

The Weyto Language of Ethiopia: State of the Art

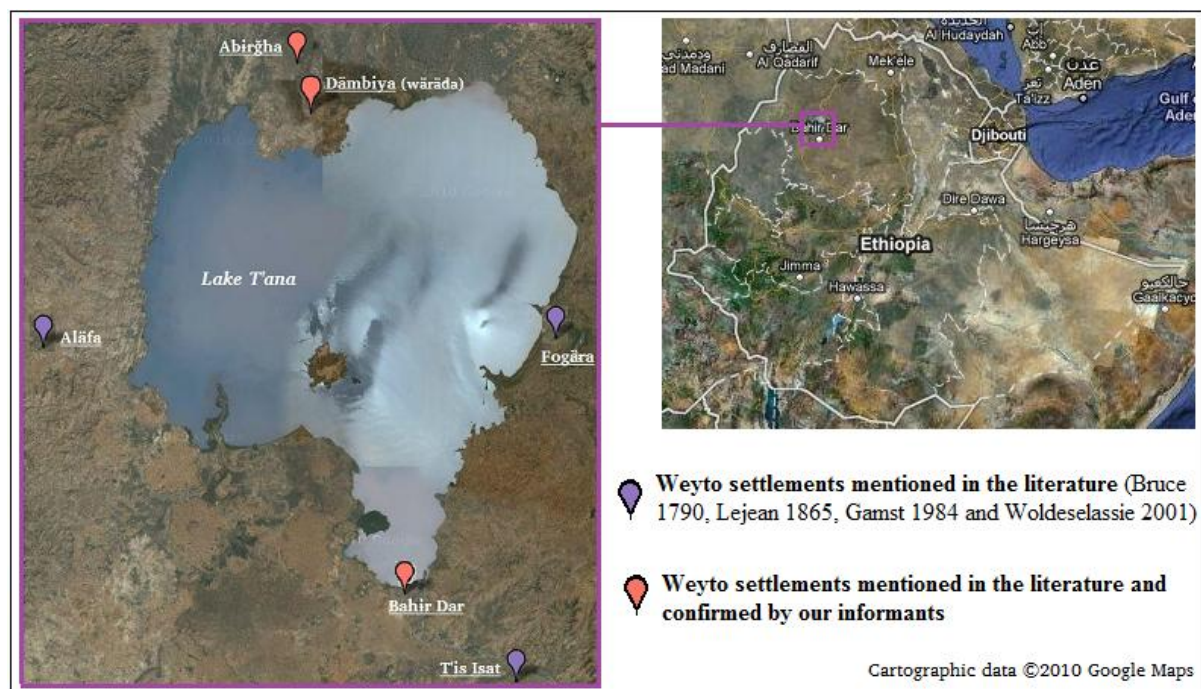
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Weyto¹ is an unclassified and now probably extinct language formerly spoken in the Lake Tana area of Northern Ethiopia. Except for a word-list collected in 1928 by Griaule and later published and analyzed by Cohen (1939: 358-371), there is no linguistic data available on Weyto. As an ethnic group, the Weyto still exist. They were 1677 according to the 1994 national census of Ethiopia but they are not mentioned in the preliminary report of the 2007 census. Based on the existing literature and on a fieldwork carried out in 2010, this paper intends to give an overview of available information on Weyto people and their language.

1. Weyto People

The Weyto live on the shore of Lake Tana which is located in the Amhara region of the country. It is generally assumed that Weyto settlements are specifically found in the Goğğam zone of the region (around the city of Bahir Dar), however Woldeselassie (2001a: 13) also reports the presence of Weyto further North in the Gondär zone, a statement that was confirmed by our informants.



Map: Weyto settlements

Until the 1950s, Weyto were hunters-fishers whose culture and economy mainly rested upon hippopotamus (Gamst, 1984: 853), but the diminution of the number of hippopotami in Tana forced them to change their way-of-life and the last testimony of a hippo-hunt in the lake was reported by Simoons (1960: 51). According to Ajala's study (2008: 25), nowadays the central

¹ Alternate spellings: *Wayto, Waito, Wohito, Weyt'o, Woyto, Weyito*. Amharic: ወይቶ

activity of Weyto men is fishing. In the town of Bahir Dar we observed a quite different situation: men are mainly involved in *tank^{wa}*² building or in stone hewing, while women's occupation is basketry (see Woldelessie 2001a/b for corroborating facts). Our informants said that Weyto around Abirgha were selling and mending baskets too.

Because the Weyto people do not own lands, they are living in extremely precarious conditions. They build their huts wherever the government allows them to, knowing that they can be asked to move at any time.



Photo 1: Hut of a settlement in Bahir Dar



Photo 2: Women doing basketry

Though Weyto profess to be Muslim, they are usually not recognized as “true Muslims” by others, maybe because some of them keep on believing in spirits associated with paganism (Gamst, 1984: 855). In his book, Bruce (1813: 83-84) described Weyto as “Pagans” considered as “sorcerers” that “can bewitch with their eyes”, suggesting that their conversion to Islam is quite recent.

In a region of Ethiopia dominated by Amhara (people who are predominantly settled agriculturalists and Orthodox), Weyto are perceived as outcasts. Because their eating habits infringe Amhara's food taboo, Weyto are said to be dirty and no non-Weyto would agree to share food with them or invite them in their house. The Weyto we met in Bahir Dar told us that their condition had improved, but the Amhara we talked to expressed strong feeling against this community. To avoid the socially stigmatized term *Weyto*, the government has renamed them *Nägäde*, which means ‘the tribe’ in Amharic.

2. Weyto Language

Unfortunately, there are very few information about the Weyto language. According to several authors, Weyto are probably part of the original population of Ethiopia who lived in the Lake Tana area before Amhara. Based on this assumption, their language has been categorized either as (Central) Cushitic (Dimmendaal, 1989: 15; Gamst, 1984: 852) or as Eastern Sudanic (Bender, 1983).

The fact that Weyto had their own distinct language was noted by Bruce, Mitrovich and Griaule, but only Griaule collected data on it. His entire word-list has never been published,

² Small boats made of papyrus reeds locally called *dängäl*.

however a shorter and commented version of it is presented in Cohen (1939: 358-371) who tried to figure out the possible etymology of each lexical item. He managed to relate most of them to Semitic (Amharic, other Ethiopian Semitic languages or Arabic) and a few to Cushitic. Seven words remained totally unclassified: *šalkərít* ‘fish scale’, *qwambät* ‘stern (boat)’, *qəntat* ‘wing’, *čəgəmbit* ‘mosquito’, *ammabay* ‘strap which ties the yoke to the trailer draw bar’, *ʾnk'es* ‘hippopotamus thigh’ and *wazəmäs* ‘hippopotamus spine’. To this list, we can add some words with very vague etymological correspondence in the description, for example: *loča* ‘rush used to make knots’, *šangwa* ‘bow (boat)’ or *gumámənnä* ‘name of a plant (food for horses)’.

Given that these words are all directly linked with the Weyto way-of-life on the Tana shore, Cohen was unable to draw reliable conclusions on the Weyto language and postulated that the people already spoke Amharic in 1928. From Cohen’s viewpoint, the difference between standard Amharic and Griaule’s data lies on the fact that Weyto words are either part of a “jargon” [sic.] of Amharic, or the remnants of a prior Weyto language (from the Ethiopian Semitic or the Central Cushitic family).

By the time Gamst went to Ethiopia to attempt to get more linguistic data on Weyto, in the middle of the 1960s, people had already totally switched their language to Amharic (Sommer, 1992: 399). The Weyto we talked to in 2010 were not aware of a Weyto language and said Amharic had always been their only mother-tongue.

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