

Oromo Cavalry in the Survival of Modern Ethiopia: Military Skill and the Art of War (c. 1875–1900)¹.

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Abstract

This article examines the critical role of the Oromo cavalry forces between 1875 and 1900 in the creation and survival of modern Ethiopia. Emphasizing their strategic contribution to the formation of the contemporary Ethiopian Empire, the study highlights the cavalry's function as "frontline national defenders" during the empire's consolidation and their key role in repelling foreign threats. Employing an exploratory research methodology, the study evaluates the impact of the Oromo cavalry on Ethiopia's military success and national security. The research draws on a diverse range of sources, including both primary and secondary materials, such as diaries, chronicles, firsthand accounts, and interviews with descendants of oral informants. Secondary sources include academic theses, journal articles, and other historical documents. The study concludes that the Oromo cavalry's expertise in psychological warfare and hit-and-run tactics was essential to the defense of Ethiopia's sovereignty, contributing significantly to the nation's resistance against colonial powers. Although the traditional use of cavalry has diminished, the principles of cavalry tactics remain relevant in modern military strategy.

Keywords: *cavalry, horsemen, veterans, galloping, and hit-and-run*

1. Introduction

The history of modern Ethiopia is deeply intertwined with the military prowess and strategic contributions of the Oromo cavalry forces, particularly during the late 19th century. From 1875 to 1900, these cavalry units were central to the defense of the Ethiopian state and played a critical role in shaping the nation's future. As Ethiopia faced external threats from European colonial powers and internal challenges in consolidating its empire, the Oromo cavalry emerged as one of the most effective military forces in the region, renowned for their exceptional skills in warfare and their ability to adapt to changing battle conditions.

¹This work is based on my two theses from Addis Ababa University: Salale Oromo Horsemen for the Anthropology Department and Ras Gobana for the History Department. The preliminary findings of this paper were presented at the Salale First National Research Conference in 2020. Additionally, some of my research was published in JIKDS by an individual in 2023 without my consent.

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The Oromo cavalry, with their deep knowledge of terrain, advanced horsemanship, and mastery of psychological warfare, became the "frontline national defenders" of the Ethiopian Empire. Their hit-and-run tactics, mobility, and strategic use of surprise were keys to their success in numerous battles, helping to secure Ethiopia's sovereignty and resist foreign domination during the era of imperialism. Despite their significant contribution, the role of the Oromo cavalry in Ethiopia's survival and expansion has often been overlooked in historical narratives that tend to focus on more widely recognized military figures and events.

This article seeks to shed light on the vital role the Oromo cavalry played in Ethiopia's military history from 1875 to 1900, examining how their skills and tactical ingenuity were instrumental in safeguarding the nation's independence and fostering the development of the modern Ethiopian state. Through an exploration of primary and secondary sources, including firsthand accounts, diaries, and interviews with descendants of oral informants, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Oromo cavalry's contribution to Ethiopia's survival in the face of foreign threats. In doing so, it highlights the enduring legacy of their military expertise and the continued relevance of cavalry-like units in contemporary warfare.

2. Background

Cavalry refers to soldiers who fought on horseback. Historically, cavalry units played crucial roles in various armies due to their mobility, speed, and impact on the battlefield. They were essential for reconnaissance, flanking maneuvers, and charging enemy lines (Ellis, 1978). With the advent of mechanized warfare in the 20th century, traditional horse-mounted cavalry became largely obsolete, replaced by armored units and vehicles, although the term "cavalry" persists in modern military nomenclature to denote certain types of units, like armored or air cavalry. Cavalry designates the history of the soldiers on horseback and its account of the rise and fall of an elite fighting force for centuries. It's a history of the warrior, horse, and weapons that grew the ideal of knighthood and the romantic image of the dashing cavalryman. Horses have been used by humans for over 5,000 years, starting in the late Neolithic period. They became domesticated in Central Asia in the fifth millennium BC, possibly by the Aryans. Initially, they provided meat, milk, and leather to nomads. The earliest written record of domesticated horses comes from China in the third millennium BC. Horses have played a significant role in the creation and destruction of empires and states. (V. Vuksic and Z. Grbasic, 1993, p.7).

Cavalry has played a pivotal role in military history, with its importance spanning various cultures and epochs. Notable examples include the Assyrian cavalry, Scythian horse archers, Persian cavalry, Macedonian Companion cavalry, and Roman cavalry (Curry, 2004). The Assyrian cavalry is considered one of the earliest known organized cavalry units, while the Scythian horse archers were renowned for their expertise in mounted archery and their nomadic lifestyle. The Persian cavalry, part of the Achaemenid Empire, was a formidable force, and the Macedonian Companion cavalry, famously led by Alexander the Great, played a crucial role in the success of his phalanx formation.

Throughout the medieval period, cavalry continued to be a dominant force in warfare, with various specialized units such as Byzantine Cataphracts, European Knights, Mongol cavalry, Ottoman Sipahi, Polish Winged Hussars, and Cossacks (Bukhari, 1979). These forces were known for their heavy armor, shock tactics, chivalric codes, archery, speed, and battle prowess. They were also highly effective in reconnaissance and raiding, contributing significantly to the expansion and defense of empires.

In the early modern period, cavalry saw significant evolution. During the Napoleonic Wars, cavalry units such as the cuirassiers (heavy cavalry), hussars (light cavalry), and dragoons (mounted infantry) were central to many key engagements, including the famous battles of Austerlitz and Waterloo (Bukhari, 1979). In the United States, cavalry leaders like J.E.B. Stuart and Philip Sheridan utilized cavalry in the American Civil War (1861–1865), where it played a pivotal role in large-scale battles, raids, and reconnaissance operations.

The role of cavalry continued to evolve in the 20th century. During World War I, cavalry was still used for reconnaissance and charges, but the advent of trench warfare and the rise of machine guns rendered traditional cavalry tactics increasingly obsolete. As a result, cavalry units began transitioning into mechanized forces, with tanks and armored vehicles taking center stage in the *blitzkrieg* tactics employed during World War II. Today, modern cavalry is composed of both air and mechanized units, reflecting the continued adaptation of military strategies to new technologies and combat environments (Curry, 2004).

2.1.Cavalry in Africa

Cavalry has played a critical role in the development of states, military strategies, and empires across various African societies throughout history. Noteworthy examples include the Carthaginian cavalry (9th–2nd centuries BCE), which relied heavily on the expertise of Numidian

horsemen. These skilled light cavalry warriors were especially effective during the Punic Wars against Rome. The Berber cavalry, comprising tribes like the Moors and Numidians, also demonstrated exceptional horsemanship, becoming key components of North African armies such as the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties (Shillington, 2001).

In West Africa, the Ghana Empire (c. 300–1200 CE) leveraged its cavalry to control vital trade routes across the Sahel and expand its territory. The Mali Empire, particularly under the leadership of Mansa Musa, also utilized a strong cavalry to defend its vast lands and ensure the safety of trade routes. Similarly, the Songhai Empire (15th–16th centuries) under the leadership of Askia Muhammad I relied heavily on cavalry to expand its influence and maintain control over its provinces.

The Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Hausa States possessed formidable cavalry forces, with the Bornu cavalry noted for equipping both riders and horses with chainmail armor, which provided crucial protection during battle. In Central and Southern Africa, cavalry played a key role in military strategies, state formation, and historical outcomes. The Kingdom of Kongo, the Zulu Kingdom, the Sokoto Caliphate, and the Tukulor all relied on cavalry for swift raids, reconnaissance, and communication. These examples highlight the diverse and essential roles that cavalry played in shaping African military systems (Gies, 1984).

2.2.Cavalry in Ethiopia

Cavalry has been a vital component in the military history of Ethiopia, playing a crucial role in the defense and expansion of the Ethiopian Empire over many centuries. Several key historical moments highlight the importance of cavalry in Ethiopian military strategy. During the Aksumite Empire, one of the ancient world's great civilizations, cavalry was used alongside infantry and war elephants. While specific details about Aksumite cavalry are limited, they were renowned for their military capabilities (Marcus, 1984).

In the medieval period, under the Solomonic Dynasty, cavalry became a central part of the military forces, essential for both defending the empire against external threats and maintaining internal stability. Emperor Sarsa Dengel (1563–1597) notably utilized cavalry to counter the Ottoman-backed Adal Sultanate and other regional rivals, playing a key role in stabilizing the empire during a time of external invasion and internal turmoil (Marcus, 1984). During his reign, cavalry was used effectively in various battles, including those that helped solidify the empire's borders (Pankhurst, 1968). Emperor Susenyos I (1606–1632) further modernized Ethiopia's military by integrating

firearms and adopting new tactics, with cavalry remaining an integral force. His forces, including cavalry, played a crucial role in the Battle of Gol (1617), one of the defining conflicts of his reign. In the 19th century, Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) sought to unify Ethiopia and modernize its military. While his focus was largely on artillery and firearms, cavalry continued to play a vital role, particularly in providing mobility and executing rapid assaults. Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889) also relied heavily on cavalry during his campaigns against Egyptian forces and internal rebellions. His cavalry units achieved significant victories, such as in the Battle of Gundet (1875) and the Battle of Gura (1876), where they decisively defeated Egyptian forces (Marcus, 1984). One of the most pivotal moments in Ethiopian military history came during the reign of Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913). His forces, which included a substantial cavalry component, played a central role in the famous Battle of Adwa (1896). This decisive victory against the Italian invasion was crucial in preserving Ethiopia's sovereignty and became a symbol of African resistance to colonialism. Ethiopian cavalry, armed with swords, spears, and some firearms, employed flanking maneuvers and swift charges that disrupted Italian lines, ensuring the victory (Marcus, 1984). In the 20th century, during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1936–1941), Emperor Haile Selassie's cavalry units contributed significantly to Ethiopia's defense efforts, often utilizing guerrilla tactics to combat the Italian forces. Their mobility and expertise in irregular warfare played a key role in Ethiopia's continued resistance during the conflict.

3. Methodology and Sources

The data collection for this study followed a two-stage approach: interviews and literature review. In the first stage, I selected a range of relevant literary works that explore the role of horses and cavalry in Ethiopia, focusing specifically on the Oromo cavalry. This phase also involved gathering extensive oral histories. I utilized three main techniques: collecting oral testimonies from key informants, cross-referencing these oral accounts with published sources, and corroborating the information provided by one informant with that from others to ensure accuracy and consistency.

The second stage of data collection involved a thorough examination of both published and unpublished manuscripts, complemented by visits to military colleges for further insights. In addition, I reviewed various travelogues, diaries, and firsthand accounts written by travelers and scholars, which provided valuable context and perspectives on the Oromo cavalry's historical

development. This comprehensive approach ensured a critical and nuanced understanding of the role of the Oromo cavalry in shaping modern Ethiopian military practices.

4. Results and Discussion

Oromo Cavalry

Human lives are deeply intertwined with their environment and upbringing. Similarly, horses have held significant cultural and social importance in the lives of the Oromo people, both in times of joy and sorrow. Horses are closely associated with various cultural rituals, such as marriage ceremonies, funeral practices, and transportation methods. In Oromo culture, the horse is regarded as one of the most esteemed animals, symbolizing affiliation, dignity, social connection, and moral inspiration. Because of their high regard for the horse, the Oromo often describe the animal as beautiful and affectionate, even referring to it as "*Abba*" (Alemayehu Haile, 2016).

The Oromo galloping horse, or *Gugsi farda*, is a prominent form of entertainment in the region, particularly during Christian holidays such as *Mesqel*, *Hidar Mikael*, *Tehsas Gabriel*, *Qille (Gena)*, *Astero-Mariam*, and *Ximqat*. For the Oromo people, the galloping horse also holds a traditional military significance, representing a symbol of their cavalry forces, which were a central part of their warfare tactics (Getachew, 2007). Beyond the Oromo, the entire Tulama region is renowned for its strength and bravery in cavalry warfare, with the people's fierce resistance and military prowess being passed down through tradition. As one saying goes, "their fierce resistance and strength are remembered well in tradition."

| Afaan Oromo | English |
|---|---|
| <i>Chee! Chee! yaa fardaa</i> | Che Che the horse |
| <i>Fardi fardaan loluu</i> | The best mounted cavalry ever to fight. |
| <i>Jidda malee hin jiru</i> | Found only in Jidda |
| <i>Ijoolllee Abbichuu ijoollee Oborii</i> | Oh! a son of Abichu a son of Oborii |
| <i>Ijoolllee Ada'aa Dargaggoo Gumbichuu</i> | Oh! a son of Ada'a; a youth of Gumbichu |
| <i>Maalidhaan komatu Diina addaan hiru</i> ³ | How are they criticized, they are heroes who disperse an enemy. |

The Oromo people begin training their children in horseback riding during the *Folle Gadaa* stage, typically for youths aged 16 to 24 years. However, it is during the *Raba Gadaa* stage, for

³ Oral informant: Alemayehu Haile, 2019, at Oromo cultural center, Finfinnee, 2019.

individuals between 24 and 32 years of age, that more advanced military strategies are taught. These strategies include how to engage and escape from enemies, how to throw spears, and how to defend oneself with a shield (Jabesa, p. 45, 165; Gadaa Melbaa, 1988, p. 10). During this period, young men also train to ride horses independently. When they feel capable of competing with others, they participate in a ceremony called *Gojje*, also known as *Gombisa* (Mahateme, 1959, p. 4).

In the 16th century, Abba Gada Walabu Jilo invited youths from North Shoa and trained them to defend their territory from intruders. These youths were trained as both infantry and cavalry forces. The infantry consisted of 500 men per unit, while the cavalry was organized into units of 100 men (Dirribii, 2014, p. 47). The infantry was typically composed of individuals who were the heaviest, tallest, and bravest, while the cavalry recruited those who were lighter and more agile, as they were better suited for horseback riding (ibid., p. 48).

While historical records do not provide a clear timeline for the domestication of horses in Ethiopia, it is evident that the Oromo people have used cavalry extensively for centuries, long before the 16th century (Taddesse, 1988, p. 1). *Aleqa Asma Giorgis Gebramasi* explains the well-organized Oromo cavalry in 16th century, "Had the lands been accessible to horses, had they not been precipitous or filled with caves and grottoes, no one would have survived..." (Bairu T, 1987; Tsegaye Z, 2002). Before the introduction of firearms, the horse was a vital weapon in Ethiopia's territorial expansion and defense, serving as a key element in both offensive and defensive military operations. Oromo cavalry also played a significant role in hunting, as they were capable of hunting large game as well as fighting human adversaries. After successful hunts or battles, the Oromo would take trophies such as the ears and tails of big game animals or the genital organs of their enemies, later displaying these in a ceremonial boasting event called *hung* (Merid, 1979, pp. 120–121; Almagor, 1979; Andrzejewski, 1962; Cerulli, 1922). This practice was later adopted by the Christian Abyssinian soldiers, particularly when the Yajju army was composed mainly of Oromo cavalry from Wallo (Merid, 1979, pp. 120; Caulk, 1972, p. 609).

Oromo horsemen made significant contributions on the front lines of battle, especially in the establishment of the contemporary Ethiopian Empire. Despite their crucial role, their sacrifices are often overlooked in Ethiopian historiography. This essay focuses on the role of the Oromo cavalry between 1875 and 1900, particularly in protecting the empire from external adversaries and quelling internal uprisings.

4.1.Oromo Cavalry in the Making of Modern Ethiopian Empire

Long before the formation of the modern Ethiopian Empire, the Oromo cavalry played a central role in the military forces of the Abyssinians. These cavalry units were instrumental in the rise and fall of certain Abyssinian emperors, particularly from the medieval period onward, including during the Gondarine period (1632–1769) and the era of princes (1769–1855) (Abir Mordechai, 1968). The Oromo cavalry often found themselves in conflict with one another, but at other times, they formed coalitions to fight common enemies. One notable example is when the Tulama cavalry united to combat shared adversaries. Cavalry was one of the major factors for the rise of local chiefdoms in Tulama. According to Tsegaye Zeleke, while the internal dynamism of the Oromo has been discussed, the primary factor behind the rise of Abbaa Maallee and his predecessor, Badhaasaa Guddaa, was their exceptional skill in cavalry. The area around Saggoo, a highland region ideal for barley cultivation and horse breeding, played a crucial role in their success. Abbaa Maallee and his followers fed their horses barley, which is believed to enhance their strength and effectiveness in battle. Abbaa Maallee's large army, estimated at around 10,000 cavalry, benefited greatly from this nourishment, as horses fed on barley are said to be particularly strong and formidable in warfare (Tsegaye, 2002). In the 1860s, one of Gojjam's powerful leaders, *Dejjazmach* Goshu Zawde, planned to invade Salale and confront the formidable ruler of Kuyyu, Nagawo Gamada. However, his advisors informed him that Nagawo had a large number of horses, leading Goshu to cancel the punitive campaign against Kuyyu (Tekle Yesus, 2005).

Another notable horseman was Hassanu Wadaj, the ruler of Darra, who boldly confronted the forces of *Ras* Darge, and Negus Teklahymanot, who requested that he send his prized horse, Kurara. However, Hassanu refused to comply with any of their requests. Aleqa Teklayesus observed Hassanu's stubbornness and resentment, addressing him with the following words:

| Amharic | English |
|-------------------------|--|
| የሸዋ ንጉሥ ኩራረን አምጣ ይለኛል | The King of Shewa says, "Bring me Kuraren." |
| የጎጃሙ ንጉሥ ኩራረን አምጣ ይለኛል | The King of Gojam says, "Bring me Kuraren." |
| ቁመት ነዉ እንጂ በምን ይበልጡኛል፡፡ | In what way are they superior to me, except in height? |

(Tekleyesus W, 2002)

Hassanu Wadaj fought against various local Amhara chiefs, achieving several victories over them. The local people still sing a song that goes, "*Hassanu Abba Kurara Gedel sedede yan hulu Amhara*," which translates to "Hassanu Abba Kurara (his horse's name) threw those Amhara

opponents off the cliff" (Demeke Dubale, 2009). Later, Hassanu was severely wounded in battle. Before his death, he killed his warhorse, Kurara, swearing, "After me, no one will ride Kurara." Following his passing, the Darra was governed by a council of elders, which included Hassanu's widow. It was *Ras Darge* who finally conquered the Darra in 1878 (Cerulli, 1922; Eirik Arnesen, 1996).

In the process of the making of modern Ethiopian empire, 1870s, the Metta Oromo, led by Biratu Gole, arrived with over one hundred horsemen to support Tufa's forces during the Gulale conquest. However, diplomatic negotiations with Gobana ultimately persuaded Biratu to abandon the mission and return to Metta. Similarly, *Ras Gobana* received significant support from several Tulama chiefs in uniting his cavalry forces. As Greenfield notes, Gobana "was the architect of the Shoan Oromo Confederation, which Menelik used to further extend the areas under his control and which sought to unite all these [Tulama] groups" (Greenfield, 1965, p. 75; Abdel Karim, 2009, p. 95; Holcomb and Sisai, 1990, pp. 96, 285). He received support from *Dejjach Caacaa Dobi* of Menegsha to conquer Waliso areas, *Fitwari Biru Nagawo* to conquer Chabo area, and *Dejjach Garado Walde* to conquer Guder areas. According to Enrico Cerulli, Wobori initially resisted but eventually submitted. Following this, their leader, Akka Buta, and his 58 cavalymen joined Gobana's campaign to Mareqo and Menelik's campaign to Chaha. Sources suggest that one of Akka Buta's brothers lost his life during the Mareqo campaign in 1869⁴. Meanwhile, Menelik's and the Shawan armies were defeated in their battle against Chaha and Gurage forces. It is likely that this battle also led to the death of *Debtera Zeneb*, the first chronicler of Emperor Tewodros II. After the harsh conflict, Gobana returned with hundreds of cattle (Bahru, 1972, p. 62; Atsme, 2009, p. 324; Worku, 1984).

During the 1860s–1870s, Gobana and his cavalry forces, including notable leaders such as Ato *Dajazmach Balcha Jimma*, his brother Ato *Fitawrari Tullu Jimma*⁵, *Grazmach Nagawo*, *Balamabaras Tasew*, Ato *Astatique*, *Grazmach Asfere*, Ato *Firdu*, and *Bitweded Atnafu*, were instrumental in military expeditions, leading a formidable cavalry. On March 26, 1878, six days after Menelik's formal submission to Emperor Yohannes, Cecchi, along with Chiarini and Orazio Antinori, encountered *Dajjach Gobana* and Menelik's cousin, *Dajjach Mashasha Seifu*. They

⁴ Nagada, "Yee *Ras Gobana Dache Senedoch*," IES Ms. No. 4616, no year, p. 34, 50.

⁵ *Dejjazmach Balcha Jimma* (Abba Xalas) and *Fitawrari Tullu* are the sons of a Gobana brother named Jimma Dache. *Fitawrari Tullu* is the father of *Wezero Ketsela Tullu*, who married *Hakim Warkneh Eshete* (Charles Martin). ; Nagada, "Yee *Ras Gobana Dachu Senedoch*," IES Ms. No. 4616, no year, p. 27.

commanded a force of approximately 4,000–5,000 cavalry and 6,000–7,000 infantry, some armed with rifles and others with lances. They looted and plundered cattle from Guduru (Gabre Sellasie, 2008, p. 64).

The Oromo cavalry forces also served as a symbol of ceremonial prestige, representing the dignity of rulers and nations. It is important to note that in 1878, both *Dajjazmach* Gobana and *Dajjazmach* Darge were elevated to the rank of *Ras*, becoming the first two *Ras* under Negus Menelik of Shoa (Bairu T., 1973, p. 35). Gobana, in particular, became the first individual in Shoa to receive the title of *Ras* without being of royal blood (ibid, 1975). *Aleqa* Atsme has documented the cavalry ceremonies of the time as follows:

ወታደሩ እየጨፈረ የደጃች ጎበና ሠራዊት የመላት ሎማ ኦሮሞ በፈረስ ጉግስ እየተጫወቱ በቀኝና በግራ ሁኖ እየጋለበ ሴቱ አልል እያለ ከደብርበርሃን [ከደበረብርሃን] ጀምሮ እስከ ቦሎ ወርቁ እስከ ሣርያ በሠራዊት ተመለሜዳው ሁሉ ጠቦ ነበረ። ንጉሡም ሕዝቡም በደስታ በከብር ልቼ ገቡ። ታላቅ በዓል ተደረገ። ታላቅ ምሣ ተሰናዳ ከምሣ በፊት ራስነት ለራስ ዳርጌና ለራስ ጎበና ተሰጠ።

(Atsme, 2009, p.342)

The soldiers danced, while the entire Oromo army of *Dejjach* Gobena, showcased their horsemanship, skillfully maneuvering on both the right and left flanks. Women cheered, and from Debre Birhan to Bolo Werke to Sarya, the field was filled with troops. The king and the people entered, overflowing with joy and pride. A grand celebration followed, complete with a sumptuous feast. Before the meal, the prestigious titles of *Ras* were bestowed upon *Ras* Darge and *Ras* Gobena.

The Oromo cavalry made significant sacrifices in the formation of the modern Ethiopian empire. For instance, 534 Tulama Oromo horses perished in the Battle of Embabo in 1882 (Harold Marcus, 2009, p. 145; Phawulos, 2002, p. 65, 153). Their pivotal role is also highlighted in the contributions of the Oromo people under *Fitawrari* Birru Nagewo (Cerulli, 1922; Mebrete Gergiso, 2020). In his widely read work *A Modern History of Ethiopia 1855–1991*, and in the third edition of the Amharic version published in 2003, *Yee Ethiopia Tarik Kee 1843–Eska 1983*, Bahru Zawde discusses these important contributions as follow:

...እንደተፈካከሩትም ግንቦት 29 1874 የጦር ሜዳ ተፈልጎ ሆኖ ጉድሩ ውስጥ ኤምባቦ ላይ ተገናኙ። ብርቱ ጦርነት ከተካሄደ በኋላ የጎጃም ነፍጥ እና መድፍ በሸዋ ፈረሰኛ (በተለይም በሰላሌ አና በወሎ ፈረሰኞች) ተራምዶ ምኒልክን ለድል፤ ተክለሃይማኖትን ለሸንፈት አበቁ። (Bahru, 2001, p. 71)

As the war reached its final stages, it was on June 6, 1882, that the Battle of Embabo unfolded on the Horro-Gudurru plateau. After intense fighting, the Shewan army, particularly the Salale and Wallo cavalry, secured a decisive victory for Menelik and inflicted a crushing defeat on Tekle Haimanot. The Shewan forces captured the entire Gojjame army and their artillery

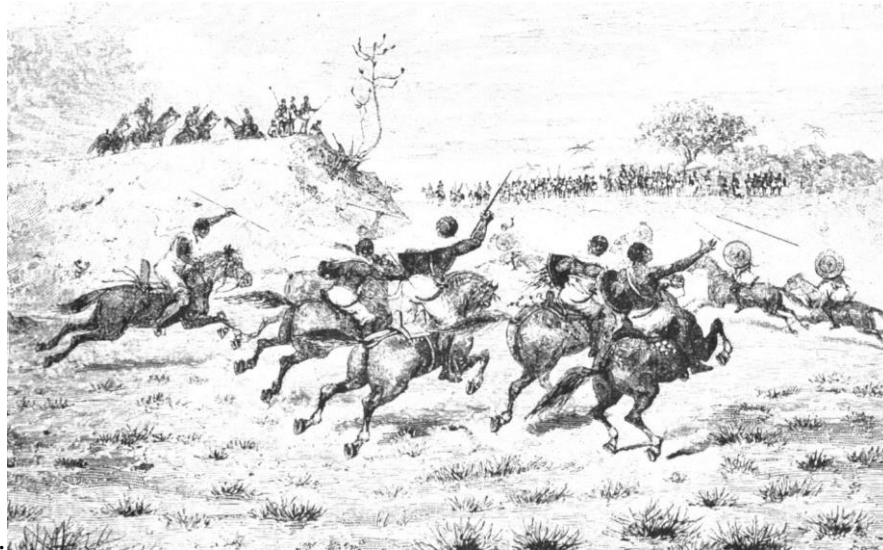


Figure 1: Portrait of Embabo in Guduru June 6, 1882.

The battle raged for several hours, with the men of *Negus* Teklehaimanot displaying remarkable bravery. However, they were eventually outmaneuvered by the strategic tactics of *Ras* Gobana (Bahru, 2001, p. 71; Tekla Tsadiq, 1982, p. 214). *Ras* Gobana's military strategy involved surrounding the Gojjame forces with his cavalry for two main reasons: to prevent any escape attempts and to avoid becoming targets for Gojjame gunfire. Unlike the Oromo, the Gojjames focused more on rifles than cavalry. Initially, an attack on the Shewan Oromo cavalry under *Ras* Gobana was repelled by several of Tekle Haimanot's cannons, causing the Shewan army to retreat, with only the king remaining calm on a high hill. However, the Shawans suddenly opened fire with the limited 200 rifles they had, creating such a deadly barrage that the Gojjame forces began to waver. In that critical moment, *Ras* Gobana arrived and launched an attack from behind, forcing the Gojjame to flee. *Ras* Gobana personally captured 40 prisoners (Bulatovich, 2000). Shockingly, on the third volley, the Gojjame's gun carriages malfunctioned and broke down.

After regrouping, Gobana's horsemen moved from the right flank to capture the enemy camp and encircle the entire Gojjame army. Hidden units of Oromo cavalry swept down on the Gojjame

lines, contributing to a decisive victory. Menelik praised their efforts, acknowledging that the cavalry forces had been crucial in winning the battle of Embabo (Caulk, 1972, p. 620). After heavy casualties on both sides, the Gojjames finally surrendered, giving up all their weapons (ibid.). The battle resulted in a staggering loss of life on both sides, with many Ethiopians and their horses falling in what was effectively a civil war at Embabo (Getachew, 2007, p. 27.96). From Shawa, 913 were killed, 1,648 wounded, and 534 horses, including that of Abba Dagnaw, were lost. On the Gojjame side, half of their forces perished, one-third was wounded, and only a few managed to escape to Gojjam (Tekla Yesus, 2002, p. 65, 153; Bizualem, 1971). Additionally, the plague claimed 3,123 lives, while a total of 4,036 people died either in battle or from disease in the aftermath (Gabre Sellasie, 2008, p. 78; Oljira Tujuba, 1994).

In the aftermath of the battle, *Ras Gobana* guided the survivors across the Abay River (Gabre Sellasie, 2008, p. 78). Menelik, along with the wounded king, entered Entoto on July 6, 1882, just a month after the battle. In October of the same year, Yohannes IV imposed a tax on the Shewans (Haggai, 2004, p. 36). During this time, Menelik was able to cover his expenses effortlessly. *Ras Gobana* presented Menelik with gifts, including 1,300 horses, 500 mules, gold, ivory, and musk (Soleillet, 1886, p. 97; Darkwah, 1966, p. 257).

After his victory over Gojjam at Embabo in 1882, Ras Gobana did not return to Shoa but instead led a second campaign toward Chabo in an attempt to subdue the Chabo Oromo. He advanced into their territory but was ambushed by the Chabo at Warego. During the encounter, Fitawrari Birru Nagawo Garri, a local Oromo chief from Jidha and Gobana's son-in-law, was killed by the Chabo (Greenfield, 1965, p. 75; Tabor, 2015, p. 507; Cerulli, 1922, p. 41). The loss of Fitawrari Birru Nagawo was widely mourned, and a song commemorating his death became popular, appearing in Cerulli's collection of Oromo songs. The song, which was well-known at the time, goes as follows:

| Afaan Oromo | Gloss |
|------------------|--|
| Birruu Nagawoo | Birru Nagewo, |
| Soddaa Goobanaa | son-in-law of Gobana! |
| Allaattii Caboo | O eagle of Cabo, |
| Gullo Warego | O hyena of Wego. |
| Shurrubaa Birruu | The hair of Birru, |
| nyaatte fixxemoo | Have you (O eagle, O hyena) eaten it entirely? |

| | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Tuulte kessee? | or have you piled it and kept (it)? |
| Caba rabata koo; | A bite of my supper |
| Caboo diinakoo! | Maybe Cabo, my enemy! |
| Jedhe Goobanni | said, Gobana |

(Cerulli Enrico, 1922. p.42).



Figure: *Ras Gobana* on horseback original taken from his monument at Debra libanos and reproduced on Menelik chronicle.

To avenge the death of his son-in-law Birru, *Ras Gobana* launched a third campaign against the Chabo Oromo in July–August 1882 after reorganizing his forces at Guder. Accompanying him was his godson, Biratu Gole of the Meta Oromo nobility, along with his sons, Garasu Birratu and Habte Gorgis. The Chabo rebellion continued into 1883, prompting Gobana to enlist the help of Habte Giorgis, who led the troops to encircle and ultimately overwhelm the Chabo forces. Through this brutal victory, Gobana sought to avenge his loss by cruelly massacring the Chabo. In response to the defeat, a Chabo minstrel composed a song.

Afaan Oromo

Yaa soressa koruma kori
 Soressi bonumma bone
 Yaa hiyyessa bo'umma bo'i
 Hiyyeessi bo'umma bo'e
 Qabbaneessaa ilma Danci

Gloss

O rich, be proud!
 The rich showed their pride,
 O poor shed your tears!
 The poor shed their tears.
 The cold (son) of Danci,

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Goobanaa farda qilleensaa qilleense | Gobana, whose horse galloped like the wind, |
| Goobana farda qilleensaa | Gobana whose horse is the wind, |
| Hindhuntu dhufa wal nu qixxessa | No doubt he will make us all equal |
| Dhufeeti walnuqixxeessee | Came and let us equal. |
| Waraanni gaaraa duulte | The invaders descended from the mountain, |
| Allaattin Cabos quufte | The vultures of Chabo were satisfied |

(Cerulli, 1922, p.102; Tamene, 1983, 321).

The Role of the Oromo Cavalry in the Survival of Ethiopian Independence.

In the formation of modern Ethiopia, Tulama horses were not only vital in warfare but also became a form of tribute and a commodity used for taxation. Regional lords and emperors required numerous cavalry units, and horses were often received as tributes to fulfill this need. In 1865, *Dajjach* Menelik fled from Meqdela and entered Warra Himanu, a province under the rule of Warqitu, who assisted Menelik in his return to Shawa (Tekla Yesus Waqjira, 2002, p. 125; Getahun Delebo, 1974, p. 34). During this time, the previously unknown Bezabih, who had proclaimed himself Negus of Shoa from 1863 to 1865, prepared to confront Menelik at his father's fate. In the meantime, Bezabih sent 2,000 birr and hundreds of Oromo horses and mules to Warqitu in an attempt to imprison Menelik in Wallo (Afewerk Gabreyesus, 1902, p. 23). It wasn't until 1868 that Menelik sent *Dajjach* (later *Ras*) Gobana as part of a diplomatic mission, offering over a thousand horses as gifts and tributes to Tekla Giorgis (Greenfield, 1965, p. 65; Phawulos, 1984, p. 48).

In 1875 and 1876, the Shoans paid thousands of horses to Emperor Yohannis IV as part of their tribute. On one occasion, Menelik of Shoa provided an enormous tribute of 50,000 Tegara birrs, 500 mules, 1,000 horses, 50,000 horned cattle, and other goods in kind (Sergew, 1982, p. 184). Emperor Yohannis used this cavalry to achieve decisive victories over the Egyptians at the battles of Gundet and Gura in 1875 and 1876, respectively (Zawde G. Sellassie, 1975; Aren, 1978, p. 373; Gustavo Bianchi, 1886, p. 482).

In 1878, following the Liche agreement, and again in 1882, after the “unwarranted war” at Embabo, the Shawans were forced to pay thousands of horses and mules as tribute. At this point, Menelik was easily able to cover his expenses. *Ras* Gobana, in turn, offered Menelik 1,300 horses, 500 mules, gold, ivory, and musk (Soleillet, 1886, p. 97; Darkwah, 1966, p. 221).

Another defining moment of the Tulama cavalry's dominance came in 1888, when Negus Menelik asked Gobana how he would confront the well-prepared Mahdists. Gobana replied, "All of my *Balambaras*, *Grazmach*, *Qagnazmach*, and *Fitawrari* have their cavalry forces with at least 30 to 50 of the best horsemen. I will mobilize them quickly; my *Grazmach* do not just hold names or titles like those of Gondar." Gobana swiftly mobilized his cavalry, moving them from Wechacha to Waliso Caca to Sibilu, and finally to Mecha. From Tulama alone, he managed to assemble a cavalry force of 3,000 men. A horse, in this context, was also a prized gift for veterans. When Gobana entered Shewa in late October 1888, King Menelik welcomed him and honored his general with recognition and gifts. This event has been recorded in chronicles as a significant moment in the history of the Tulama cavalry's power and influence.

.... በዚህም ዘመን በወለጋ በኩል ብዙ ነፍጥ ያለው ደርቡሽ ተነሣ። ራስ ጎበና ገሥግሦ ሄዶ ግምባር ገጥሞት ድል አድርጎ ፋጀው። ከዚያም ተመልሶ ግዳይ ጣለ። አጤ ምኒልክም ፋረስ ከነ ወርቅ መጣ ብሩ ባለ ወርቅ ጋሻ ባለ ወርቅ ጫማ ጎራዴ ማለፊያ ጠበንጃ የወርቅ ዝናር ባለወርቅ ለምድ ወርቅ ኩፊታ ግምጃ ሱሪ ግምጃ መታጠቂያ ቀጭን ድርብ ሸለሙት።

(Phawulos, 2010, pp.136-7, 334; Gabre Sellasie, 2008, p.115)

In this year's the well-equipped Dervish {Mahdist Sudan} came to Wallaga. *Ras* Gobana marched to the west to confront them and he has successfully beaten them. After his return from the campaign, King awarded *Ras* Gobana a full-fledged *Mexabari*, the golden shield, a golden decorated sword, a golden decorated belt, and other forms of awards.

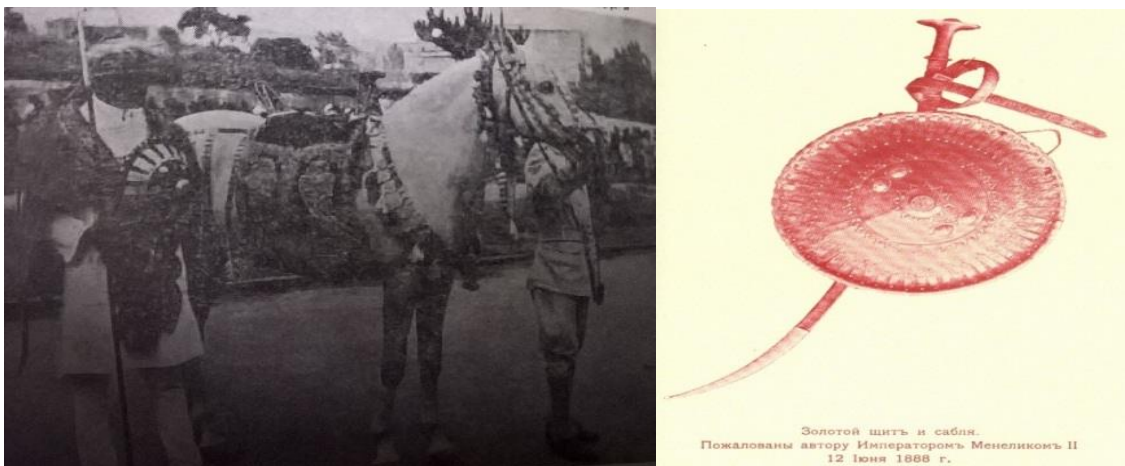


Figure 2: a horse decorated with *mexabir* and the sword for award Source: Mahateme Selasie, *Zekra Neger* and Alexander Bulatovich, *Ethiopia in the eyes of Russia*

At the Battle of Adwa in March 1896, the Oromo cavalry played a pivotal role, as observed by the Italians. Led by *Ras* Michael of Wollo, *Ras* Wale of Yejju, and *Fitwarari* Gabayahu around 8,000 Oromo cavalry soldiers inflicted significant damage, humiliating the Italian forces. The Oromo cavalry's age-set system, structured around ten groups, followed a traditional political organization. Young boys were trained as warriors from an early age, carrying their spears and shields into battle, which made them fearsome fighters admired across a vast region. As mounted infantrymen, their cavalry was particularly intimidating to the Italian soldiers, demoralizing them further. The Italian army's morale deteriorated with exaggerated reports of the Oromo cavalry, especially after European press outlets like *L'Illustrazione Italiana* published sensational stories in March 1896. Fear of the Oromo, amplified by rumors—such as the belief that they castrated only soldiers armed with weapons—caused many Italian soldiers to abandon their arms and flee in a panic (Jonas 2011, p. 213-214).

The Oromo cavalry's strength was evident in their aggressive tactics. When *Ras* Michael's forces arrived, they decisively broke through the Italian lines, killing the general and nearly annihilating Dabormida's brigade. In a small valley, they slaughtered Dabormida's troops, shouting "Reap! Reap!" Dabormida's body was never found, but an elderly local woman later revealed to his brother that she had given water to a high-ranking officer—likely Dabormida—along with an Italian officer who was gravely wounded (Quirico, 2014). Over 20,000 Oromo cavalrymen took part in the battle, and more than 2,000 horses were killed, the majority coming from Tulama and Wollo (Teklatsadiq, 1983).



Figure 3: Portrait of Oromo's Cavalry forces at the Battle of Adwa on March 1, 1896. From Italian sources; “*Ai feroci cavaliers arruolati tra me tribu die Oromo era assegnato il compi do razziare e annientare il nemico in ritirata*”. Meaning that (The ferocious cavaliers enlisted among the tribe of Oromo were assigned the task of raiding and annihilating the enemy in retreat). Adopted from *L' Illustrazione Italiana* in March 1896.

Many notable figures from Tulama, including *Dajjach* Caca Dobe, father of *Dajjach* Balcha Caca, and others such as *Fitawrari* Gabayyahu (Abba Goraw) and *Fitawrari* Walde Mikael (Geresu Biratu), perished in the conflict along their horses (Mebrete, 2019). *Ato* Mulatu, the Ethiopian cavalry commander at Adwa, died in the course of the battle on March 1, 1896 (Tekla Tsadiq Mekuria, 1936, p. 117). He was succeeded by another renowned cavalry leader, *Fitawrari* Hordofa Changare, also known by his horse's name, *Abba Derib*. Hordofa, an Oromo from Metta, was appointed chairman of the Ethiopian cavalry forces under Emperor Menelik II and Empress Zawditu. He passed away on February 18, 1931, and was succeeded by his son, *Ligaba* Bekele Hordofa (Maheteme Sellasie, 1961, p. 72).

The Arts of War among Oromo Cavalry

Among the Oromo, the "arts of war" in cavalry encompassed a range of strategies, tactics, and skills that were crucial for success in battle. These included:

1. *Reconnaissance and Scouting*: Cavalry units played a vital role in gathering intelligence about enemy positions, movements, and strengths. This information provided critical insights to command units, helping to shape the overall battle strategy.
2. *Flanking Maneuvers*: Known for their speed and agility, cavalry could maneuver around the enemy's flanks, launching attacks from the sides or rear. This tactic disrupted enemy formations and created confusion among opposing forces.
3. *Charges*: The cavalry charge was one of the most iconic tactics, designed to break through enemy lines using the sheer momentum and force of massed cavalry. This aggressive attack often overwhelmed enemy defenses.
4. *Skirmishing*: Cavalry units engaged in skirmishing, using hit-and-run tactics to harass and weaken the enemy without engaging in direct confrontation. These fast-paced operations were effective in tiring the enemy and creating openings for larger assaults.

5. *Pursuit and Exploitation*: Following a successful battle, cavalry would pursue retreating forces, preventing them from regrouping, capturing prisoners, and securing the battlefield to ensure victory was fully exploited.
6. *Raiding*: Cavalry units were skilled in conducting raids deep into enemy territory to disrupt supply lines, communications, and infrastructure. These raids weakened the enemy's ability to continue fighting and were strategically significant (Tabor, 2015; Jabesa, 1985).
7. *Screening and Covering*: Cavalry could be deployed to provide a screen for the main army, concealing their movements and intentions. This protective role shielded the army from potential surprise attacks and facilitated strategic maneuvering.
8. *Defensive Operations*: While less common, cavalry could be used in a defensive role to delay or harass advancing enemy forces. This tactic bought time for infantry and artillery to prepare for a more organized defense.
9. *Ambushes*: Cavalry's mobility allowed them to set up ambushes in key locations, catching the enemy off guard and inflicting significant damage through surprise attacks.
10. *Discipline and Formation*: Mastery of various cavalry formations, such as wedge, echelon, or column, was essential for effective battlefield operations. Maintaining these formations during the chaos of battle required exceptional discipline and coordination, making cavalry a highly valued force in historical military campaigns (Marcus, 1984).

These tactics and skills demanded rigorous training, precise coordination, and unwavering discipline, making cavalry units a formidable and essential component of military forces throughout history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Oromo cavalry played a pivotal role in shaping the military history of Ethiopia, particularly in preserving the nation's independence during a critical period from 1875 to 1900. Their remarkable skills in horsemanship, strategic flexibility, and tactical innovation, including flanking maneuvers, surprise attacks, and psychological warfare, allowed them to not only survive internal conflicts but also defend against foreign aggression. Though traditional cavalry units have become largely obsolete in the face of modern technological advancements, the enduring legacy of the Oromo cavalry's spirit—marked by resilience, discipline, and tactical ingenuity—continues to inspire and influence military strategies today. The history of the Oromo cavalry serves as a

testament to the importance of adaptability and skill in warfare, and its impact remains a cornerstone of Ethiopia's survival and strength in the modern era.

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