

The Danta-Dubamo: *An atypical Semitico-Cushitic identity?*

By Kinde Kiziso (E-mail: kkiziso@yahoo.com)

Origin, Language and Religion

The **Danta**, historically and commonly known as Dubamo are a relatively small [ethnic group](#) in [Ethiopia](#) estimated to number more than 100,000 (1-4)¹. Their symbolic center of settlement is the highland area of Danta, after which they are also named (4). The Danta (Dubamo – hereafter used interchangeably) originally spoke the Kizinya dialect of Kambaata (1-2, 4) belonging to the Cushitic family. However, the Danta have undergone significant linguistic transition since the massive migration of the Hadiya into the Dubamoland (Figure 1) in the beginning of the 19th century. A sizeable number of Dubamo living in their original home of today's Hadiya Zone² have to date resisted

¹ The Central Statistical Authority takes data only for nationalities that have been accepted, registered with and have seats in the House of Federation. Dubamo pursued recognition for all the 18 years of EPRDF's rule and the case is still pending at the House of Federation. I was told that the Dubamo elders have talked to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on one occasion and submitted their application to him repeatedly. The Dubamo are by design registered as Hadiya against their will, they complain. In the last population census, an orientation was given by the Hadiya Zone administrators in Sorro to register all people as Hadiya. A few Dubamo enumerators at the orientation rebelled right away at the meeting. Then words got out to the rural villages making it a serious problem. A handful of EPRDF cadres from Dubamo were thankfully called in to calm down their compatriots. It somehow saved the day but most Dubamo refused giving data as they knew the name Danta or Dubamo was not coded in the nationalities list in the population census form.

² Dubamo think that they are the indigenous people at least relative to today's politically dominant Hadiyas and abhor the reality that even not a *woreda* name let alone the zone's does not allude to their existence. Some elderly Hadiya acknowledge that the "land belonged to the Dubamo" – contextually meaning that the Dubamo are the original occupants, that the Hadiya arrived later and were well received by Dubamo. The Dubamo-Hadiya naming controversy has long roots dating back to the final years of the *Derg* when the name Sorro replaced the former Timbaro *woreda* (district). The name Timbaro refers to the Tambaro nationality in the current Kambata-Tambaro Zone. The *kebeles* (localities) where the Tambaro live were reorganized under a new district called Omo Sheleko. Sorro refers to the four brothers of the Boyamaana, a politically dominant group of the Hadiya tribes belonging to the same ancestral Boyamo. It was a bitter disappointment for Dubamo and to a lesser degree to the non-Sorro Hadiya, for they were not consulted (in fact kept in the dark) in the process of renaming Timbaro to Sorro. The Dubamo have continued pursuing the matter since the *Derg* regime, submitting application to the *Derg Shengo* (the nominal Parliament of Mengistu Haile-Mariam regime). A group comprising of the administrators of the former South Shewa region (capital at Ziway) including Petros Wontamo (Chairman of South Shewa) and Petros Gebre (Chairman of the Kambata-Hadiya *Awraja*) repeatedly converged at Gimbichu (capital of Sorro *woreda*) consulting elders of Hadiya and Dubamo. According to my informants, after studying the situation a decision was to be made by the *Derg Shengo* perhaps in favor of a neutral name. But this did not materialize as the *Derg* regime was overrun by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front.

linguistic assimilation by the Hadiya and still speak their original Kizinya dialect of Kambatta (4).

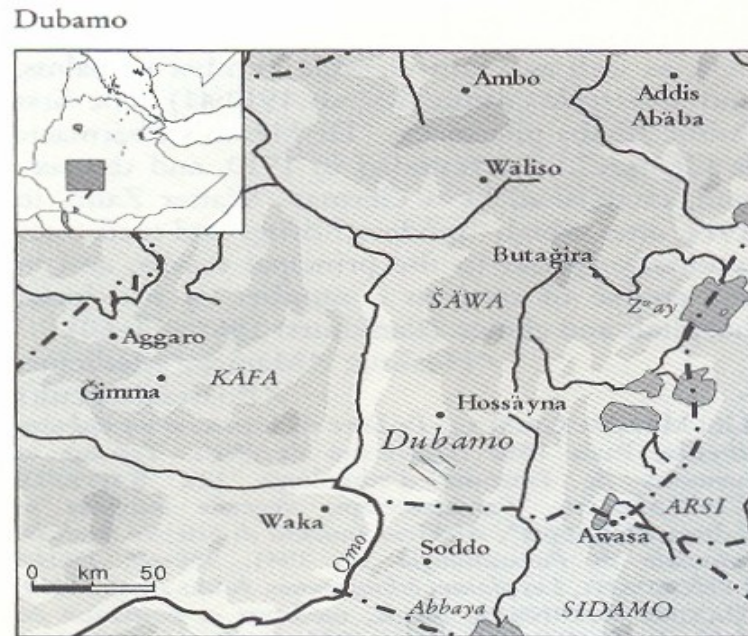


Figure 1. A map of the location of the Dubamo land in Southern Ethiopia (Source: Braukämper (2005b)).

Historically, Dubamo is thought to be a “state formed in Kambata about 1550-1570”, and the “Dubamo people were known to have slave trade with Jimma even after the anti-slavery proclamation of 1923” (5).

The Dubamo “were organized in a small kingship whose rulers claim descent from ‘King Solomon’ of Gondar, i.e. from Amharic nobility” (4). Dubamo still maintain “a tradition that they came from Gondar about 15 generations ago” and “conserved an outstanding consciousness as an upper stratum tracing their origin to the North Ethiopian Christian area, a stratum which had at one time superimposed itself upon a Kushitic” substratum of the indigenous people (1).

To date, it is a common practice for an average Dubamo to name his or her paternal genealogy going back to more than 20 generations. Braukämper, in one of his other

articles on Dubamo suggests that Dubamo's allusion of their origin to King Solomon and the Amharic nobility may be an astute strategy to legitimization of status and power³ rather than actual hereditary relationship with the north. However, a layman's analysis of Dubamo's genealogy (e.g. tribe names and distant ancestral names of individuals) occasionally albeit weakly yields names that connote northern connection.

Hawzula is a supra-natural deity worshiped by all Dubamo in the past and still by some to date (4). The *Hawzula* spirit 'speaks' and 'works' through the *Hawzulmancho*, a hereditary Dubamo *man* on whom the *Hawzula* spirit descends and dwells on. *Hawzula* was the arbitrator, councilor and judge on all matters not only for Dubamo but also for the neighboring peoples including the Hadiya, Donga, Kembata and Tambaro but also as far as Wolayta and Dawro. The Hadiya are not allowed to enter the *Fadoó* – the house including the compound in which the *Hawzula* (and *Hawzulmancho*) resides. Nonetheless, they are permitted to make supplications from a distance of perhaps more than 100 meters.

Recently, on top of the already rampant grudge harbored by Dubamo, an attempt (perhaps real) to desecrate the *Hawzula* and humiliate the *Hawzulmancho* by the Hadiya officials of the Sorro district has yielded political overtones and a flurry of protest by the Dubamo. Many Dubamo confessed Orthodox Christianity after Menilik II's conquest in 1880s but evangelical Christianity has become the dominant religion since the 1970s (4).

The Danta-Dubamo Land

The Danta nationality is found in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) especially in the Hadiya and less so in Kembata zones (See Figure 1 below). The Danta are mainly concentrated in the Soro, Duna and Misha districts of the Hadiya Zone of the SNNPR. A large number of Dubamo also live in the adjoining Doyogana

³ It is not clear as to which power to maintain should they pretend, as no Dubamo assumed a position of significance in the government even at the district (*woreda*) level during the Imperial regime. There had not been any *balabat* of Dubamo origin among the several in Hadiya and Kembata. I was told only very few conscious Dubamo resisted submitting to the several Hadiya *balabats* during the Haile Selassie regime. Dubamo claim a far better level of participation in leadership during the *Derg* regime when ethnic identity was less of an issue in assuming positions. Manifestly, a high regard is conferred to date for Dubamo in various trades including agriculture, traditional governance and civil service.

district of the Kembata Zone. Reportedly, relatively small clusters of people of some Danta tribes live in Silte and Wolayta zones of SNNPR.

The Danta are a mountain people living in the cool highlands of the Dubamoland. They are known for their intensive cultivation of *ensete ventricosum* and barley and for breeding of horses (4). *Dantich farasho*, literally meaning ‘the flying horse of Danta’, is a phrase that is commonly used for eulogy and well known by my informants from even the neighboring nationalities such as the Kambata and Hadiya.

Current Political Organization and Representation

Since the federal rearrangement of the Ethiopian state in the 1990s, “the Dubamo increasingly became aware of their non-Hadiya origin and started demanding an administrative district of their own” (2, 4). Ever since and on a number of occasions, the Danta have submitted their grievances to the government, including to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi himself, for recognition and representation⁴. In the 1990s, the Dubamo refused to acknowledge the Hadiya-dominated local administrators as their legitimate rulers and stopped paying taxes as a token of resistance (2). According to my informants, ever since the Dubamo have been making peaceful political struggle for representation at all administrative levels including the councils at the district, zonal and regional levels and the Houses of Peoples Representatives and Federation at the national level. No definitive answer has so far been given and the case is still active and pending. Local newspapers have written on the demands of the Dubamo at various times and the Deutsche Welle radio Amharic service has made a lengthy report on the case on 12 May 2009 (6).

In the current political configuration, most Danta are either affiliated with the EPRDF or neutral. This aside, because of the increasing consciousness of their distinct historical and cultural identity, a few Danta elites living in the area had opted for establishing a political

⁴ See for instance Footnote Number 16 on page 368 in ‘Braukämper, (2005a). Controversy over local tradition and national Ethiopian Context: Case study of the Hadiyya. pp. 363-376’. Part of the footnote reads “Hadiyya administrators blamed me for the fact that in the map of the book of 1999 the Dubamo are classified as ‘linguistically assimilated to the Hadiyyaa’. A Dubamo delegation presented another map of my book on Kambata (1983:60) to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in order to prove their claim” of an independent indisputable Dubamo Nationality.

party called the Danta, Dubamo and Kinchichila Democratic Organization. Time did not allow checking on whether this party is an affiliate of EPRDF and the regard it musters within the Danta people. Nonetheless, what is apparently clear is that Danta being a minority, such a demand for ethno-political identity within the Hadiya Zone aroused some degree of persecution by the Hadiya administrators in the form of alienation, job losses, imprisonment and discrimination in recruitment and appointments at almost all levels. However, this appears to have hardened the Danta people's determination for self identity and political representation at all levels rather than calming the controversies and recriminations.

Recently, there appears to be a growing acknowledgement, at least in the Hadiya Zone and its *woredas*, of the seemingly irreversible and persistent claim of historical and cultural identity of the Danta as a nationality. I believe it is a matter of time before decisions are arrived at the regional but more likely at the level of the Federal government.

Conclusion

Development of human capability and confidence is a starting point in the long and arduous process of socio-economic development of a country. Instilling a sense of equity and inclusiveness is perhaps a psychological icing on the cake to set off stability and release the power of individual as well as collective creativity in a community. The EPRDF, as a party and government, has come a long way turning the table on historical injustices committed against the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. However, because of the large diversity apparent in the Ethiopian nation and the complexity of attendant issues, addressing real or perceived grievances continues to be a work in progress. With up and coming generation being extraordinarily conscious of identity matters, patience appears to be the last word in the cards. Nevertheless, 18 years of persistent entreaty by Danta youth is not a mean feat vis-à-vis self-control, peace and quiet. It, therefore, appears timely to pronounce the final word apropos their evidently legitimate demands, make the people join hands, and focus their energy and attention in the all important tooth-and-nail fight against the challenges of poverty and underdevelopment.

References

1. Braukämper, U. 1973. The correlation of oral traditions and historical records in Southern Ethiopia: a case study of the Hadiya-Sidamo past. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 11 (2), 29-50.
2. Braukämper, U. 2005a. Controversy over local tradition and national Ethiopian Context: Case study of the Hadiyya. Pp. 363-376. In: Afrikas Horn: Akten der Ersten Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz, 2. bis 5. Mai 2002 in München. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, Germany.
3. Braukämper, U. 2007. Kāmbata. In: Uhlig, S. (ed.). *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* 3. Volume 2, page 337. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, Germany
4. Braukämper, U. 2005b. Dubamo. In: Uhlig, S. (ed.). *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Volume 2, page 202.
5. www.nai.uu.se/library/resources/dossiers/local_history_of_ethiopia/d/ORTDU.pdf.
6. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4246589,00.html>.
(In Amharic).