

List of place names in Welkait (Tigray, Ethiopia), as recorded in 1939

Version 1.1

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Abstract

There are attempts to offer a *post-hoc* justification of the military conquest and ethnic cleansing of Western Tigray by the combined Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara forces in late 2020. For this purpose, an "eternal Amharic character" of Welkait and the surrounding districts is invoked. Historical records, however, show a typical Tigrayan rural landscape. We analysed the notebooks of ethnographer Giovanni Ellero, holding field notes from Welkait in the 1930s and extracted a list of 574 place names as recorded by Ellero and his translators. The etymology of almost all place names is of Tigrinya origin, with a few of Oromo, Arab or biblical origin, as well as in the extinct Falasha language. In the whole list of place names, there are less than ten locations that in 1939 held a name of Amharic origin. More specifically, among the 574 place names, there are 229 "Addi ..." (village in Tigrinya) and 49 "May ..." (water).

Context

After the military conquest of Western Tigray by the combined Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces in late 2020, the numerous massacres and ethnic cleansing that took place there (1), there are attempts to provide a post-hoc justification by referencing an "eternal Amharic character" of Welkait and the surrounding districts. However, historical documents from the *tempore non suspecto* period depict a typical Tigrayan countryside.

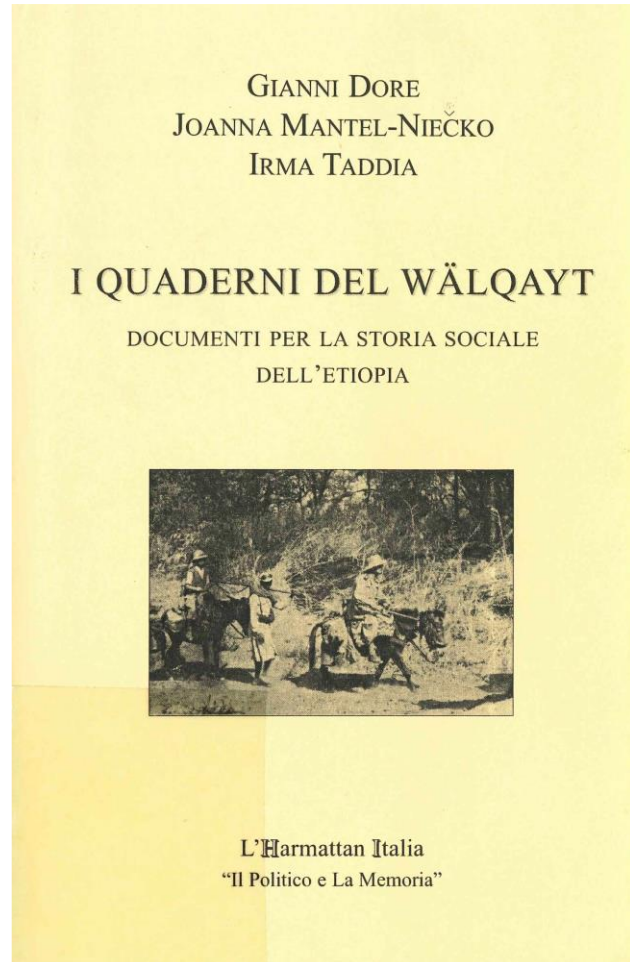
Earlier on, we published an extensive set of historical and language maps of the area (2). In addition, the notebooks of ethnographer Giovanni Ellero, holding field notes from Welkait in the 1930s, have been published as a book by Professors Dore, Mantel-Niečko and Taddia: "I Quaderni dal Wälqayt" (L'Harmattan Italia, 2005) (3).

Ellero was in Welkait in 1939-1940, where he was district administrator as part of the Italian occupying administration. He was taken prisoner by the British in 1941; his wife Pia Maria Pezzoli typed and organised the field notes when Ellero was prisoner and at the same time administrator in Eritrea under the supervision of the British officer S.F. Nadel SPO. In 1942, Ellero was transferred to South Africa as prisoner of war, but he perished when the ship on which they travelled was sunk by the Japanese marine.

For his fieldwork, Ellero visited all villages of Welkait, and also part of Kafta. For every village he noted (among many other details) the number of inhabitants, the origin of the first inhabitants of

the village, and the genealogy of how the inhabitants were related to the founders of the village. Language(s) practiced, religion, cropping system, and sometimes tales, habits and customs were also recorded. In our understanding, this is the most detailed field investigation that has been done in the area by an ethnographer.

In almost all studied villages, the inhabitants remembered that, many generations earlier, their forefathers had migrated from a specific place of origin in the Tigray highlands; some villages were also inhabited by descendants of slaves, especially in the eastern plains (“Mezega Welkait”). In all villages, the people were reported to speak Tigrinya, with mostly passive knowledge of Amharic. Those who were literate wrote in Amharic; Ellero mentions the reason: all communication with the administration was in Amharic. The descendants of slaves had forgotten their original language, and all practiced Tigrinya for daily communication. However, the priests commonly preached in Amharic, as was common all over Ethiopia at the time.



From the *Quaderni*, we extracted a list of 574 place names as recorded by Ellero and his translators. The etymology of almost all place names is of Tigrinya origin (4). Some exceptions for Addi Tinno (Oromo for a short person), Zua (extinct Falasha language (5)), Batua Mariyam (bible), In the whole list of place names (below), there are a dozen locations at most that in 1939 held a name of Amharic origin. More specifically, among the 579 place names, there are

- 229 locations named ‘Addi ... (village, place, home in Tigrinya; similar to the German *-heim*, the French *terroir*, or the Italian *paese*)
- 49 locations named May ... (Tigrinya for water, spring; not one village bears the corresponding Amharic name *wuha* or *mintch*)
- 24 locations named Inda ... (house of ...)
- Selassa Aini (T: ሰላሳ ዓይን) – thirty eyes
- Seleste Kodo (T: ሰለስተ ኮዶ) – three fig trees, most probably *Ficus sur* (6)
- Egam (T: ኣጋም) – vernacular name for the shrub *Carissa edulis* (6)
- Idaga Hamus (T: ዕዳጋ ሃምስ) – Thursday market
- Lahalai Uollel and Tahatai Uollel (T: ላላለዋይ ዎለል; ታሕተዋይ ዎለል) – upper and lower part of Uollel village; the word “Uollel” according the inhabitants indicates a plain with a lot of grazing cattle
- Gual Imba (T: ጻል እምባ) – daughter of the mountain, typically used for a village on a hill, adjacent to a larger mountain
- Ksad Idaga (T: ክሳድ ዕዳጋ) – market place on a mountain pass

- Ketri (T: ከትሪ) - river narrowing, by analogy used for mountain pass. See also current use of “ketri” for check dam.

Ellero's field notes (3) include also a series of sketch maps, with relative position of villages. Around 100 localities are mapped with their names. Some features on the maps are very clear, for instance rivers, but there are spatial distortions. The other, more than 450 names, are not on the maps; they are often names of small hamlets that depended on those major villages, a cluster of homesteads on a hill, etc.

Besides the listed 574 place names, the *Quaderni* mention many other place names; for instance the places or origin for the founders of the villages. In this list we included only those names pertaining to locations in Welkait and surrounding districts.

References and notes

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2. Nyssen J. Western Tigray in 109 historical and 31 ethno-linguistic maps (1607-2014). 4 ed: Zenodo; 2022.
3. Ellero GB, Taddia I, Dore G, Mantel-Niečko J. I quaderni del Wälqayt: documenti per la storia sociale dell'Etiopia: L'harmattan Italia; 2005.
4. The next version of this dataset will include an extensive etymology of the place names, as recorded by Ellero.
5. Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities. Catalogue and map of Ethiopian nationalities. Addis Ababa: Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities; 1985.
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List of place names in Welkai (Tigray, Ethiopia), as recorded in 1939

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'Addi Adenna, Adi Adennà	124
'Addi Adgeni, Addi Adgeni	
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'Addi Akeltena, Addi Acheltenna	130
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