

SLAVERY, SLAVE TRADE AND MANUMISSION IN GOJJAM, ETHIOPIA, 1940S-1950S.

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ABSTRACT

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Like in other African countries, in Ethiopia slavery and slave trade was practiced for centuries and had been an endemic for the society. In this article I have made an attempt to bring out the efforts of different emperors, particularly Emperor Haile Sellassie's period in order to regulate and prohibit slavery and slave trade in Ethiopia and to discuss the existence of the institutions and the practice until the 1950s. The attempt of the Ethiopian rulers to regulate or prohibit the slave trade in slaves failed owing to several reasons. Anyway, the most serious laws making the beginning of the end for the institution of slavery in Ethiopia came in the 1920s. In attempt to counter European criticism RasTafari issued an edict in 1923 and 1924 imposing heavy penalties on the slave trade without, however, abolishing the legal status of slavery itself. Later, Ethiopia became a signatory to the 'Slavery Convention of 1926.' The official policy of the Ethiopian government against the slave trade, however, did little to stop the regional war lords from continuing to raid the borderlands for slaves. The continuation of slave trading and slavery itself in Ethiopia into the 1930s, the involvement of the state in the trade and the continued use of slaves in the royal court were directly contrary to the public statements of Emperor Haile Sellassie I and the legal commitments of the Ethiopian state. Immediately after the evacuation of the Italian although Emperor Haile Sellassie made efforts

to prohibit the trade in slaves, it continued to flourish. Even in 1942 he issued an edict imposing heavy punishment on those who involved either in capturing or kidnapping or selling slaves. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it came to an end. For this, I have discovered archival evidences in Debre Markos Administrative Office and Higher Court House of Eastern Gojjam Zone, and in Dangla and Metekel administrative offices. Accordingly, the archives I discovered have three categories: the first deals with people who were accused of catching, kidnapping and selling slaves on the basis of eye witness who punished from seven to twenty years of imprisonment. The second category is dealing with people who were accused of kidnapping and selling individuals as slaves for money but for lack of witness, who pardoned and set free. The third phase is connected with the people who after capturing and kidnapping individuals with intent to sell them to slavery but because of the absence of a purchaser, who treated them brutally. The sources are critically collected, scrutinize and analyzed and their validities are cross-checked one against the other. Finally, as a historical research, the paper is based on a systematic selection, collection and analysis of archival documents, manuscripts and secondary sources of both published and unpublished.

KEYWORDS:

Emperors, Slavery and Slave Trade, Decrees, Manumission

INTRODUCTION

Slavery and slave trade were an age-old institutions and practices in all African countries. Like in other African countries in Ethiopia slave trade was practiced for centuries and it had been endemic in the Ethiopian society. The second half of the nineteenth century in particular was characterized by attempts of the rulers of Ethiopia to abolish slavery and slave trade. However, despite European pressures and treaties signed with the British government, these attempts failed. In deed the attempts of the Ethiopian rulers to regulate or prohibit the slave trade in slaves failed because of the following reasons: the first is that the population saw no evil in slavery, the second was that the country was surrounded on all sides by slave raids and traders, and the third was that no all-out attempt to eradicate the trade was attempted.¹

This paper, therefore, considers slavery, slave trade and manumission in Gojjam since 1940s on the basis of a systematic selection, collection and analysis of archival documents, manuscripts and secondary sources of both published and unpublished. Primarily, it deals with the attempt of the Ethiopian rulers that existed before Emperor Haile Sellassie I to regulate or prohibit the trade. Following this it attempts to investigate how an international pressure as well as domestic forces succeeded in bringing some changes in the institution of slavery and the slave trade. Finally the paper deals with the existence of slave trade in the border areas of the country and on the basis of an edict issued in 1942 how Emperor Haile SellassieI and his government imposed heavy punishment on the people who

involved either in capturing or kidnapping or selling slaves.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In any research to investigate new field of study, one must make series of decisions. One of these is the decision of choice between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The choice between the two research methods is important because they reflect entirely different research attitudes. Accordingly, given the overall objective of this study, which is to deepen the understanding of access to slavery and slave trade, I employed qualitative method, supplemented by basic quantitative method, as the main research methodology. This is because qualitative research techniques are essential in exploring peoples' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. It is also particularly important when dealing with sensitive issues and people's life through interview and archives as well. In addition, qualitative method is a naturalistic approach that helps to understand historic processes and human experiences in specific historical settings here the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest. Further, the strength of qualitative research method to my research is its emphasis on words rather than numbers. This is important to reflect and interpret the understandings and meanings of people's past life, social worlds and realities.

Accordingly, the reason why I employed qualitative method as the main research method is the nature of the research problem and research questions, which in the case of this study, was an attempt to understand slavery and slave trade in the past and experience the 20th century.

Therefore, in considering this reason, qualitative methodology is more appropriate.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has the following significances:

1. Due to the variation and dynamics of the slave trade systems of the study area, the study have scholarly significance for the understanding of complex slavery system, social interference and inequality; Regional study gives wider understanding of slavery and slave trade than the study of Ethiopia in entirety; The study contributes to our understanding of reactions and oppositions against slavery system in the country -despite the fact that I deal only within Gojjam; The study builds deeper knowledge on social structure and slave trade in Gojjam not only from the perspective of the past but the present and the future too; The research can be used as reference material for students and scholars of Ethiopian history in general and Gojjam in particular. In such a way, it will have significance for academic research activities, policy makers, and general readers and to advance the frontier of our knowledge and perspective on slavery and slave trade processes or reforms of Gojjam.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Different Monarchs effort to abolish slavery and the slave trade

During Emperor Tewodros's reign (1855-1868) the slave trade was already widespread and dominant in Ethiopian society. In fact, Tewodros himself opposed the trade and declared it illegal mainly to prevent conversions to Arabs and to win the friendship and goodwill of

European governments. He made the first attempt to put an end to the slave trade which had become endemic in Ethiopian society. During one of his campaigns in Gojjam Tewodros freed all the slaves at the Basso market and, in an unrehearsed wedding ceremony, he had all the male slaves married to the females. He followed this by an official ban the slave-trade throughout his realm. In Qallu he forbade the soldiers to resell slaves they had captured. Such measures against the slave trade did not extend to an abolition of the institution of slavery itself, since slavery had come to be embedded in the Ethiopian social fabric (Bahru Zewde, p.34). Nevertheless, beside all these efforts, large numbers of slaves were exported to the Sudan. Trade in Metemma and Gallabet was flourishing and transactions were carried out in the open.

Despite the claim of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) that he found slavery repulsive, any attempt to abolish it, or even the trade in slaves would have provoked opposition from many of his local chiefs. Indeed, the trade continued although Emperor Yohannes took little action to prevent his followers from seizing slaves on raiding campaigns. Furthermore, in the mid-1870s Ethiopians made frequent raids for slaves in Bogos, on the northern border with Egypt, and the trade flourished with the implied consent of both governments.

In fact in 1884 Emperor Yohannes IV carry out his major step to abolish the slave trade in a treaty signed with the British government. He agreed to prohibit and prevent to the best of his ability the trade in slaves and their import and export from within in his territories and to protect all liberated slaves, as well as to punish severely any attempt to molest or assault

them or return them to slavery. Anyway, the slave trade in Ethiopia continued nonetheless, albeit underground.

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the earlier monarchs, it was during the reign of Menelik II that the issue of abolishing the slave trade acquired wider currency, corresponding, partly at least, to the gradual but steady involvement of international anti-slavery bodies. Menelik had issued at least two proclamations prohibiting the slave trade in his realm. The first, issued in February 1875 while he was still king of Shoa, declared that Christians should no more buy or sale slaves: that slaves smuggled by Muslim slave dealers could reclaim their freedom; and that dealers would be arrested and tried. (Gebre Sellassie, chronicler, II, 601-602). However, there was very little attempt to enforce this in practice, and the edict remained a dead letter for a long time. The second proclamation was issued shortly after Menelik's accession. In this, the emperor referred to his earlier proclamation and reiterated the people who persist in the practice of trading in slaves would be severely punished and declared, also, that prisoners of war should be liberated after seven years of service to their captors. (*Ibid*).

Basically two main factors were accountable for Menilek's failure to abolish slavery in Ethiopia. The first and the most important one was his southward expansion of the Christian Highland Kingdom. Due to his successive wars and campaigns in the newly conquered areas, Menilek himself attended a massive enslavement of the captives of war. With the establishment of a new social economic system in these areas, local people also enjoyed the pain of

enslavement soon after their subjugation (Pankhurst, 1968a). One was because the unprecedented expansion of the Ethiopian empire into what are today the southern provinces, a process over which Menelik himself presided, was attended by a massive enslavement of captives of war.

The other factor which seems to have prevented Menelik from taking stronger measures against the slave trade was his heavy depending on individual foreign traders for his importation of arms and ammunition. These traders in turn operated with the good will of the coastal chiefs who derived handsome revenues by levying taxes on slaves bound for export. Menelik apparently knew that interference with the slave trade would offend these chiefs and thus directly affect the import of firearms to Shoa.

During Menelik's reign, therefore, despite his involving European powers in efforts to abolish the slave trade, it continued as before and no meaningful steps were actually taken to suppress it. Thus, no actual struggle to quash the slave trade developed in Ethiopia during the nineteenth century. In the absence of effective and responsible administration, Menelik's extension of Ethiopia's frontiers and the incorporation of new areas only tended to accentuate the predatory tendencies of the ruling class and the soldiery.

As Pankurst indicated there had been little external pressure over Ethiopian rulers to stop slavery. Britain the champion of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade had little or no effort to suppress slavery and slave trade in the eastern part of Africa. In fact, Britain and France had their own protectorate on the Gulf of Aden. However the trade continued until 1930s by using

different means of shipment of slaves along the coast (Pankhurst, 1968).

Before 1900s slaves were sold openly in the markets in Ethiopia. After this time the open slave markets were closed and slave traders abandoned their conventional routes and traveled at night on different routes. This was also the case in Jimma where slaves were sold at night through the brokers (Baravelli, 1935).

On his death, Menilek was succeeded by his grandson Lij Iyassu. This new crown did nothing for the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia. He even participated in a slave raiding. In 1912, the well-organized slave raiding of LijIyassu, captured and raided many southwestern provinces and captured many thousands of captives in the raiding. He distributed the captives for his favorite officials and clergymen. In other words during the reign of LijIyassu, there was no attempt for the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Written sources assert that the most serious laws marking the beginning of the end for the institution of the slavery in Ethiopia came in the 1920s. International pressure as well as domestic forces succeeded in bringing about some changes in the institution of slavery and the slave trade. Although earlier emperors like Tewodros II and Menelik had made some ‘half-hearted gestures’ to check the trade in humans, it was not until the 1920s that serious measures began to be taken. In the early 1920s in particular, a vigorous campaign against Ethiopian slavery was conducted in the British press. Domestically, too, growing costs of maintaining large numbers of slaves as well as the changing life style of the ruling class had begun to render slavery both uneconomical and obsolete. As a result, a

series of proclamations were issued providing for the gradual emancipation of slaves. Institutions to implement the decrees and a school for the freed slave children were established. Administration of the school was given to ardent campaigns against slavery.

By 1922, Ethiopia had come under unremitting pressure to end slavery from Western news-media particularly the British press as well as anti-slavery groups such as the ‘Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society’.

On September 23, 1923, *Ras* Tafari issued the first proclamation outlawing slave raiding and imposing a duty on administrations to enforce the proclamation under the penalty of the laws. This proclamation made slave raiding capital offensive. It also imposed strict liability on local authorities in which governors, chiefs and headmen (chiefs of small villages) would be liable to a steep fine for every slave stolen from their area. In addition, this proclamation stated that every slave taken from his country would be eligible for a license of freedom and would maintain the right to return home.

On the same year, September 28, Ethiopia had become a member of the League Nations and as such was forbidden from engaging in the slave trade under the terms of the Brussels Act of 1890. Later Ethiopia became a signatory to the ‘Slave Convention of 1926’. This was followed by another amendment of law in which the Emperor sought to gradually emancipate slaves in the country and abolish slavery.

The slave trade in fact includes all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to slavery; all acts involved in the acquisition of a slave with a view to

selling or exchanging him, all acts of disposal by sale or exchange of a slave acquired with a view to being sold or exchanged, and, in general, every act of trade or transport in slaves.

The official policy of the Ethiopian government against the slave trade, however, did little to stop the regional war lords from continuing to raid the borderlands for slaves. Border enclaves on the periphery of Ethiopia served as hunting grounds to capture slaves. Lack of effective control of the central government in many parts of the country, and the fact that people in place of authority including judges and village chiefs, were also slave owners, had made the enforcement of existing laws impossible. The Emancipation Law sought to remedy that by putting in place strict enforcement mechanisms. To that end it introduced a mandate for the registration of all slaves and the establishment of special slavery courts that would be subject to supervision of central government inspectors. Fifty-six special judges were appointed in different parts of the country and a department main function was to supervise the proper implementation of laws was established in the capital, a sign of the Emperor's determination to ensure the effective enforcement of his laws (Goadby, pp.180-202).

The Emancipation law also included provisions that made it easy for slaves to emancipation immediately. It did this in part by stacking procedural hurdles against slave owners. For example, it provided that if a slave escaped he/she could only be legally captured by their master or by authorized customs officials at the border. In addition, it gave slaves legal standing to litigate their masters for

maltreatment. If it was found that a master had indeed mistreated his/her slave, the master would get one warning: a finding of a second offense would result in the emancipation of the slave (Pankhurst, 1968: p.114).

Significantly, the Emperor's court at Addis Ababa continued to support Muslim slave raiding polities and to employ slave labor itself. Even after *Ras* Tafari issued different decrees making the slave trade illegal, the royal court commissioned the procurement of freed slaves. *Ras* Tafari's wife Wayzero Menen, advanced 30,000 thalers to Sheikh Khajjeleof Sudan to buy 600 young slaves between seven and thirteen years old. Not only this. Tafari and Menen kept the slaves as servants in their own palace. So, generally speaking, the continuation of slave trading and slavery itself in Ethiopia into the 1930s, the involvement of the state in the trade and the continued captivation of slaves in the royal court were directly contrary to the public statements and decrees issued in the period.

After they invaded the country, in fact, Italians had made great efforts to stop slavery and the slave trade. Even after they advanced through Tigray, they are said to have proclaimed a proclamation on October 14, 1935 that all slaves were to be free. However, the total abolition of slavery in Ethiopia goes to the Italian. During their occupation, the Italians issued a decree in April 1936 which liberated more than 40000 slaves in the 'Galla- Sidama' Province. The Italians created a job opportunity for some of the ex-slaves in the expanding infrastructural facilities of the country. In some place they also set up a village of liberty for those freed slaves

by providing plough and oxen to begin a new settled life (Woldemariam, 1984)..

Following Italy’s defeat, Emperor Haile Sellassie in fact returned from exile from Britain. Then, he said to have changed mechanisms and abandoned his plan to phase out slavery over an extended period of time in favor of one that resembled Italy’s, immediate and complete abrogation. It seems that the lack of any significant reaction from the passage of the laws against slavery by Italy during its brief occupation of Ethiopia had convinced Haile Sellassie that his fear of possible negative impact that may result from an immediate abolition was unfounded. The Emperor, therefore, issued the Abolition of Slavery Proclamation No. 22 of 1942 in August of that year.

The 1942 Proclamation declared that “the legal status of slavery is abolished” and imposed harsh penalty on persons who participated in transporting of persons out of a person’s out of Ethiopia so that they could be sold as slaves: participated in slave dealing prevented slaves from asserting their freedom; or participated in the trade of people. The 1942 Proclamation was later replaced by the Penal Code No. 158 of 1957, which was then repealed by the law currently in force. In general, although several rulers and emperors of Ethiopia made attempts to regulate or prohibit slavery and the trade in slaves, until the second half of the twentieth century it is said to have continued. This is clearly proved in the archives and manuscripts that I have discovered.

THE VERACITY OF SLAVERY AND SLAVE TRADE IN ETHIOPIA IN THE 1940S AND 1950S.

Immediately after the evacuation of the Italians although Emperor Haile Sellassie made efforts to prohibit slavery and the trade in slaves, it continued to flourish. In fact it is assumed that the abolition was complicated in the years that followed the evacuation of the Italians from the country. Unlike this assumption, however, catching, kidnapping and selling slaves was not eradicated. Rather, it is said to have continued for several years though in a clandestine manner. Following the rumors about the existence of slavery and slave trade in different parts of the country, Emperor Haile Sellassie issued several edicts in different years imposing heavy punishments on the people who involved either in capturing or kidnapping or selling slaves. However, this does not mean that it came to an end. For this I have discovered archival evidences in Debre Markos Administrative Office, which formerly served as the capital city of Gojjam *Teqalay Gizat*, presently the capital of East Gojjam Zone, and in the Higher Court House of Eastern Gojjam Zone, and in Dangla and Metekel administrative offices, as well as manuscripts and secondary sources of both published and unpublished.

Here, I would like to present these events by separating in to three parts. first one treaties people who were accused of catching, kidnapping and selling individuals (slaves) and on the witnesses that have testified in the prosecution who were punished from seven to seventeen years of imprisonment. In relation to this issue there are four belongings.

The second category or phase deals with people who were accused of kidnapping and selling individuals as slaves for money but for lack of witnesses, who exonerated and set free.

The third category is connected with the people who, after captured and kidnapped individuals with intent to sell them to slavery but because of the absence of consumer, treated them severely and brutally.

In relation to the first category, there are four cases.

Case One:

The first case was happened in the former Gojjam province, Metekel *Awraja*, Chagni town. Its File Number was 130/42 E.C. The prosecution of a claim was started on July 11, 1950 and the name of the court that followed the case was Metekel *Awraja Gizat*. The subject of litigation was that kidnapping *Lij Alem* with intent to reduce her to slavery and selling for money. The place where she was captured was *Azena Woreda*, *Azena* town. The plaintiff was *Qegnazmatch Alene Kefale* and the defendants were *A to Melese Abiyir* with his mother, *Woyizero Desta Yenenew* and *A to Tegegne Yigzaw*. The judges were one, *Qegnazmatch Tedla Ayele*, second *A to Workineh Meshesha*. But later, when the court was transferred to Gojjam province, DebreMAarkos town, the panel or group of judges included *Azazh Bezabeh Desta*, *A to Mebratu Engida* and *A to Emiru Belay*. In the litigation that proceeded, initially the defendants denied the action they were accused of, and the court in Metekel had decided in favour of the defendants. Nevertheless, the complainant raised the case to the Supreme Court of Gojjam province to reconsider it again. After a two years debate and litigation, on the basis of the witnesses given by three individuals, the Supreme Court reconsiders the file and decided in favor of the accuser and the

defendants were sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Here, although the *Awraja* court decided for the defendants, the Supreme Court decision was the highest and would be ratified and authorized. Therefore, the defendants were imprisoned in Debre Markos for ten years. Moreover, the Supreme Court passed a decision on the mother of *A to Melese Abiye*, *Woyizero Desta Yeneneh* to be in prisoners each for three years for being involved in cajoling and selling *Lij Alem* for thirty Birr for her brother, *A to Kassahun Yeneneh*.

Case Two:

The second case was occurred in *Azenaworeda*. This prosecution was very sophisticated. Because the accuser of the event is on the one hand the *Agaw-Bahir Dar Awraja Gizat* police station commander *Shambel Gebre Sellassie* and on the other hand the one who was reduced to slavery named, *Erramete Wollie*. The defendant was *A to Tiruneh Yimer*. The commander accused *A to Tiruneh* because of by violating the 1942 decree that reported and warned in *Negarit Gazet* for his buying *Erramete Wollie* from *A to Bayabil Atnafand* putting her in enragement and anger in his house. *Erramete* herself and procurator were the others who accused *A to Tiruneh Yimer*. In *Agaw-Bahir Dar Awraja* the group of judges consisted of *Fitawrari Tedla Ayele*, *A to Keleme work Mazengiya* and *Qegnazmatch Megesha Derseh*. The prosecution was started on January 01, 1952 and the file number was Criminal Law No 40/44. The litigation sustained for three years and on the basis of eye witnesses the Court decided on *A to Tiruneh* for eight years imprisonment

while *A to Bayabil*, who involved in the act of selling *Erramete*, had disappeared.

Case Three:

The third case was connected with kidnapping and selling. The file number is 152/42 and it was occurred in 1950. The defendants were *A to Tessema Abichu* and *Yalew Negera*, whereas the plaintiff was procurator. In fact the defendants denied the act at the Court in *Matakal*. But later with reconsideration, the Supreme Court at *DebreMarkos* investigated the issue and passed a decision to be imprisoned for thirteen years.

Case Four:

The fourth case seems unique. Its file number is 63/54. The plaintiff was *Desta Yemane* herself and the procurator, and the defendants were *Workineh Agazhe* and *Kebede Aymiro*. The main subject was an attempt to sell *DestaYemane*. In the litigation that followed although the defendants attempted to sell *Woizero Desta*, no one was volunteer to buy her. After a four days travelling, the defendants who couldn't get a purchaser jolted and pierced her body and finally threw her to a river by considering as if she has passed away. Unfortunately, however, *Woizero Desta*, who suffered much from the criminality went to *Matakal Awraja Gizat* after an eight days suffering and applied the issue for the court. The judges who surprised by the act immediately ordered the police force in order to search, and capture the defendants then to bring them to the Court. Finally the issue transferred to the Supreme Court at *Debre Markos* and on the basis of the witness given, the judges passed a decision on both defendants to be imprisoned for seventeen

years each. Moreover, the Court passed a three years imprisoned on *A to Zelalem Meseret* for cajoling *Woizero Desta* to agree with the defendants (criminals).

CATEGORY TWO

The third case was connected with kidnapping and selling. The file number is SE/98/52 and it was occurred in 1952. The defendant was *A to Bemrew Beyene* whereas the plaintiff was procurator. The subject was for selling *Woizero Alemitu Wodajo* as a slave for *Grazmach Belew Emiru*. And for lack of witness, the Court set free the defendant.

CATEGORY THREE

File number reads *Ze/Qu/158/544*. Kidnapped; *Woizero Jameru Negawo*
Kidnapper: *A to Agidew Getahun* and the place *Qilazh*, presently named as *Zigem*. And the year that occurred was 1952. The case reads as follow. By violating the law of the government, in 1952 *A to Agidew* kidnapped *Jamera* and sold as a slave for *Qegnazmacch Shibabaw Fenta*. Although the defendants accused of kidnapping and selling *Jamera*, the Court at *Debre Markos* couldn't get a witness and finally after two years litigation the court made the kidnapper free.

CONCLUSION

Ethiopia was one of the great centers of slavery and slave trade in Eastern Africa. There are evidences which show that slavery and slave trade existed in what is today Ethiopia even during the *Aksumite* period, if not before. So slavery has a long history in Ethiopia. It was only in the early part of the twentieth century that slavery as an institution was officially abolished. Emperor *Haile Selassie* introduced a

legislation outlawing slavery in 1924 (as part of his effort to join the League of Nations), but with no concrete results.

The Italians also proclaimed the abolishment of slavery in Ethiopia immediately following their occupation of the country in 1935. When independence was restored in 1941, the Emperor “reinstated previous anti-slavery legislation, and also confirmed that the existing Italian decrees against slavery and forced labor were to remain in force”. The measures of the Emperor might have been successful in “preventing a resurgence of slaving and in undermining slavery as a social institution”, as one scholar has put it, but had negligible results in terms of the integration and empowerment of the “freed”. The “real” freedom has to wait for another three to four decades. (Baravelli, 1935).”

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