expropriation and continuous alienation of land. It gave rise to profound resentment among the people of Wolaitta. '*Minile nu bitta Amaraw emidi nuna qasi kafuwaw emis*', literally, 'Menilek gave the land to the Amhara, and other people to the birds', laments a Wolaitta saying, meaning that the loss of their land reduced other people to corpses to be eaten by birds. The hateful exactions imposed by officials and landlords have inspired numerous sayings which depict the Amhara, with remarkable unanimity, as grasping and devious. According to Wolaitta, '*Amarayne Wangirelloy dichibenna dorssa qoddes*', means 'the Amhara and the wolf count sheep they haven't raised'. Moreover, the people of Wolaitta have felt the weight not only of the power vested formally in the officials, but of the entire Orthodox Christian group (*neftegnas*) settled in their land- all of whom have considered themselves as representatives of the ruling power. Sayings that indicate the abuse of such power, the Wolaitta people felt, are easy to obtain; for instance, one of Wolaitta proverb says, '*Asa wora Amarappe daruwa mitta qanxxa Wolaittay morancha getettes*', 'a Wolaitta who has cut a tree is guiltier than an Amhara who had killed a man.'^{iv}

In addition to *neftegnas*, Orthodox Christianity is deeply involved in the process of empire building (Aspen, 2001). It was as an ideological companion of this 'reunification' that Orthodox Christianity as known

today reached most parts of southern Ethiopia, including Wolaitta, in the late 19th century. It was one of what Donham (1986) identifies as the three principal components of Abyssinianisation of southern Ethiopia:^v "The expansion of Orthodox Christianity was the last aspect of the tripartite process of Abyssinianisation, and like the ability to speak Amharic; it was contradictory in class character: that is, it at once legitimized Abyssinian society and its traditional inequalities and undermined the superexploitation that took place in the peripheries" (Donham, 1986: 11).

For most people in southern Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget, especially when nothing is done on the side of the Church to redress this basic issue of morality. Since religion cannot be separated from concrete history, both material and spiritual, of real, historic people (Swi Werblowsky, 2004), it is not unexpected that the early 20th century prophetic movements in the traditional religious landscape of Wolaitta and southern part of Ethiopia at large bears the mark of this historical processes. The historical origins of Esa's prophetic movements in the context of traditional religious which influenced the orthodox Christian group, including their ideal of religiosity and their structural position vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the state is result of crises.

A discussion of the socio-political and economic consequences of the Abssynian colonial system is beyond the scope of this article; but I hope that this brief article clearly demonstrates the socio-political and economic context of Wolaitta after the Abssynian conquest that influenced prophet Esa and his prophesy. Indeed, the 20th century as well as present political conflict, contradiction, and crises can be traced to this period, the last decade of the 19th Century.

Continuation of crisis: Prophet Esa and his messages, 1920-1928

According to Balisky (1997), there are two forces that contribute to the rise of prophets. Externally, the prevalence of certain crises within the given society shapes the prophet's message. Secondly, "there is an inner spiritual force that impels the prophet which could be called 'divine inspiration'." He concludes that, in the case of Esa, it was the external factor that shaped his teaching, the social and political factors which were shaping southern Ethiopian culture since 1890s.

Other scholars (Goil, 2001; Leclerc, 2006) argue that prophetic movements can be interpreted as solutions to two kinds of issues faced by native societies: one, external, referring to the disorganizing and de-structuring effects of contacts with nonnative societies. Acceptance of prophetic messages offers moral reform, which enables native peoples to control crises and

regain their integrity vis-à-vis intruders. The other problem is internal, having to do with dilemmas inherent to cosmologies and inherited from primordial times; for example, the challenges of harnessing dangerous shamanic power for the purposes of social reproduction. Clearly, explanations may draw equally on both hypotheses as far as a prophetic movement of Esa is concerned. Externally, Esa's prophesy and reformist ideas were evolved as a response to disruption and destruction of social structure by Abssynians (nonnative) after conquest; the natives were socially and economically harassed by the Northerners. Internally, the dilemmas inherent to the traditional religious institutions and functionaries that seems unresponsive and exploitative.

Firstly, as explained earlier, a series of crises that the people of Wolaitta faced in the 20th century and even at present, can be traced to the period of conquest in the last decade of the 19th Century. The conquest of the Wolaitta by the northern imperial armies in 1894 led to their forced inclusion in a feudalist social structure, in the most brutal way where Wolaittans were massively massacred and mutilated by the Abssynian army who combined traditional barbarous practices of castration and mutilation; causing, the physical, moral, and psychological damage. The agonies and atrocities, once started in time of conquest, had continued (even increasing in magnitude) in the periods after conquest due to the institutionalization of a social system where Orthodox Church, soldiers and settlers had the right to claim land and extensive labor-services from the vanquished. Most Wolaitta became virtual serfs as a result of what was known in Amharic as the *gabbar*-system (*neftegna-gebbar* system). In addition, many thousands were carried away as slaves to the north by traders and bandits, as well as by departing governors and administrators. The ensuing deep crisis in the socio-economic system meant that the traditional structure of kingdom was virtually destroyed since their power and prestige were broken by the new rulers. The frequent raids by the northern settlers for cattle and people led to the growing disruption of social relations in the area as a whole. The Wolaitta of today still speak about the traumas of conquest, slavery, economic exploitation, and lack of justice, which led to the erosion of so much of their culture. The Orthodox Church was served as instrument of maintaining such oppressive system; for the Wolaitta people, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget. On the other hand, the traditional religion of Wolaitta failed to be responsive to such situation though the Wolaitta people continued to worship numerous spirits and also practitioners. Malevolent spirits such as *talahiya*, were highly feared by the people of Wolaitta and sacrifices were offered so as to appease them and thereby to escape from the harm they bring to mankind. Particularly, the *talahiya* or

Satan which was assumed to be introduced to Wolaitta after Menelik's conquest of the area in 1894 was highly feared and needs immeasurable offerings. Finally, the infectious disease which affected the people and its cattle, in the 1920, is also worsened the situation.

It was during this time that prophet Esa emerged. Thus, it could well be that prophet Esa felt burdened for his compatriots. They were socially and economically harassed by the Northerners. And they were being exploited by their religious functionaries. Esa's burden was translated in to action. As a response to domination by non-native forces Esa promised the people that God would help them to liberate their land from the invading force. Esa's teaching has got political dimension as he taught the people about the expulsion of the Northern settlers from their motherland. This was a threat to the officials as it might invoke the indigenous people against the new comers.

In addition to this, the reforms that he brought into the traditional religion can be analyzed from two angles; as a reaction to the view of Orthodox Church, and as a solution to reduce the elements of traditional religion that burdened the local people. Thus, he adopted some aspect from Orthodox Christianity, and integrated it into the traditional religion so as to bring a significant reform on it. In so doing they reacted to the view of Orthodox clergy and responded to Amhara domination. Of course, the rise and rapid expansion of the teaching of Esa, which was within the context of the primal religion of the south, indicate that the people of Wolaitta found little attraction to Orthodox Christianity. As explained earlier, for most people in Southern Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church's close association with and ideological support of the feudal empire that committed one of the worst human atrocities is not easy to forget, especially when nothing is done on the side of the church to redress this basic issue of morality. In Wolaitta and southern Ethiopia at large considerations such as these provide a substantial part of the explanation for the success of Esa's prophetic and reformist messages, which could be characterized as 'Wolaitta's revolutionary' response to Abssynians and Orthodox Church. He fought for ethnic equality^{vi}, social justice, land reform, and freedom in most cases favoring the native people. Consequently, the people began to call him *Esa Laliya*.^{vii} Whatever its failings maybe viewed from a current perspective, Esa Laliya has offered the peoples of Wolaitta an alternative route to meaning, identity and even resistance to power in one of the darkest times of their history. Consequently, his messages remained the most dominant and popular even after he was wiped out by *neftegna* officials and in Wolaitta area, his prophesy and reformist messages are widely remembered by the people at present.

Another reform ideas of Esa was directed towards ways of reducing some elements of traditional religion that burdened the local people; letting the people to abandon the worship of various spirits and to worship

only *Tossa*, God. He was also introduced new ritual practice, like teaching the people to seek mercy by offering honey in place of animal sacrifices. In this regard he enabled the people to ascertain the omnipresence of *Tossa* among the ordinary Wolaitta people, and enabled them to worship *Tossa* together in an open field called as *Dubusha*. In effect the family members went to *Dubusha* especially on one day of the week, Sunday. There, the fathers were to pray *Tossa*. In praying he would dip his fingers in honey and flick it towards the sky, symbolizing that his prayer were directed to God/ *Tossa*, not to Satan. On the other hand, mothers pray to *Marama* or to St. Mary. In addition to this, Esa insisted that people should fast on Friday. Some literatures as well as my informants tend to explain that Esa taught the principles which are more or less similar to the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament (Decalogue).^{viii}

In fact, Esa's teaching was loved, and as his message spread, his following increased in Wolaitta and in other Omotic speaking areas. Consequently, the songs announcing the worship of *Tossa* and denouncing other spirits were created in the Wolaitta language. He "stirred up the consciousness of many people and left a lasting impression on their heart." One of the songs which the people still remember is the following.

Mittawu goynoppa, shuchawu goynoppa
sharechuwa kalloppa, Gamasheras yarshoppa
Nena Medhdha Xossa xalla amana
A xalalay nena fatana madana.^{ix}

The above songs' literary translated as follows:

Do not worship trees, do not worship stone
 Do not follow the magician/diviner, do not make
 sacrifices to *Gamashera*. But believe only in *Tossa* who
 created you.
 It is only He who could save you

In the final analysis, even though Esa tried to reform the existing traditional religion by adopting some aspects of the universalistic religion, he did not make radical changes within the traditional religion for the fear of identity crises. Indeed there is an incredible amount of innovation and syncretism in its practice today, even drawing on Christianity and Islam. But scholars also note that both Christianity and Islam have incorporated some aspects of traditional religion (see Aspen, 2001; Braukämper, 2002). Esa's teaching has got political dimension as he taught the people about the expulsion of the Northern settlers from their motherland; it was considered as a threat to the officials as it might invoke the indigenous people against the new comers. Because of this Esa was imprisoned by the provincial governor, Dejazmach Habte Giyorgis, and taken to Addis Ababa. He was died a little before the advent of the missionaries in 1928. Therefore, this indicates the substantial influence of Esa's teaching even in the

politics.

CONCLUSION

The commitment religion and religious prophets engender, and its impact on people's lives, as shown in the proceeding analysis, reconfirm that religion and religious prophets constitute an extraordinarily meaningful act. However, this might mean a range of different things for different people. But what seems to be common is that religious ideologies do what ideologies generally do: they give meaning to the dynamics of existence but also form an orienting aspect of the way human beings move in their worlds (Kapferer, 1997). Many people employ them to make sense of difficult situations and experiences. In the Wolaittan case, it can be noted that before historical circumstances brought the aggressively competing forms of world religions, the prophets of indigenous religious order emerged in time of crises and circumstances of social stress and, redirect their society in the context of the indigenous religious practices. But at present, the existence of prophets in traditional religion remain unrecognized and even the practitioners of traditional religion are demonized by the new ideologies of universalistic religion.

Like most prophetic movements, Esa's prophetic messages had appeared in circumstances of social stress. The event that led to a series of crises, and circumstances of social stress in Wolaitta occurred in the last decade of 19th century. The conquest of the Wolaitta by the northern imperial armies in 1894 led to the misery of the people, ensuing deep and series crisis in the 20th century. The Wolaitta of today still speak about the traumas of conquest, slavery, economic exploitation, and lack of justice, which led to the erosion of so much of their culture. The infectious disease which affected the people and its cattle, in the 1920, also worsened the situation. By 1920s the society of Wolaitta had become demoralized and hopeless. The Wolaitta lacked pride of their identity because much of their own societal structure was replaced by that of the Northerners (Orthodox Christian group), who were harassing the local people socially and economically. Orthodox Church was served as instrument of maintaining such oppressive system. On the other hand, their traditional religious system was no longer functioned; they were being exploited by their religious functionaries.

It was during this time that prophet Esa emerged as he felt burdened for his compatriots. Esa's burden was translated in to action. Esa's prophetic and reformist messages could be characterized as 'Wolaitta's revolutionary' response to reactionary Abyssinians and Orthodox Church and the northerners/*neftegnas*. He fought for ethnic equality, social justice, land reform, and freedom in most cases favoring the native people. Esa Laliya has offered the peoples of Wolaitta an

alternative route to meaning, identity and even resistance to power in one of the darkest times of their history. Consequently, his messages remained the most dominant and popular even after he was wiped out by *neftegna* officials and in Wolaitta area, his prophesy and reformist messages are widely remembered by the people at present. Internally Esa brought elements of reform to the traditional religion to make it responsive to the then situation and also to save the people who were being exploited by their religious functionaries.

Finally, Esa was quilted by the politicians. The reason why the prophetic messages of Esa are so admonished and suppressed is basically because they enabled Wolaitta people refuse to evacuate the cultural space desired by the nonnative ideologies. I then conclude that prophecy of Esa in the context of traditional religion here, as is the case in many other places in the world, is not just a private matter of spirituality, but also a political act mediating historically constituted contests for power and resistances involved therein. Since the written information about Esa was too scanty to write the comprehensive history, I would like to suggest that further research should be made before the last remaining oral witnesses vanish.

Conflict of Interests

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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ⁱ Informants: Ato Tadesse Tantu and Ato Abraham Tanga, interviewed on May 04, 2010, Wolayta Soddo, and Balisky, pp. 64, 74.

ⁱⁱ Informants: Ato Bekele Matafa, interviewed on May 02, 2010, Delbo (Wolayta); Ato Merikine Maja, Ato Anjulo Bassa and Ato Mazgana Manja, interviewed on May 04, 2010, Ottona(Wolayta).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is estimated that those who killed or wounded in Wolaitta numbered 118,987 (Prouty, 1986; Alaro,1993).

^{iv} Informants: Ato Tajura Bergene, Ato Alagaw Anja and Ato Churqo Bariso, interviewed on May 03, 2010, Zalashasha(Wolayta)

^v The other two being the spread of the rist system of land tenure and the adoption of the Amharic language.

^{vi} Esa preached certain moral values like universal brotherhood and love for mankind regardless of their social and economic status. In this regard he preached equality of human beings to win the local people against the privileged classes like northern governors and neftegnas. Indeed, this message had psychological implication too since it enabled the majority of Wolaitta people, who have been undermined and felt inferior position due to racist attitude of Amhara officials and settlers, to regain at least a feeling of equality.

^{vii} the one who releases to freedom; Ato Wana Wagesho and Ato Hailemickael Kuke, interviewed on May 01, 2010, Wolayta Soddo

^{viii} These were: Do not believe in other spirits except Tossa; Do not steal; Do not kill; Do not lie; Do not commit adultery; Love your enemies; Be friend with each other and live in peace; Do not argue with your neighbor; Do not create divisions among yourselves; Prefer humanity to the clan pride

^{ix} Informant: Ato Bibiso Bico, interviewed on May 05, 2010, Humbo (Wolayta).