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Wollabo: Indigenous Technology that Magnify the Glory of Lake Abaya

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Abstract

The Wollabo transport technology, which sculls across Lake Abaya, plays an indispensable and highly visible role in enhancing the natural beauty and scenic landscape of Lake Abaya and its surrounding environs. It actually symbolizes the wisdom and invincibility of its builders and operators on Lake Abaya. Gidicho and Getseme are well-known for their expertise in building wollabo and rowing them on Lake Abaya. The construction, operation and its indispensable role evidently signaled deep rooted experience of our forefathers in probing solutions to problems that encountered them in their everyday life. Its production sensibly needs indigenous knowledge and strong and positive mental setup. With a strong believe in themselves, the inhabitants of both the shore and islands of the lake had developed a good experience of building this particular technology after inquisitively observing their environment. After thoroughly observing the manmade and natural processes taking place around them, they were attempted to construct knowledge that would enable them to solve problems, to challenge challenges, and to upgrade their life in different forms. They had attempted to integrate different forms of indigenous knowledge to make life comparatively easy. Among other examples, the construction of the wollabo and its remarkable ability to float on Lake Abaya exemplify living indigenous knowledge and technology. Therefore, this study intends to give some important insights with regard to the emergence and eventual development of this technology. In addition, it attempted to portray the efforts and skills exerted to operate wollabo. It also unveils acknowledgements and appreciations forwarded to the wollabo technology, its builders and operation systems and its contribution in facilitating interactions across people around lake Abaya. Data collected from wollabomen, elders, community leaders, and individuals, with extensive experiences and knowledge with the wollabo technology and the art of its sailing, carefully selected from Gidicho, Getseme, Mirab Abaya, Humbo, and Guji. To evidently and objectively reconstruct the emergence and development of wollabo transport technology, the researchers collected written documents, oral sources and travel accounts. Specifically, to gather oral sources, interviews and FGDs were carefully conducted during consecutive fieldworks. Data gathered from different contexts are cross-checked among each other to write an objective history of the subject. The

researchers also personally observed both the construction process and the operation of wollabo technology during successive fieldworks. The findings clearly exhibit the role of wollabo in magnifying the beauty and role of Lake Abaya in facilitating communications across the lake.
Keywords: *Glory, Indigenous knowledge, Lake Abaya, Magnify, Wollabo*

INTRODUCTION

Transport technologies have long been central to the development of human societies, enabling the movement of people, goods, and ideas. Indigenous transport systems, developed independently within local ecological and cultural contexts, often reflect sophisticated knowledge of materials, engineering, and environmental adaptation. The study of indigenous transport technology can be informed by material culture theory, which emphasizes how objects and technologies embody the knowledge, skills, and social practices of a community (Miller, 1987). Similarly, ethno-technology frameworks consider how traditional communities design, construct, and operate technologies adapted to their environment, highlighting the interplay of skill, experience, and cultural values (Bunn, 2022).

Likewise, the inhabitants of the shores and islands of Lake Abaya developed considerable expertise in constructing their own indigenous transport technology for navigating the lake. In the Abaya Basin, the people of Gidicho and Getseme were the first engineers to construct *wollabo* transport technology (Hodson, 1927). Bounded by water and confined to island settings, these communities studied their environment in search of transport technology to cross the lake. Communities living on the shores of Lake Abaya had a firm stance on the fact that the Gidicho were the first to construct and row *wollabo*. They learned about the prospects of constructing this transport technology from their observation of *soke* wood floating on the lake. After witnessing this fact, they decided to build *wollabo* to easily row on the lake. Afterwards, the Sidama, who had abundant *soke* tree, had learnt the skill of constructing *wollabo* technology directly from the Gidicho.

To date, no written work has exclusively or primarily focused on this transport technology. Consequently, this area of research has received limited scholarly attention. However, there are studies that mainly deals with the intimate cultural, social, economic and organizational interdependence among the people living in the shores and islands of the lake. The lake is accessible to the inhabitants of both islands and the shores. The lake becomes accessible due to the invention of *wollabo* technology. This implies that studies focusing on the interactions between

the inhabitants of the islands and the shores must also give due attention to this transport technology to render their analyses complete and comprehensive. However, no single work has given due attention to this particular subject. Accordingly, this manuscript presents an original contribution by providing a comparatively more detailed analysis of the topic.

There is no comprehensive study that gives lengthy insight with regard to the wisdom of *wollabo* building and operation, its distinctive features, skill and experience of rowing and related knowledge in the endeavor of human interactions in the area. It is important to underscore that the *wollabo* indigenous transport technology has received little attention in social science research. W*ollabo* transport technology, its nature, role, and expertise applied to row it still remains insufficiently explored. To date, this subject has not been subjected to intensive and extensive investigation capable of exhaustively analyzing and synthesizing. Rather, there are fragments of written accounts left behind by travelers, and researchers who investigate the dynamics of socio-economic forms of interactions as a passing reference to their respective main points of discussion. To start with, Fleming (1964), a socio-linguist, who conducted fieldwork in the lake's region in 1958 and 1960, points out the existence of constant conflicts between the inhabitants of Gidicho Island and the inhabitants of the eastern shore before the resurgence of the imperial state in the 1880s and 1890s (Fleming, 1964). Similarly, Cerulli (1956), who was seriously engaged in the publication of an ethnographic survey of Africa since 1941, also argues that the Kore, who lived in the area north of the Burji and east of the lake in the sixteenth century, were on bad terms with Gamo. The author also points out the frequent occurrence of confrontations which were waged through the isthmus called "God's Bridge", which separates lakes Abaya and Chamo (Cerulli, 1956). Although these authors acknowledge the existence of communication between communities on the opposite shores of the lake, they do not provide insights into *wollabo* or its role in facilitating such interactions. Investigations and discussions concerning communication across the lake are incomplete unless the role of *wollabo* is incorporated.

Likewise, Epple (2016), in her "salvage ethnographic work", states that people living around the lake have strong contact among each other. Epple has evidently expressed the nature of the interaction as: "Bond friendship around Lake Abaya links individuals within and across ethnic boundaries through an institutionalized and socially recognized relationship based on mutual solidarity, support, exchange of gifts and emotional bond" (Epple, 2016). Epple provides some

insights into *wollabo* as a point of departure for discussing topics and sub-topics related to the material culture of the inhabitants of Gidicho Island. However, this ethnographic account offers only limited information on *wollabo*, focusing mainly on the materials used in its construction and its major components. According to Brogger (1986), the Gedeo were served as intermediate host to the regional trade system of the people of the eastern shore of the lake before 1890s in which the merchants of the Borena, Guji, and Sidama were actively engaged. According to Brogger, the Gedeo had freely traveled and also conducted exchange of goods with the Guji. Brogger also elucidates that the Gedeo had frequently carried out trade contact with the Gamo and Wolaita by traversing the lake. Brogger adds that ethnic groups of the western shore of Lake Abaya, who lacked the technology necessary to preserve *enset (ensete ventricosum)*, had bought it from the Gedeo. The same author states that *enset* plant grown at the altitudes of Gedeo was perceived to have a more disease-resistance power (Brogger, 1986). Brogger evidently and empirically exhibits the level of interdependence established between communities living on the eastern and western shores of Lake Abaya. Transportation of commodities from one side of the lake to the other needs transport mechanism, most of the time *wollabo*. However, Brogger had stated nothing with regard to this transport technology.

Berhanu (1993), in his MA Thesis, also underlines the existence of a palpable trade relationship between Gedeo, Guji, and Gidicho Island. He also enumerates the market centers which were expediently situated in the nearby regions of the eastern shore of the lake. These exchange centers include; Wonago, Waldana, Melka, Dabobasa, and Buqqissa. These markets were strategically positioned in the region where region-wide exchanges were taking place by the merchants of Sidama, Gedeo, Wolaita, Guji, Arsi and Borena Oromo merchants. Berhanu adds that most of the commodities of the region had been passed through the lake (Berhanu, 1993). Although Berhanu clearly acknowledges the transportation of commodities across Lake Abaya, his thesis makes no reference to *wollabo*, the transport technology that facilitated these movements. The Gidicho, inhabitants of the island bearing the same name in the lake, are identified as part of regional interaction and communication. However, Berhanu provides no information on the means by which they maintained communication with the shoreline communities. In the same fashion, the existence of steadfast trade interaction between the peoples of the eastern and the western shores is substantiated by Awoke (1985) who points out the frequent trade exchange that appears among Kore, Gamo, Gedeo, and Guji (Awoke, 1985). These communities are located on the eastern shore

(Kore, Gedeo, and Guji) and the western shore (Gamo) of Lake Abaya. Their physical environments are separated by the lake; therefore, issues of transportation and communication between them warrant equal attention. However, Awoke does not address this aspect in his study.

Similarly, Braukmann (2012), who had investigated the political and cultural challenges of the life of the inhabitants of Gidicho Island, also suggests that the inhabitants of the Island were operated as intermediaries to trade contacts carried out between the eastern and western shores. According to Braukmann, the inhabitants of Gidicho Island had trade contacts with the Gedeo agro-pastoralists, Guji pastoralists, and Gamo weavers. Nevertheless, *wollabo* and its contribution to facilitating such interactions and communications receive little attention in Braukmann's discussion. The Gidicho had no alternative means of communication with the shoreline communities other than rowing *wollabo* across the lake. Therefore, any discussion of interactions between the inhabitants of Gidicho Island and the shore remains incomplete without incorporating *wollabo* and its role. In addition, Jackson (1971), in his investigation of the market structures of the densely populated Gamo Highland, points out that *addo* (a salty earth added to cattle diets) was brought to the Ezo market, found in Gamo highland where the troops of Emperor Menelik II had built garrisons, from the eastern shores of Lake Abay (Jackson, 1971). *Addo*, gathered from the eastern shore, was, of course, one of the major commodities that have been transported through the communication line across the lake. McClellan (1984) also verifies this thesis by signifying the fact that the merchants of Gedeo had carried *enset* to Gidicho Island to exchange it for *addo* (McClellan, 1984).

The above literatures attest that the shore communities had an evolving and deep-rooted socio-economic interaction by using the inhabitants of Islands as an intermediary force. They have evidently and slightly depicted the volume of trade conducted across Lake Abaya. However, none of them give an important and deserved insight on the role of *wollabo* to realize the socio-economic interaction of communities of the region. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have contact between the inhabitants of the islands and communities of the shores without *wollabo*. The communities of the shores who are separated by the widely laying lake could not make any form of contact across the lake in its the absence. That means *wollabo* and the knowledge of its builders are critically needed to facilitate any form of community-to-community and individual-to-individual contact that has occurred in the area for centuries. Therefore, the researchers believe that, discussions and

analyses made on different forms of interactions and experiences of co-existence that endured in the region could not be full-fledged by disregarding the pivotal role of *wollabo* and indigenous knowledge of its builders. Therefore, the primary intention of this manuscript is to portray the wisdom of our forefathers in building and operating the *wollabo*, with particular emphasis on its local character, major features, the skills and experiences required to row it, its contribution to facilitate interactions across the lake, and the appreciation and recognition attributed to it.

Therefore, this research finding highlights the wisdom of our ancestors in constructing, rowing and improving the *wollabo* transit technology to facilitate communication across the lake. It also serves as a reminder to both local and national governments to thoroughly excavate heritages like *wollabo* to clearly demonstrate our ancestors' contribution to the entirety of global civilizations. In addition, it helps the youth to comprehend the knowledge and skill of their forefathers in improving their material culture through relentless effort. Furthermore, it provides guidance to researchers who are interested in conducting further research on the same subject.

Unlike the accounts discussed above, this manuscript emphasizes the wisdom applied in the construction and operation of *wollabo* transport technology. It primarily examines its indigenous nature, distinctive features, rowing expertise, contributions to facilitating interaction and interdependence, and the appreciations and recognitions attributed to *wollabo*. Moreover, discussions of these aspects of *wollabo* aim to depict the wisdom of our forefathers as developed independently of external influences. In doing so, the researchers seek to address the gaps clearly evident in the existing written accounts. Accordingly, this manuscript focuses on explaining *wollabo* transport technology in terms of its physical characteristics, modes of operation, services, and the recognition it receives from its users.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is qualitative in nature and uses direct data collection approach to gather data from different contexts. Within this approach, researchers applied different data collection tools. To start with, they sustained their research journey through gathering of primary and secondary sources through intensive and extensive fieldworks carried out in the region. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used. Interviews were conducted in Amharic language, Baiso, Gamotho, and Wolaitatto. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. In

addition, FGDs were conducted to capture collective views, shared experiences, and community-level interpretations of the subject. A discussion guide was used to facilitate interaction among participants. Each FGD lasted approximately 60 minutes, and discussions were moderated by the researchers.

The selection of informants was guided by purposive sampling, which enable the researchers to identify individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience to the *wollabo* transport technology. Key informants included elders, community leaders, practitioners, and individuals with extensive experience and knowledge related to the topic and *wollabo* sailing tasks. The use of this approach attest that data was collected from participants capable of providing rich, detailed, and contextually grounded information**.** All in all, a total of 30 key informant interviews were conducted to gather oral sources. These comprises ten elders and eight community leaders. The number of practitioners and knowledgeable individuals participated as an informant were respectively four and eight. All of them were participants of both interviews and FGDs. Six focus group discussions (FDGs) comprising equal number of participants (five) were administered. The number was determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or significant information emerged.

The study sites were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives. Selection criteria included; the sites' historical significance, the presence of knowledgeable community members, and their direct connection to the subject of the study. Therefore, the islands and the shores of Lake Abaya were the sites where interviews and FGDs were carried out. The three villages of Gidicho, that means Baiso, Shigma and Haro, Wajifo, Humbo, and Malka Market were the most important sites where interviews and FGDs were conducted. Choosing these sites enabled the researchers to gather data from locations where the inhabitants are familiar with the *wollabo* technology and its indispensable services. Since the study relied primarily on qualitative data, data that include narratives, experiences, personal accounts, collective interpretations were gathered.

The researchers had also visited different libraries, archival centers and Manuscript Section of the Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies found in the regions between Addis Ababa and Arba Minch. Moreover, personal collections were assiduously searched and collected somewhat satisfactorily from private houses. Additionally, the researchers conducted field observations in the

same region to get an eyewitness data with regard to parts of the *wollabo,* operation of the *wollabo* across the lake. Furthermore, scholarly research findings available in different forms were critically consulted. As part of this method, observational notes recorded during field visits were gathered. Moreover, travel accounts were cautiously read, and pertinent notes were taken out to write this manuscript.

Methods of data analysis applied to this particular investigation is descriptive one. Here, *wollabo*, as one of the key expressions of indigenous knowledges, is briefly examined with emphasis on its role in facilitating interactions in the area. Moreover, data gathered through the above data gathering tools from different contexts were critically evaluated to write this manuscript. Primary sources are evaluated in terms of originality and authenticity while secondary sources are also evaluated to ensure their reliability and credibility. After integrating and organizing the evaluated data, descriptive and analytical interpretations were undertaken to present the subject meaningfully. More importantly, data collected from different contexts are cross-checked in line with authenticity, reliability, originality and impartiality principles of historical writing.

The use of such multiple data sources strengthened data triangulation, which in turn enhanced the reliability and analytical depth of the study. Based on evidence gathered from diverse contexts through multiple methodological approaches, this study aims to demonstrate the wisdom of our forefathers in developing and operating *wollabo* transport technology, with particular emphasis on its indigenous nature, distinctive features, the appreciation attributed to it, the skills and experiences required to row it, and its indispensable role in facilitating interactions across the lake.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Local Genius or Foreign Imprint?

Wollabo is an indigenous technology that vividly demonstrates the ingenuity and accumulated wisdom of our forefathers in designing and manufacturing tools capable of alleviating the challenges of everyday life. In the country level, there has been a long-lived and empirical experience of manufacturing indigenous transport technologies in different size and form from locally accessible and natural materials. The people living around Lake Tana made *Tankwa* by binding papyrus stalks together. Similarly, the Omotic people have also a good practice of building a dug-out canoe to cross the Omo River in ancient period. It is also palpable that residents of different villages of Lake Haiq and its environs are well-known by manufacturing their own

version of transport technology from locally accessible reeds of Lake Haiq. Available evidences also verify the widespread use of sack-like inflated goat-skin to move across water bodies (Whiteway, 1961; Dubois, 2008; Flemming, 1985). This experience is also clearly supported by Belayneh (2009 E.C.), who documents the practices and innovations of the Bulqi and Wurky villagers in the Gofa region. According to him, these villagers were crossing Umma River to Dawaro and Jimma by using sack-like inflated goat skin (Belayneh, 2009 E.C.).

In the same fashion, communities living in the Lake Abaya basin have been well-known in manufacturing local transport technology from high-plowed *ambatch* wood (scientific name, *herminiera elaphroxyion*) which was abundantly available in the region. The Gidicho, Gesteme, and Sidama, which had abundantly available *ambatch* plant, were well-known in constructing wollabo. The skill of constructing *wollabo* or the *wollabo* transport technology itself were not directly copied from the other corners of the world. Available sources evidently portray that *wollabo* is an indigenous technology produced by the inhabitants of the islands and shores of the lake. The idea, construction procedures, skill and wisdom applied to construct this transport technology were formulated and in due course advanced in the mindset of the communities of the region. It has been one of the indigenous technologies constructed in the islands and shores of the lake through try-and-error techniques. The technology is need-driven and cost-effective, as it was readily manufactured from locally accessible materials.

In response to environmental challenges, the local communities had demonstrated remarkable ingenuity and resilience by developing innovative solutions through systematic observation of their surroundings. The critical observation of the environment enables them to construct *wollabo* transport technology. The nature of their environment, which is bounded by water, forced them to desperately find out means of communication across the lake. They perceived it as a means of survival on such environment. Consequently, in order to maintain connections with communities on neighboring islands and the lakeshore, and to sustain their livelihood on the lake, they acquired the knowledge to build *wollabo* and the expertise to navigate it effectively. That means the Gidicho and the Getseme had acquired the skills of constructing this indigenous transport technology and navigating it across Lake Abaya entirely by their own.

The name given to the *wollabo* itself underscores its indigenous nature. It is true that the diverse names attributed to this technology across various linguistic groups provide compelling evidence

of its indigenous origin. The name bestowed by the Wolaita is *wogollo* while the Gidicho and Getseme termed the same technology as *wollabo*. This naming pattern gives an imperative hint to argue that *wollabo* is an indigenous technology. Moreover, inputs used to reconstruct *wollabo* are both locally available and named by different languages of the region. *Borbono*, commonly known as *soke*, is a water-adapted tree characterized by its softness and lightness. Its properties are suitable for crafting lightweight structures like *wollabo*. It was plentiful along the western and northeastern parts of the lake's shores, providing a readily available resource for local communities to build *wollabo*. Therefore, the communities living in these regions and islands used this abundantly available natural resource to manufacture this problem-solving transport technology.

Another important evidence that attests the indigenous nature of this transport technology is oral tradition which is widely narrated by the inhabitants of Gidicho Island with regard to the origination of the construction process (Eshetu, 2012; Brenzinger, 1995; Tadele, 2014; Council of Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State, Arba Minch University, and Gamo Gofa Zone Cultural, Tourism and Communication Bureau, 2008 E.C.). Oral tradition of the Gidicho verifies that the foundation for its construction was directly related with critical observation of the floating of a piece of *soke* tree in the lake.

> We were able to make *wollabo* after observing the *soke* wood that used to float widely on Lake Abaya. This wood, known as *soke*, is light in weight and capable of floating easily on water. It was readily available along the shores of the lake and around the islands. Our ancestors, having observed the buoyancy of this wood, came to the understanding that it could be used to construct a watercraft suitable for rowing on the lake. On this basis, the making of *wollabo* became possible, enabling the easy crossing of Lake Abaya (Macuqe Galle, 22nd February 2021).

The residents of Gidicho Island were amazed to see a piece of *soke* wood floating in the lake. This frequent observation and inspection directly instruct them to build *wollabo* from the same wood, *soke*. This indicates that through meticulous observation, they were able to determine that the floating properties of the wood would facilitate the construction of wollabo for effective rowing across the lake. Henze (1977), who personally visited the area in 1977, also substantiate that *wollabo* was built of peeled logs of *soke* plant that was abundantly grows along most Rift Valley lakes and rivers (Henze, 1977). Thus, *wollabo* is an important symbol of our forefathers' good

experience of learning from observation through critical eyes. Due to this creative experience, the construction of *wollabo* transport technology, the communities of the islands and the shore made the lake their communication line and means of socio-economic interaction among the wider areas. Thus, *wollabo* stands as an indigenous craft, reflecting the ingenuity and problem-solving abilities of our forefathers in addressing the difficulties they encountered. Nevertheless, existing sources provide no definitive evidence regarding the precise period in which the first *wollabo* was built in the history of the region.

Major Features of the *Wollabo* Technology

Wollabo has a unique shape and peculiar nature with an open stern. It's a technological wonder and spectacular transport technology that ease communication among communities living in the Lake Abaya basin since ancient period. Both FGD participants and interviewees affirmed that *wollabo* transport technology represents a remarkable innovation of their ancestors. They unanimously expressed appreciation for both the ingenuity of this technology and its indispensable role in facilitating communication among communities in the region. Informants strongly emphasized the role of *wollabo* in enhancing the prominence of the lake, as well as its symbolic significance in commemorating the creativity and wisdom of their forefathers. Informants expressed deep admiration for the beauty and captivating appeal of their transport technology.

> The transport boat known as *wollabo* is a heritage of our forefathers that we see and enjoy in our daily lives. When *wollabo* glides over Lake Abaya, viewing it from both near and afar is always a source of joy. *Wollabo* is an expression of our identity, which we admire with deep affection. It is a creative legacy of our ancestors that has enhanced the beauty of both Gidicho Island and Lake Abaya (FGD participants in Shigma site).

Oral sources portray *wollabo* transport technology as a cultural heritage and a source of joy and aesthetic value for the communities of the region. It is a valuable innovation that is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of these communities. People take pleasure in its daily movement across the lake and proudly benefit from its services. Moreover, they continue to enjoy and actively participate in its production process. They continue to construct it in diverse sizes and forms, reflecting the adaptability and evolving manifestations of *wollabo* technology (Ballamo Worba, Personal Interview, June 07 2022; and Beneke Gurtumo, Personal Interview, February 24 2021).

The spectacular and enjoyable features of *wollabo* are corroborated by observers who have had the opportunity to visit the lake on which it rows. During his visit of Gidicho Market in 1969, Henze (1977) evidently expresses his admiration to *wollabo* indigenous technology as "what caught our eye first on arriving there. . . was something far more unique. Two of the high-prowed ambatch boats that are the glory of this lake. . ." (Henze, 1977). He also adds that *wollabo* ". . . are probably the most handsome still in use anywhere in Africa." Henze who got the chance to visit the Sunday Market of Melka, located on the eastern shore of the lake, had appreciated his good luck of observing a large number of boats loaded with goods and marketers floating on the lake on the same day. His observation evidently shows that *wollabo* is a beautiful indigenous technology that had a quality to attract both observers and users.

Likewise, Lobley depicts *wollabo* as "the proof of the enduring nature of primitive boats in backwaters is to be found in Africa." He adds that the Gidicho are continuing to use "one of the most interesting boats of all time. . ." His additional words used to admire *wollabo* include "so far as is known the *hobolo* [to mean *wollabo*] exists nowhere else. By this, he implies that its remarkable buoyancy on the lake never fails to amaze anyone who has the opportunity to observe it (Lobley, 1972). Hodson (1927) who went out to catch fish in one of the *wollabo* argues that ". . . quite unlike any other kind of boat he had seen" (see picture I below). Hodson was amazed by the buoyancy of the *wollabo* due to the extreme lightness of the wood item from which it is made rather than its watertight nature (Hodson, 1927). Other available sources also attest that *wollabo* of lake Abaya is beautifully structured, graceful, one of the lightest and most buoyant boats of all time (Talbot, 1952; Lobley, 1972; and Rutland, 1978). More importantly, *wollabo* is one of the oldest craft still in use in continental Africa (Rutland, 1978; and Lobley, 1972).

The above reports of travelers' observations and writers accounts depict that one of the significant characteristics of *wollabo* transport technology is its high buoyancy, a property derived from the lightweight quality of the wood used in its construction, enabling it to float efficiently. *Wollabo* is not by its nature watertight but float on the water surface like rafts. Most of the time, it is made of curved poles of *ambatch* wood locally known as *soke* in Gidicho and the shores. Its construction has been started by carefully linking *soke* sticks to each other parallel with wooden nails, locally known as *bel'e* in Baiso language. The *wollabo* is uncaulked and water can find its way between the curved baulks of *ambatch* wood that form the hull. That means, it has space between logs

which are themselves entwined by *bel'e*. Therefore, waves slosh up through the logs which are lashed together with bark. Moreover, the bottom and sides of *wollabo* are riveted together with wooden pegs. Its front part, on the other hand, is bent up to two meters height. All of these features of the *wollabo* makes it virtually unsinkable. Though it looks heavy, it is as light as foam plastic or cork when lifted (Henze, 1973; Lobley, 1972; Henze, 1977; Rutland, 1978; Safari Magazine, vol.3, 1972; Brenzinger, 1995; Talbot, 1952; Epple, 2016; Eshetu, 2012; Braukmann, 2012; Hodson, 1927; Buxton, 1967).

Picture I: *Wollabo* used by Arnold Hodson in June 1915

CANOE ON LAKE MARGHERITA.

Source: (Hodson, 1927)

A large fleet of *wollabo*, varies in size from small to large, stunningly took several mules and their owners from one side of the lake to the other. The floating of this technology on Lake Abaya magnifies its glory. That means from small to large size *wollabo*, constructed with spectacular view, move across the lake with beautiful and attractive motion (Hodson, 1927). *Wollabo* with graceful prows drawn up vertically to a fine tapering point has been remarkably rowing on the

lake. A big raft has been built by using about fifty *ambtach* trees and 500 wooden nails. The small and simple form of *wollabo* used for transporting a person and his belongings is made of five to six *ambatch* trees. The length of the *wollabo* also varies from five to ten meters with an approximate width of 1.5 meters (Epple, 2016; Brenzinger, 1995; Eshetu, 2012; and Braukmann, 2012). The *wollabo* of Lake Abaya with different sizes has enough buoyancy to carry several people and cargo across the lake. During market-days, on either side of the lake, there were great numbers of boats that floated on the lake to transport people, goods and animals both from islands and shores and vice versa (Edwards, 1962). During market days, huge *wollabo* go back and forth continuously for several hours. A single boat, if not too heavily laden with goods, may carry as many as 12 passengers (Henze, 1973; Lobley, 1972; and Henze, 1977). The small size *wollabo* that only serves to transport commodities was known as *fako* in Baiso (Hodson, 1927; Edwards, 1962; and Tadele, 2014). Buxton (1967), who visited the area in 1943, also astonishingly observed while boats crazily transported heavy cargoes and several passengers each from island to island and all up and down the lake (Buxton, 1967). Anyone who gets the chance to visit Lake Abaya today would not imagine that such huge and spectacular *wollabo* like the one depicted below on picture II were floating on the lake.

Picture II: *wollabo* on Lake Abaya in 1943

49. The beautiful boats of Lake Abaya (Margherita). These are made of Ambatch, and float well owing to the extraordinary lightness of that wood.

Source: (Buxton, 1967)

The above picture preserved from the eyewitness account of Buxton depicts large volume of the fleet on the lake and the strong trade tie made across the lake. As readers could easily understood from the picture itself, large and many *wollabo* were floating across the lake almost five decades ago, when Buxton visited the lake's region. Even in the early twentieth century, the transportation system across the lake was evocatively carried out. Hindlip (1906), who saw a large number of reed boats dotted about in different parts of the shores of Lake Abaya in 1906, thought that a kind of boat service existed from one side to the opposite side of the lake. He adds that there were perhaps as many as 50 *wollabos* involved in this mass movement (Buxton, 1967; and Hindlip, 1906).

The life span of *wollabo* has been mainly determined based on the nature of the season. It is known that the wooden poles used to make *wollabo* gets heavy after a while by absorbing water. Water streaming into it during sculling rots it. It serves a maximum of three months in the summer season due to strong wave. Paddling during this season has been characterized by a kind of struggle between the wave and the *wollabo*. In contrary to this, the *wollabo* could serve for about five months during the winter season due to the relative calm of the wave. That means sailing during this particular season is relatively easy. Therefore, the friction between the wave and *wollabo* become less. Due to this fact, the life span of the *wollabo* has been extended to more than two months. Some other writers extended the life span of *wollabo* to a year, i.e., functional until the wood became waterlogged. After a year, therefore, the *wollabo* is discarded and replaced by a new one (Brenzinger, 1995; Braukmann, 2012; Epple, 2016; Siebert and et al, 1994; Tadele, 2014; Henze, 1973; Lobley, 1972; Henze, 1977; Rutland, 1978; Safari Magazine, vol.3, 1972; and Talbot, 1952).

The Skills and Experiences of Rowing *Wollabo*

The key question, here, is: where did the paddlers acquire the skills necessary to operate the *wollabo* and scull across one of the country's largest lakes, Lake Abaya?" Of course, operating a *wollabo* necessarily involves the skilled art of sculling, which demands experience, balance, and coordination. The owners of *wollabo* have been well acquainted with the skill of operating *wollabo* through try- and-error. *Wollabo* owners had eventually developed their expertise to manage the overall transport service across the lake. As part of the sculling practice on the lake, they had developed a good knowledge of envisaging the time and direction of the wave system of the Lake

(Ballamo Worba, Personal Interview, June 7/2022; and Beneké Gurtumo, Personal Interview, February 24 2021). The wave system of the lake is well defined in terms of time and direction based on their experiences. The wave system of the lake was too strong to challenge movements across it. There are different wave systems identified by paddlers in particular and communities of the region in general. These include; *logodo, golando, ergado, hanagado*, *borodawo*, *hagasto*, and *shafa*. Among them, the *hanagado*, *hagasto*, *logodo* and *shafa* are branded as the most powerful wave systems which highly distressed the journey across the lake. Since the paddlers possessed prior knowledge of the specific timing and direction of wave movements, they adjusted either the timing or the direction of their day-to-day sculling accordingly. Their experience enables them to know the magnitude and direction of the wave system before they leave their home to row. They know the nature of the wave before personally come to the shore and see it (Damota Uqa Bocho, Personal Interview, June 06 2021). This is one of the peculiar natures of wisdom that they had developed to manage the whole journey across the lake. This also gives them deserved authority to determine the whole process of journey across the lake system. (Mirab Abaya *Woreda* Cultural, Tourism and Communication Bureau, MS, nd; and Tadele, 2014).

As part of the maneuvering of *wollabo* transport service, organized efforts of paddlers and their assistants are necessitated. A large *wollabo* is propelled by two or three standing *wollabomen* who punt them with long poles tipped with chunks of the thick lower trunk of the *ambatch* (see picture III below). That means operation of the *wollabo* desperately required high skills and perfect coordination of movements among the paddlers. The paddles consist of a long, three meter long, curved pole to the end of which is fastened to a large block of *ambatch*, most oddly shaped and reinforced with two short sticks of harder wood. The front part of the *wollabo* is bent up to almost two meters high while the rear part is under water during its movement across the lake. This terminal block is too buoyant to sink, too bulky to move appreciably through the water, and the paddlers (standing at the back of the *wollabo*), having dropped their paddle ends into the water, simply push with a punting action. In fact, *wollabo*, whether in shallow water or deep, are not paddled but just punted (Henze, 1973; Henze, 1977; Buxton, 1967; and Brenzinger, 1995).

The operation of *wollabo* transport technology across the lake is dynamic. The tools used near the shore is quite different from the tools used at the center section of the lake, where water level is too deep. This basically means that the impellers used different bargepoles to navigate at the initial

stage of the journey and in the middle of it. They used a long stick, locally known as *hankalcho*, to paddle *wollabo* near the shores where the water is supposed to be shallow. However, when they reached deep into the lake, the impellers just prefer to use *ferfera* to navigate. *Ferfera* is attached with logs made of *soke* wood which has about 80 cm length and 20 cm width (see picture III below). The *ferfera* has 2.5 meters height. Other important instruments for the navigation, locally known as *areferfera* which means the sub branch of the *ferfera*, are attached in both sides of the tip of the *ferfera* so as to easily insert it into water during sculling. In addition, the impellers have to be careful in properly operating the *wollabo* and properly using and organizing other important instruments in appropriate place and time for efficient and effective sculling (Epple, 2016; and Brenzinger, 1995).

These all knowledges, skills, and experiences are important to scull *wollabo* across the lake. Therefore, paddlers and their assistants working as *wollabomen* should know the nature of the *wollabo*, wave system of the lake, and need to have the experience and skill of successfully sculling across this large lake. Such organized efforts and successful lake crossings not only demonstrate skill but also enhance the beauty and cultural significance of the region. It is just enjoyable and wonder to both observers, from both far and near, and travelers. That means the natural beauty and glory is accompanied by human creativity and wisdom which magnify the beauty and attraction of the region (Henze, 1977; Hindlip, 1906; Berhanu, 1993; Hayward, 1978; Fleming, 1964; Siebert and et al, 1994; Braukmann, 2012; Epple, 2016; and MS, File number 3ዩ37/10/58, 4/2/1958 E.C.; MS, Folder number 17,1.16.13, file number 17.1.16.13.02, Nehase1957 E.C.)

Picture III: *wollabo* and its parts

Source: (Tadele, 2014)

The above picture clearly depicts the skills and experience required to scull a *wollabo* on Lake Abaya. The effective and efficient coordination of the paddlers resulted in the successful sculling of the *wollabo*. Wollabo paddlers interviewed by the researchers proudly explained that the expertise of rowing *wollabo* has been transmitted from generation to generation through rigorous practice and training. They emphasized the importance of coordination among paddlers to ensure effective and efficient transportation across the lake. Both the paddlers in particular and the community in general regard *wollabo* as an integral part of their material culture, while the skill of rowing it symbolizes their curiosity and dedication to learning and applying knowledge. They also expressed deep appreciation for the efforts of their forefathers, who initiated and developed this skill for navigating the lake (Banja Balta, Personal Interview, February 27 2021; and Anteneh Wogga, Personal Interview, June 7 2021).

Contribution of *Wollabo* in Facilitating Interactions across the Lake

The questions the researchers seek to pose here are: what strategies did the communities living in and around this vast lake conceive to ensure their survival within such a diversified environmental context? Did they attempt to make the environment more conducive to communication through creative responses, or did they instead use it as a pretext to abandon the region and migrate elsewhere? Oral sources confirm that the rationale for constructing the *wollabo* and its indispensable role in facilitating interactions provides a clear and direct answer to these key questions. It guaranteed their survival and also served as a means to confront and overcome the challenges they encountered. Any forms of interaction and integration experienced between communities of the shore on one hand, and with the inhabitants of the islands on the other across the lake was mostly carried out by *wollabo* (Gula Zeleqe, Personal Interview, January 17 2021). Informants evidently verify this fact. "This route was a relatively shortest and the most familiar one preferred by communities of the region. It was also the safest route for travelers and commodities for centuries" (Kara Madaro, Personal Interview, June 07 20121). Thus, it has memorable role in facilitating and widening the horizon of the socio-economic interactions of the communities living in the region. The construction of the *wollabo* also enhanced the strategic significance and role of the inhabitants of Gidicho and Getseme islands. This means mainly due to the construction of *wollabo*, the inhabitants of Gidicho and Getseme islands had functioned as a business liaison.

Wollabo plays an indispensable role in facilitating interaction and integration between the communities of the shore and islands at least for centuries. *Wollabo* transport enabled the inhabitants of the islands to function as an intermediary force within the regionwide communication. To discharge such duties and historic roles of facilitating communication, inhabitants of Gidicho and Getseme islands were intensively engaged in the production of *wollabo*. After the emergence of *wollabo* as a well-known transportation system across Lake Abaya, its owners emerged as compassionate communities by offering the service to everyone who needs it. They were serving as transit and mediators of regional trade. Since the inhabitants of the above two islands mastered the movement over the water for a long time, their neighbors that are found on all sides of the lake depend very much on them to move across the lake to any direction (Gambura Qullamo, Personal Interview, June 04 2021). Therefore, communication among the

shoreline communities of Lake Abaya and the inhabitants of its islands had become dependent on *wollabo* and yachtsmen of Gidicho Island. By doing so, the inhabitants of the islands had strengthened the interrelationship of the communities living on the two sides of Lake Abaya by making their communication relatively easy through their transport technology (Jackson, 1971; and Ababu, 1995).

In addition to transporting commodities and traders, and facilitating everyday communications of communities of the region, the *wollabo* was also used to solve fortuitous problems encountered by communities of the shores. In the 1950s, when the provincial governor of Gamo Gofa claimed Chano as a state farm, the people of Ochollo strongly opposed such claim of the government. Moreover, the farmers outrageously decided to personally report the case directly to Emperor Haile Sellassie. To manageably do it, a group of individuals were assigned and represented to go to Addis Ababa with the same question. One of our informants, a member of the group[1], went to Addis Ababa to submit the petition, still remember the vicissitudes encountered them in the process. They were banned not to go to Addis Ababa through public vehicles. The road to Addis Ababa was closely monitored by security forces, who were instructed to identify and prevent Ochollo passengers from proceeding beyond their home area. The road was carefully and frequently checked. *Dejazmach* A'emiro Sellassie Abebe had kept the road well-protected to the Ochollo passengers. Thus, the Ochollo properly deal with Gidicho *wollabomen* to find out another possible way to travel to Addis Ababa. Based on their agreement, the Ochollo traveled on foot directly from the highland down to Gidicho to safely continue their journey to Addis Ababa with the indispensable cooperation of the Gidicho, *wollabo* service. Thanks to the benevolent collaboration of the Gidicho, the Ochollo successfully submitted their petition to the then Minister of Interior. *Ato* Tolcha Torche and *Ato* Desta Dara also orally presented their case with fluency to the office. They brought back a clear order to *Dejazmach* A'emiro Sellassie Abebe which directly compel him to redistribute the farmland to the claimants. In this historic collaboration, the Ochollo and Gidicho are acknowledged each other's role in the interaction of the region. This momentous role of the Gidicho is still remembered as one of the junctures which strengthened the interaction among them. When the representatives returned from Addis Ababa, the Gidicho again welcomed

[1]The petitioners who went to appeal the case on behalf of the people to the office of the emperor were; *Ato* Tolcha Torche, *Ato* Desta Dara, *Ato* Damota Uqa, *Ato* Amburko Chlbe, and *Ato* Elku Ansuko.

them and help them to go back to home through *wollabo*. The People of Ochollo still remember this benevolent role of the inhabitants of Gidicho. According to oral sources of the Ochollo ". . . without the assistance of the Gidicho and their *wollabo*, the Ochollo would not have been able to submit their petition and question to the king" (Wango Melo Meshka, Personal Interview, June 06 2021).

Later on, after the people of the area began to eat fish, which was abundantly available on the lake, *wollabo* has become the only tool available to work for the development of fishery. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to engage in the fishery economy without its service. In his own travel account, Hodson (1927) reports his pretty engagement in fishery by using *wollabo*, which is hallowed as quite unlike any other kind of the boat he had seen. The development of fishery economy, which is one of the livelihoods in the region, is highly related with the service of this technology. Exploitation of other aquatic animals and plants are also possible due to the service of this transport technology. It is due to this fact that disentangling of *wollabo* and its transport service from the socio-economic interaction and integration exhibited in the region is difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, making *wollabo* and its service part and parcel of academic discourse eases and directs our effort of having a good understanding on the socio-economic interactions and technological advancements evident in the region.

Community Acknowledgments and Appreciations of *Wollabo* Technology

This transport technology earned deserved acknowledgement and appreciation from those who got its service and saw its spectacular service to the community at large. Foreign travelers, diplomats and researchers blatantly expressed their admiration towards the long row of strangely and beautifully shaped *wollabo* drawn up along the eastern shore of Lake Abaya. Neuman, who came to the eastern shore of Lake Abaya in late 1902, expressed his admiration to the *wollabo* technology as "the boats of the Gidicho are very interesting" (Neumann, 1902). His travel account is one of the invaluable sources of information with regard to the nature of the *wollabo* technology and the materials used for constructing it. He evidently states that its bows were often ornamented like the boats of the Venetian gondolas. Neuman personally used *wollabo* to move across Lake Abaya (see picture IV below) (Neuman, 1902). Likewise, Hodson (1927), the officer of the new post of British Consul for Southern Ethiopia since 1914, who arrived at the western shore of Lake Abaya in June 1915, also provide some important notes with regard to the traits of the *wollabo* transport

technology. He went out for fishing in one of the *wollabos* of the inhabitants of Gidicho Island. Likewise, Hodson (1927) states that the bows of the *wollabo* have shaped like a Venetian gondola and the stern is open. He also believes that *wollabo* has "a unique shape" (Hodson, 1927, Epple, 2016; Brenzinger, 1995; Eshetu, 2012; and Braukmann, 2012). In the same fashion, Buxton, (1967). who visited the area in 1943, also states that "I was taken across to the nearer island and observed with interest how the boat was made to move". After his personal visit and observation, Buxton was extremely amazed by the skill applied by the paddlers and the nature of the *wollabo* itself in the well-organized effort of successfully accomplishing the journey across this large water body (Buxton, 1967). Henze and his companions have also expressed their appreciation to *wollabo* as a technology that magnified the glory of Lake Abaya. They too add that ". . . probably the most handsome still in use anywhere in Africa" (Henze, 1977). Based on the references preserved by foreign observers, *wollabo* is beautifully structured with quite spectacular size and with graceful prows drawn up vertically to a fine tapering point. It is also proof of the enduring nature of indigenous boats in backwaters in continental Africa.

Picture IV: *wollabo* floated on Lake Abaya in 1902

Source: (Neuman,1902)

Researchers who investigated different aspects of the people of the lake region also presented their admiration to the *wollabo* technology and its indispensable role in facilitating human interaction in the area. However, most of them were highly influenced by the views already forwarded by Neumann (1902). Fleming (1964), Hayward (1978), Epple (2015), Brenzinger (1995), Braukmann (2012) and others did not conceal their adulation towards this technology. All of them unanimously state that the *wollabo* technology was made from locally available and a very light wood of a species of *ambatch*. They have also consensus on the buoyant nature of the species of *Acacia Aquaifica*, locally known as *soké*. A relatively detail notes are, however, presented by Susanne Epple whose scholarly work provides important information on the construction, size, and life span of the *wollabo* of the inhabitants of Gidicho Island (Hayward, 1978; Fleming, 1964; Brenzinger, 1995; Braukmann, 2012; and Epple, 2016).

The peoples living on the shores who got and/or observe the indispensable role of *wollabo* also forwarded their admiration to it and its builders. They did not hide their positive understanding towards the role of the inhabitants of the islands in easing communication across the lake. Oral sources attest their appreciation to the builders of the transport technology in different ways. To give some examples, the Guji describes the Gidicho, who had dominant role in the transportation service across the lake through *wollabo*, as: "*ofe ofe hageti he'asatape atdaga gdena agena*." (These people are probably the survivors of Noah's descendants). Likewise, there is an Afan Oromo maxim, "*Gidcho gizeduri tariki durinohe ta'utadu saniqoda tatefi abaya reti hobolut latebia kagamafi gamanajiru hiwolde siti kanankakate gurgurate gebeyati tiqmmi taggeta irtiturera*:" (Roughly means the people of Gidcho are people left over from Noah's story. The reason is that they discovered wood that can float on the lake, so that there could be a transportation service and they facilitated interactions by connecting different people through trade.) Their appreciation to the transport service rendered by the inhabitants of islands was also expressed as; "*saanin kakatee fira asjiru ka-gamajiru wolde'a atiijira worikuni Gidicho kanake woldesitufi kaasi gelanu kaana*" (Simply means that the builders of *wobollo* deserve credit for playing the role of connecting the people living in the island with peoples living on the shores). The people of Gamo highland also understood the role of the *wollabo* very well in local interaction and interdependent socio-economic life.

CONCLUSION

Wollabo transport technology has a pivotal role in magnifying the glory and beautiful scene of lake Abaya and its environs. It tells a lot to generations about the wisdom and unwavering effort of our forefathers to solve problems that encountered them in different periods. To generations living in a competitive world like us, knowledge on *wollabo* technology would give an important model and sense of invincibility to look inward to win competitions. It exhibits our contribution to world civilization in this dynamic world, particularly in the areas of technological advancement. Knowledge of this technology enables us to frame our mind in a way to be panache and self-made. Therefore, *wollabo* transport technology has a multi-faceted lessons to generations through evidently and loudly conveying our forefather's mindset of "yes we can." Such lessons, on the other hand, would have a justifiable power to enthuse generations to come to do more for technological advancement of the region by their own enterprise.

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