

Muhamed Awal Mehadi

The History of the Battle of Azule and its Aftermath

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The territorial expansion of Menelik to Arsi and the consequences of Azule battle.

Abstract

Azule is one of the most important historical places in Ethiopia. It is a battle place where emperor Menelik II won a decisive battle over the Arsi Oromo forces. Arsi which is a well-known clan in Oromia regional state was fought to maintain its independence for about one decade. However, because of the military superiority of the Menelik forces the forces of Oromo Arsi were finally defeated at the battle of Azule in 1886. This defeat of the Oromo of Arsi led to the political, economic and social foundation of the present Ethiopian state. As we have seen below in this research article, not only Arsi Oromo, Harar, and Bale were the most important areas in the nineteenth century which opposes the Menelik II territorial expansions in the southeast part of Ethiopia. After their forceful subjugations, these areas did not totally become loyal to the emperor for many years. After Menelik conquest, the land administration system of Arsi Oromo was totally changed in some parts and the politico-religious administrative system of Arsi Oromo known as the Gada system was also replaced by a new administrative system in the region.

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Introduction

This is a research article on the history of Azule battle and its Aftermath. The historical site of Azule battle is one of the most important sites which is found in the Oromia region in the east Arsi zone specifically in Sude district. The district is located far away from Addis Ababa and Asella by 222 and 93 kilometers respectively.

For the sake of coziness, the research article was divided into three main portions. The first part discourse with where the battle of Azule is found? Under this topic, the place where Azule battle was fought between Arsi Oromo society and the Menelik forces, who interested in the region to add it to his territory is discussed.

The second section was talking about, The Conquest of Arsi by Menelik II. In this section how emperor Menelik extended his territory to the southeastern part of the country and how far the Arsi Oromo resisted and initially stopped the advance of Menelik conquest of their territory was explained while the last part hashes out the history of Azule battle since the last quarter of the nineteenth century and its consequences. At the end summary and references were also drawn.

1. Historical background of the study area.

1.1. Location of Sude woreda

Sude is one of the districts in the Eastern Arsi zone of Oromia regional state. This district is located far away from Addis Ababa by 222 kilometers and from Asella, the largest capital city of the eastern Arsi zone by 93 Kilometers respectively. Relatively, the district is bounded by different districts of Oromia regional state in which, on northern direction by Merti and Jaju districts and on the south by Robe woreda and on Northeast, south East and west by Chole, Amigna and Diksis districts respectively.¹ Sude district is situated at the altitude which ranges from 1800 to 35,00 m ASL. The size of the district is estimated to be 40,5564 square kilometers. Among this around 748.65 square kilometers of land is used for cultivation while the rest is characterized by different landscapes and covered by natural and manmade forests. Most of the land is serves also for grazing.²

¹ Sude District Municipality Documents, unpublished material in the possession of the office file number 2/2007.

² Cultural and Tourism Bureau of Sude Woreda (Baruule Aanaa Suude 1999 EC), P. 10.

Accordingly, when we see the Absolute location of the woreda, Sude district is found on 8°30'N latitude and 39° E – 90° E longitude respectively.³ Regarding the name of the district oral information and few written materials indicated that it was named after the name of a person who lived around the area for a long period of time. From this person that the tribe of Sude was emerged⁴ and finally, the name of the woreda was derived from this large tribe which was a descendant of a very well-known person in the district called Sheikh Sude. He was born from his father, Samman and his mother Rawila.⁵

During a period of its succession from neighboring Robe district, it was mixed with “*ye Gersa miktil woreda gizat*” or Gersa sub-district and formed a present-day Sude district. Before that, the area of present-day Sude woreda had been administrated under Robe district within its huge and vast area of land and inhabitants of the area in which Robe district was unable to provide different social services for the existing communities. Since the Robe woreda was unable to solve the problems of its subjects, the communities around the Sude tribe grouped together and raise the question to separate them from the district and also ask different questions regarding the problem they faced through a peaceful means by selecting one leader from their tribes.⁶

Lastly, through a long process, the community of Sude district got the answer for their questions of succession from Robe district and able to get their independence from Robe district.⁷ The district was founded in 1962/1954 E.C /after its succession or separation from the Robe district.

³ MuhamedAwal Mehadi, A Historical Survey of Sude district from the 1880s -1974.BA Thesis, Jimma University,2015, p.20.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p .2.

⁶ The Sude district municipality bureau, unpublished material in the possession of the life no 2/2007.

⁷ Informant : Jemal Muktar

The district also gets legal permissions as a self-independent woreda in June 1979 EC.⁸

After its establishment as a district, Sude woreda has 27 rural Kebeles and three town structures of administrations. Kulla was the largest city and the administrative capital of the woreda. As a result, this town began to develop as an urban center and the population living in the city started to increase rapidly from time to time.⁹

2. The Conquest of Arsi by Menelik II

Menelik II actually began to expand his domain when he was still a regional king (1871-1889). His early effort was directed to conquering the region of Wallo, immediately north of Sawa, which he incorporated between 1871 and 1876. He then turned his attention to the regions lying to the south and east of his kingdom which he annexed between 1883 and 1889. His greatest territorial gain came after his accession to the throne. From 1890 to 1909 all the western, southern, and eastern regions were brought under his control.¹⁰

The Oromo conquest and incorporation were accomplished by the Shoan kingdom under the leadership of Menelik himself some times and by his military generals and warlords in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The most important battle in which king Menelik fought with the Arsi forces was found in the Sude district. The southward territorial expansion which was completed at the end of the nineteenth century under Menelik led to a dramatic increase in the geographical size and ethnic heterogeneity of the country. On the process of territorial expansion, Menelik used two types of subjugation policies: that were peaceful subjugation policies and forceful subjugation policies. Those southern rulers whose

⁸ The Sude district municipality Bureau , file No 2/2007.

⁹ MuhamedAwal Mehadi, A Historical Survey of Sude district from the 1880s -1974, p.30.

¹⁰ Akalou Wolde-Michael,Urban Development in Ethiopia (1889-1925) Early Phase, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan 1973), pp. 1-16 , p .2.

peacefully subjugated were rulers of Jimma, Wallaga, Benishangul, and Assosa. They were allowed to rule their territories by paying a fixed amount of tribute. The Arsi regions was also asked to submit peacefully and pay a certain amount of tax to the Ethiopian state through the two most important Arsi leaders: Suffa Kuso and Damu Usu, in which they were able to accept the proposal at first and their proposal of acceptance of Menelik rules was failed because different clans and elders of the community rejected this idea.¹¹

In contrast to submission to the Ethiopian state, the majority of the southeastern territories such as Arsi, northern Guraghe, Harar, and etc. were resisted the Menelik conquest and they were finally fell into the hands of Menelik's military chiefs and the nobility. The campaign in Arsi was one of the most protracted and the bloodiest of all campaigns conducted by Menelik before he was coronation as emperor in 1889.¹²

Menelik attempt to conquer the Arsi territory at different times starting from the 1880s to until the defeat of Arsi in the hands of Shoan military chief and nobility, but initially the way Menelik led the campaign against the Arsi until the middle of the 1880s seemed to have been aimed at capturing booty and cattle rather than a permanent occupation.¹³

According to Gemechu, The Arsi Oromo were participated in resistance from different regions by organizing themselves under six major warlords: Lengisso Diga of the Koloba clan in Arba-Gugu area, Koffe Shamo in Lake Ziway area, Ogotto Binno in the Munessa area, Intalle Shule in Robe/Didaa area, Gobana Robe in Gadab area, and Gatisso Balango in the area between the Kambata-Mountains and the Sidama area.¹⁴

¹¹ Gemechu J. Geda, *Pilgrimages and Syncretism: Religious Transformation among the Arsi Oromo of Ethiopia*, University of Bayreuth, Germany, September 2013, p. 34

¹² Ibid., p. 33.

¹³ Abbas Haji, *"The history of Arsi (1880-1935)"* BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1982, pp. 17-40

¹⁴ Gemechu J. Geda, p. 34.

During those times and even up to now in some areas the Arsi were predominantly pastoralists where cattle had a tremendous social, symbolic and economic importance. For the Arsi the cattle represent the dignity, a source of pride and prestige, so massive mobilization against the cattle looters was understandable, the Arsi realized the force of enemy was more important than what they imagined -*hattu loonii* 'cattle looters' and were forced to form strong coalitions to better organize and coordinate the struggle against the Shoa territorial and imperial expansion.¹⁵

After many attempts and a brief and usually, of an unplanned fight on the Arsi border, the Shoa war of conquest was launched in the first month of 1882 by the Ethiopian kingdom under the leadership of Menelik.¹⁶

He made a surprise attack and killed many peoples and captured a considerable number of booties such as cattle, goats, sheep, and different commodities that the Arsi was endowed naturally. Menelik also tried to advance the Arsi territory by sending the booty he already captured to the Shoa to increase his military base and number of soldiers.¹⁷

3. History of the Battle of Azule Since 1886

The place called Azule where the first forces of both Menelik under the leadership of Ras Darge and that of Arsi Oromo fought each other was found on the distance of 222 KM, 144 km, 90 km, from Addis Ababa, Adama, and Asella respectively. In addition to this, it is found also on a distance of 8 km from the administrative city of the district called Kula towards the east direction.

The astronomical location of Sude woreda was 8'30'n and 39'E-90E longitude, north, and east

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Culture and Tourism bureau , p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

respectively while the astronomical location of Azule battle was 39E 40" -15.08 E and 8n-30" north and east respectively.¹⁸

The relative location of the Azule battle is as follows when we see from different directions.

- on the northern direction, it is bounded by Gojama Nagele kebele
- on southern direction by Cimo Shabekir kebele
- on eastern direction by Sammare kebele and
- on western direction by Marena Gerjala kebele

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a very crucial period in the history of Ethiopia. It was the time when the independent Oromo monarchies of Mecha of the southwest , the Tulama of Shewa, the Arsi, Bale, Gujii, Karayyu as well as Hararghe Oromo of today eastern Oromia had been conquered and subjugated by Menelik, the later emperor of Ethiopia from 1889-1913.¹⁹ As far as the opposition to the territorial expansion towards the south and southeastern part of Ethiopia is concerned, Menilik faced strong Resistance especially from Arsi and Harar but he was not the first king to launch a war on both these two regions. Even before the conquest of Arsi territory by the Shoan kingdom, there were different attempts by different rulers of Ethiopia to conquer the land of Arsi.²⁰

Throughout the war until the battle of Azule in 1886, the Arsi always able to stop the enemy from their soil and able to defeat the Shoan forces at different battles such as at Qalata, where the Arsi fighters under the leadership of Gosa Dilamo killed more than 1000 soldiers including three of Meneliks bodyguards and at the battles of Albaso, where they killed the enemy soldiers and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Abbas Haji, p.41-2.

²⁰ *Ibid* . For details read also Akalou Wolde-Michael, Urban Development in Ethiopia (1889-1925) Early Phase, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan 1973), pp. 1-16 , p .2-5.

finally at the battle of Azule in 1886, on his return to Shoa when the Arsi were very close to kill or capture the king.²¹

After this Ras Darghe was given the responsibility of conquering the Arsi. After entering into the Arsi interior, Ras Darghe has established a fortified camp at Sude district in a place called Azule. At this place, Ras Darge and the Shoan forces were defended by thousands of guns, with necessary ammunition and provisions.²²

After the Shoan army entered into the territory of Arsi under the leadership of Ras Darghe, they were able to establish a strong military base at Azule. Azule is a fortified camp defended by thousands of guns, and modern firearms the emperor had obtained from Europeans. It is a strategic area which the Shoan forces were settled and used it as their military power base. It was surrounded by three different hills or fortress on three directions, that means from the northern direction by Azule hill, in eastern direction by Wargo hill, and in southern direction by Bargoo fortified the camp. So, since all of these three gedals(hills) were very deep there is no way for their enemy to attack them easily.

In addition to that Ras Darge was able to dig artificial fortress that connects the Azule fortress with that of Borgo hills to enclose himself and the Shoan army in general from the easy attacks of the Arsi Oromo in western direction.²³

After he dug the trenches around the camp, he stationed thousands of gunmen on every corner of the fortress and the artificial fortress he builds had been left with five portals protected by the Shoan army. Accordingly, the first door of the fortress was given for Basha and hence called Basha door, the second was given and guarded by Hubee, the third was given to Alii Maree, and

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Culture and Tourism bureau , p, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*

the fourth and the last one was guarded by lawwee and all of those five portals were named after their guards.

Ras Darge was entrenched in the camp for two months, during which time he managed to create some relations with some Arsi individuals, for example, one of these persons was to be Halkoo, a poor widow, a merchant of heeto /what is called by Amharic language kosso) and tamboo in Afaan Oromo (tobacco).²⁴

Apparently, she found clients among the imperial forces who were a great consumer of tobacco. Her frequent trips to the camp led to made animate relation with one of the Shoan officers called Alii Mare.

According to my informants, Halkoo was known in the community as Halkoo Ayyuba. Regarding this name, there are different suggestions given by various local elders from where the name Halkoo Ayyuba was taken from. Firstly, some of my informants suggest that the name was taken from her tribe name hence she is called Halkoo Ayyuba. Secondly, she was believed to be called by her husband's name whose name was also called Ayyuba. Since Halko Ayyuba is a beautiful woman some of the leaders of the Shoan army compute each other over her.²⁵

Among the military leaders of Shoan army Ali Maree was the first person to strengthen relationships with Halkoo Ayyuba through buying different commodities frequently from her and in the end, he was able to get her heart. Those Shoan military forces who were settled at a fortified place called Azule were able to gather different information not only from her but also from many individuals daily through establishing a market place near their camps by strengthening their relationships with many individuals.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Informants ; Shiferaw Hurrisa and Muhammad Hussein

As to informants, one can be able to say that in the history of Arsi resistance against their enemy, the only two Arsi natives betrayed their causes were Halkoo Ayyuba and that of Robale Kulla.²⁶ The system for the construction of these fortress that connects the '*qille Azule*' (Azule abysm)with that of Borgoo *gedal* (abysm) was because of the tactic achievement of Halkoo, which was believed in oral tradition among the society to counter the Arsi attacks from the naftegna, soldiers of Menilik II because as to them, Halkoo was promised by the forces of Ras Darge different rewards if she was able to provide them enough information about the Arsi Oromo war preparation and strategy.

At that time she was able to get another supporters like her and started together to gather information from the Oromo and pass over to their Shoan collaborators, at the same time Halkoo provided the Arsi with false information, advising them that they would win against the bands of cowards and with collaborations of another notable person called Robale Kulla, who was in service of Ras Darge, she told the Arsi that it was the right time to annihilate the soldiers at their base of Azule.²⁷

As to my informants, the Shoan forces rewarded her the land of Madeira and also invites her to Addis Ababa. The Arsi besides the lack of modern firearms and different war materials were able to continue resistance successfully through massive mobilization and solidarity against the army of emperor Menelik for a decade until the last battle among the two groups. Halkoo and the other supporters of the Shoan forces were able to gather and continued to provide them with generous information on the day and strategy of the attacks of the Arsi. This information facilitates the beginning of the battle of Azule in 1886. At this battle, Arsi was mobilized massively to crush their army definitively at Azule. Ras Darge was well informed

²⁶ Ibid .

²⁷ Ibid.

about the Arsi plan and war preparations, so by seeing a huge army approaching, he ordered the soldiers to fire.²⁸

According to my informants, the Arsi did not retreat and they continued to advance forward massively, at this time almost all the horsemen fell into the trenches and others who managed to enter the fortress were mowed down by the Shoan soldiers. At this time many of the soldiers and civilians were killed, those who survived the massacre had no other alternatives rather they were surrendered.²⁹

3.1. Consequences of the War

Menelik conquest of Arsi territory and South, Southeastern part of Ethiopia, in general, had the following consequences.

- Before the conquest and subjugation of Arsi by Menelik toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Oromo people had lived under a sophisticated indigenous democratic system known as Geda in which political, military and other leaders including legal experts are elected for non-renewable eight-year terms. Gada system is a highly developed socio-political system of Oromo, which influenced every aspect of their life. It has served as a guide for the religious, social, political and economic life of the Oromo for a long period of time.³⁰
- After the conquest of the region, the Gada system started to demise³¹ among the Arsi Oromo in general and the Sude district and its vicinity in particular. Menelik appointed the agent

²⁸ Informants : Manzaa Gadaa & Siraaj Jemal

²⁹ Informant: Kabbada Wayyessa

³⁰ Asmarom Legessa ,*Oromo democracy :An in Indigenous Africa political system* .Red sea press, Trenton ,2000 .p.1.

³¹ Edmond j - Keller , The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo nation and it is implications for politics in Ethiopia , *Journal of Modern African Studies* , pp, 621- 634 , Cambridge University , 1995 , p. 624.

who served as state officials over the area. These state officials were men who come from some other areas or who submitted to his supremacy from the local community.

- In the local community, the state workers were selected based on their strength, economic base, social acceptance and degree of adaptation /submission to the central government. The state officials were worked with different responsibilities like enforcing the law, collecting taxes, publish lawbreakers, settling the neftagna allocation of land to gabbers.
- A few strong Oromo leaders and chiefs who accepted Menelik rule and cooperated with him gained favor and gained a tittle of balabbats. For instance, Bulbulli Kayyoo from Balakasa clan, Abdulqadir Dayyuu from Sude clan, Shekko Barruu from Cimoo clan, Shiikkoo Bookee from Abdoye clan and Alii Lanjoo from Ataba clan were the prominent once.
- Starting from its foundation Sude district was ruled by different administrators appointed by the central government as the district governor and there were coming from different Ethiopian regions especially during a period of emperor Heila Sellasie.³²
- During the period of emperor Heila Sellasie and the time of Derg, all of the ruling parties of the district were recruited and appointed over the community by central government based on the government will weather there were supported or not supported by community without the need and willingness of local community, but after the decline of Derg period the ruling system was changed and most of the rulers of the district were selected from the native peoples.³³
- According to Informants, there were no any development in different socio-economic activity of the district starting to its establishment as a worda until the end of the period of

³² Informant: Gana Huseina and Tura Salih

³³ *Ibid.*

socialist government of Ethiopia because as to them, most of the rulers appointed to administer the district were selfish, they were not in a position to work for the society.³⁴

- In addition to this, the learning and teaching process, as well as the system of administration, was not by indigenous language rather only by the national language which has a great impact at a time on the community because at that time the Amharic language was seen as a foreign language by the Arsi Oromo society.
- The spread of garrisons was necessary for the maintenance of Menelik's power, for through them, he sustained hegemony in the newly won area.³⁵ Garrison station was established around the present-day Halila town and some of his forces and some more people settled there.
- During the battles many of the soldiers and civilians were massacred, many were wounded and many of the peoples and soldiers were also lost their lives from both sides.
- Arsi loses most of its brave personalities in their territory and also land. Arsi land was plundered and burnt with the crops, the cattle were looted and afterward, the remainder were confiscated. The state expropriated almost all the Arsi land which is distributed to the neftagna, to church, to the officials, and to the nobility.

The other consequences of the war were the formation of the present-day Ethiopian state as a result of Menelik's territorial expansion and imperial expansions towards the south, southeastern and southwestern regions of Ethiopia.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Akalou Wolde-Michael, p. 3.

Summary

Sude district is one of the districts which is found in this day in the east Arsi zone of the Oromia region. It was founded in 1962/1954 E.C as district while it was recognized legally as a self-independent woreda in June 1979 EC. On the process of territorial expansion, Menelik used two types of subjugation policies: that were peaceful subjugation policies and forceful subjugation policies.

The historic battle of Azule which was very crucial in the history of Ethiopia because of its result in the unification of the southern region of the country with the northern tip of Ethiopia is located in Sude district. Before the occupation of Arsi Oromo by Menelik II, the Arsi people of Barentu Confederacy were used to govern under the Geda system like that of their brothers, the Borana Oromo of Borana confederacy.

After the conquest of Arsi Oromo, many changes have occurred in the region. The politico, social and military organization of Arsi Oromo in particular and Oromo societies of many regions in general called Geda system was degraded, land was confiscated, towns and modern education emerged and the modern administration system was introduced to the region and as a result of the Menelik conquest of the region and many regions of south, southeastern and western part of the county present-day Ethiopia was formed.

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