CHAPTER 4

The Arsi Oromo Resistance against Ethiopian Imperial Conquest (1880–1900)

Introduction

If a word could summarize modern Arsi Oromo history it would be resistance, which includes military, political and cultural. The Arsi Oromo stood up in unison against the Shoan expanding army by mobilizing all their material and human resources for more than 10 years (1882–1892). This happened in two phases: 1882–1886 in northern Arsi (Dide’a) and 1888–1892 in southern Arsi (Bale). The Arsi Oromo made a collective and conscious decision to form an armed resistance against their invaders and paid a heavy price in order to maintain their independence. Their resistance did not end with their military defeat; they continued to resist assimilation and Amharization through conversion to Islam which was considered an anti-establishment religion in Ethiopia. Their mass conversion to Islam appeared to be a reaction to their military subjugation and the ensuing colonial political economy and policy of the Ethiopian Empire. In this chapter we will analyze in detail Menelik’s war of conquest of Arsi Oromo country which ended the era of sovereign existence and heralded a new chapter in their political and economic life.

Several scholars and the official chronicler, Gabre Selassie,1 and the historiographer Asma Giyorgis2 have written about the war against the Arsi in an extremely partial way, from the perspective of the ruling classes. Also, perhaps they were not aware of the details of a decade-long war which took place in every corner of this vast Oromo country. These writers, as many others who followed them, relegated the decade-long history to a few paragraphs or pages.

1 Gabre Selassie, La chronique de Menenlik II, Rois des Rois d’Ethiopie traduit par Tesfa Selassie publiée et annotée par Maurice de Copet, Paris, Librairie Orientale et Américaine (1930, 1932), 2 tomes. In this text we used the French translation of the original chronicle since the Amharic version of 1959 E.C. was censored by its editors. The censorship concerned Menelik’s war against the Arsi. (For the details see Hussein Ahmed, Some Problems of the Gabre Selassie’s Chronicle (B.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1977).)

Likewise, historians of Menelik’s period have been largely based on these sources and other available materials indicated the destructive nature of the war en passant.\textsuperscript{3} This is mainly because in Ethiopia the tendency is to ignore such wars of colonization and expansion, to treat them as internal wars, or as campaigns of (re)unification, incorporation, and the like. In contrast to the international wars on which entire treatises have been written, these wars of conquest and annexation of neighboring peoples and territories by “landed empires,” such as Russia and Ethiopia have received little attention. In actual fact, the war against the Arsi Oromo by the Shoan kingdom represented not only a classical colonial war but also one in which egregious war crimes were perpetrated by an organized state.

I have been working on imperial conquest and its consequences for quite some time which has provided me with the opportunity to examine available sources in Amharic and European languages (English, French, Italian and German) and to interview hundreds of Amhara and Oromo informants of different regions, religions and origins particularly among the Arsi who suffered greatly from the war and the ensuing political economy. They have not forgotten and perhaps may never forget this crucial period of their history. Their collective memory of the war is so fresh that one has the impression that the informants took part in it or saw it with their own eyes. The original oral data obtained in the course of fieldwork is analyzed in detail in comparison with other primary and secondary sources. The following analysis is the summary of Menelik’s decade-long wars and campaigns of conquest and Arsi Oromo resistance.\textsuperscript{4}

According to Asma Giyorgis,\textsuperscript{5} the first campaign against the Arsi dates back to the 1840s when most of the Tulama clans of Shoa fell under King Sahle Selassie, Menelik’s grandfather, though they did not completely submit until his death.\textsuperscript{6} Foreign observers, traditional historiographers as well as the writers of the 16th century, Bahrey in particular, dwell on what they believe to be the warlike nature of the Oromo society, on their great passion for victory in war


\textsuperscript{5} Bairu Tafila, \textit{Atsma Giyorgis and His Work}, p. 543.