

# UNIT SEVEN

## STATES, PRINCIPALITIES, POPULATION MOVEMENTS AND INTERACTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

### The Christian Kingdom under the Restored “Solomonic” Dynasty (1270s –1550s)

#### Historical Context

The period from 1270 to the mid-16th century, also known as the medieval period in Ethiopian history, was marked by significant changes in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the surrounding Horn of Africa region. This era began with the rise of the "Solomonic" dynasty, which succeeded the Zagwe dynasty and continued until the mid-16th century.

#### 1. Restoration of the “Solomonic” Dynasty

##### Key Figure: Yikuno Amlak (r. 1270-85)

- **Dynastic Change:** Around 1270, the Amhara region, having grown discontent with the Zagwe dynasty, saw the rise of Yikuno Amlak, who founded the "Solomonic" dynasty. This marked the beginning of the medieval period in Ethiopian history.
- **Legitimacy:** Yikuno Amlak justified his rule by claiming descent from the ancient Aksumite dynasty through the legendary Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. This claim was meant to demonstrate that the Zagwe rulers were illegitimate.
- **Dynastic Influence:** The "Solomonic" dynasty lasted over 700 years, influencing Ethiopian politics and culture until 1974. The capital of the Christian kingdom moved from Lalibela to areas around Lake Hayk and later to Shewa, characterized by a nomadic royal court.

#### 2. Features of the Christian Highland Kingdom

##### State Structure and Expansion

- **Territorial Expansion:** Under King Amde Tsiyon (r. 1314-44), the Christian kingdom began a vigorous expansion. Amde Tsiyon is known for his military conquests, including the annexation of neighboring states such as Damot, Felasha, and Gojjam.

- **Military Conflicts:** The Christian kingdom frequently clashed with Muslim Sultanates, particularly the Ifat Sultanate, due to competition over trade routes and territorial dominance.

### Economic and Social Structure

- **Economy:** Agriculture, primarily mixed farming, was the economic backbone. The kingdom also engaged in trade, notably through Zeyla, which replaced the Red Sea coast as a key trade hub.
- **Feudal System:** The Gult system was implemented, granting local rulers (Bale Gult) the right to collect tribute and manage local affairs in exchange for military and administrative services. This system facilitated the administration of the vast empire.

### Religious Expansion

- **Christianization:** The spread of Christianity was significant during this period. The Orthodox Church expanded its reach into new territories through the establishment of monasteries and the support of kings.
- **Monasticism:** Monastic centers, such as Debre Libanos and various monasteries around Lake Tana, played a crucial role in spreading Christianity.

## 3. Power Struggles and Consolidation

### Succession Issues

- **Internal Instability:** After Yikuno Amlak's death, succession crises led to political instability, with several short-reigning kings. The establishment of the mountain fortress of Amba Gishen around 1300 helped stabilize succession and strengthen the Christian kingdom.

### Conflicts with Muslim Sultanates

- **Expansion and Resistance:** Amde Tsiyon's expansion faced resistance from the Sultanate of Adal and other Muslim states. Despite initial setbacks, the Christian kingdom managed to assert dominance, particularly after significant victories over Adal.
- **Decline:** By the late 15th century, the power of the Christian kingdom began to wane. The rise of Adal under Imam Ahmad in the 16th century challenged the Christian state's dominance, culminating in the battle of Shimbra Kure in 1529, which marked a significant defeat for the Christian kingdom.

## 7.2 The Expansion of Islam and the Emergence of Muslim Sultanates

### 7.2.1 Overview

The spread of Islam and the expansion of trade were key factors in the emergence of Muslim Sultanates in the Ethiopian region. Islam spread primarily through two main routes: the Red Sea coast and the port of Zeyla on the Gulf of Aden. While the Dahlak Islands and the Red Sea coast were among the first areas settled by Muslim Arabs, the interior highlands of Ethiopia were less accessible. Therefore, the port of Zeyla, a significant trade hub, became the primary gateway for Islam to reach the interior regions.

### 7.2.2 Trade and Trade Routes

Zeyla was the central trade outlet connecting the Ethiopian highlands with the broader Horn of Africa. It facilitated trade between various states, including the Christian highland kingdom and the Muslim Sultanates. Other notable trade ports included northern Swahili city-states like Mogadishu, Brava, and Merca, as well as Massawa in the north.

The trade routes from Zeyla led to the development of several important market towns and centers. These routes played a crucial role in socio-economic and cultural interactions among different ethnic groups. During the medieval period, Sultanates dominated trade, but Christian highland kingdoms also participated through their agents, leading to ongoing rivalry and conflict over control of the lucrative trade routes.

### 7.2.3 Major Sultanates

#### 1. Sultanate of Ifat

- **Time of Emergence:** Mid-13th century.
- **Founding Ruler:** Umar Walasma.
- **Significance:** Ifat controlled the strategic trade routes and achieved military and political prominence, incorporating Shewa in 1385. However, it became a tributary state to the Christian highland kingdom after being defeated by King Amde Tsiyon.

#### 2. Sultanate of Hadya

- **Location:** Western Ethiopia, touching the Gibe River and extending to Lake Hawasa.
- **Economy:** Based on mixed farming and pastoralism.
- **Historical Context:** Known for its natural resources, Hadya was frequently in conflict with the Christian highland kingdom and was eventually abandoned due to pressure from the Macha Oromo.
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### 3. Sultanate of Bali

- **Location:** Southern Ethiopia, surrounded by other Sultanates.
- **Historical Context:** Mentioned from the reign of King Amde Tsiyon, Bali paid tribute to the Christian highland kingdom and was involved in regional politics until the 16th century.

### 4. Sultanate of Sharkha

- **Location:** North of Bali, west of Dawaro.
- **Historical Context:** A tributary state from the reign of Amde Tsiyon, Sharkha was controlled by Imam Ahmad's forces in the early 16th century.

### 5. Sultanate of Dawaro

- **Location:** South of Fatagar, bordered by Ifat and Bali.
- **Historical Context:** Home to the Dawro people, Dawaro was influenced by Oromo migrations and experienced significant conflict during the 16th century.

### 6. Sultanate of Darha

- **Location:** East of the Awash River.
- **Historical Context:** A small Sultanate briefly controlled by Bali before becoming a tributary state under King Amde Tsiyon.

### 7. Sultanate of Fatagar

- **Location:** Between Lake Ziway and the Bishoftu area.
- **Historical Context:** Emerged in the mid-13th century and became a tributary state during the reign of Amde Tsiyon.

### 8. Sultanate of Arababni

- **Location:** South of the Awash River.
- **Historical Context:** Known for its agricultural products, it was a minor Sultanate mentioned by Arab writers.

### 9. Sultanate of Adal

- **Time of Emergence:** Around 1380.
- **Founding Ruler:** Haqq ad-Din II.
- **Significance:** Adal emerged from Ifat's ruling class and became a dominant power under Sultan Ahmad Badlay in the 16th century.

## Relationship between the Christian Highland Kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal (1520s – 1559)

### Background

In the late 15th century, the Sultanate of Adal experienced internal turmoil due to civil wars, with real power held by Emirs and Imams rather than the Sultans. Emir Mahfuz emerged as a significant leader and waged attacks against the Christian Highland Kingdom under Kings Eskindir and Na`od. However, Mahfuz was killed in 1517, leading to further power struggles within Adal.

## **Rise of Ahmad ibn-Ibrahim al-Ghazi**

By the early 1520s, Ahmad ibn-Ibrahim al-Ghazi, known as Ahmad Gagn, took leadership in Adal. Ahmad, originally a cavalry officer under Mahfuz and married to his daughter, consolidated his power by eliminating rivals and unifying the Afar, Somali, and Harari communities. This unification helped Ahmad build a formidable army.

## **The Conflict with the Christian Highland Kingdom**

Ahmad's campaign against the Christian Highland Kingdom, which was not primarily a religious conflict but a continuation of territorial disputes and a struggle for independence, began in 1527. Ahmad's forces, despite being numerically inferior, were well-equipped with Ottoman musketeers. His early victories, including the crucial Battle of Shimbira Kure in March 1529, boosted his confidence.

By 1531, Ahmad had annexed Dawaro and Bali and controlled significant territories in southern Ethiopia. His ambitions led him to extend his control into the northern highlands, including Tigray and Aksum. Ahmad's rule marked the height of Adal's influence in the Horn of Africa.

## **Involvement of the Portuguese and Ottoman Turks**

The Portuguese, rivaling the Ottomans for regional dominance, entered the conflict on behalf of the Christian Highland Kingdom. After King Libne Dingil's death in 1540, his successor, King Gelawdewos, sought Portuguese military assistance. The Portuguese, led by Christovao da Gama, arrived in 1541 but faced setbacks against Ahmad's forces.

Imam Ahmad received Ottoman support, which initially helped him defeat the Portuguese. However, Ahmad's strategic errors, including sending Ottoman troops back and overstretching his own forces, led to his defeat. The decisive Battle of Woyna Dega in February 1543 saw Ahmad's forces defeated by a combined Ethiopian-Portuguese army. Ahmad was killed, and the brief period of Adal's supremacy ended.

## **Continued Conflict and Consequences**

The conflict continued until 1559 when Emir Nur al-Wazir of Adal defeated King Gelawdewos, who was killed in battle. The prolonged warfare caused significant destruction, loss of life, and weakened the Christian Highland Kingdom. Many churches were destroyed, and the population in both the highlands and lowlands was severely reduced. The conflict also disrupted trade routes and led to population movements, as people sought safety from the ongoing violence.

In summary, the relationship between the Christian Highland Kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal from the 1520s to 1559 was marked by intense conflict driven by territorial ambitions and political rivalries rather than purely religious motives. The involvement of European and Ottoman powers further complicated the situation, leading to significant consequences for the region's political and social landscape.