

UNIT EIGHT

POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROCESSES IN ETHIOPIA, MID 16TH TO MID-19TH CENTURY

Introduction

This unit explores two main areas: the history and political structures of peoples in southern, western, and eastern Ethiopia, and the significant historical developments in the Christian highland kingdom from 1559 to 1855. The focus is on state formation, social structures, and political power in various regions, alongside the consolidation efforts of the Christian highland kingdom, including the impact of Catholicism and the role of European explorers.

1. Peoples and States of Southern, Western, and Eastern Ethiopia

1.1 Omotic Peoples and States

1.1.1 Tato System

- The Kingdom of Yem
 - Location: Between the Gibe and Omo Rivers.
 - Governance: Ruled by kings with the title "Tato." The kingdom was divided into provinces with local officials.
 - Economy: Based on agriculture (especially enset) and supplemented by trade and handicrafts.
- The Kingdom of Kafa
 - Location: South of the Gojeb River.
 - Governance: The Tato (king) had absolute power, assisted by the Council of Seven (Mikkerecho).
 - Defense: Utilized natural and man-made defenses, including watchtowers and trenches.
 - Economy: Relied on agriculture, trade (ivory, cattle, musk, slaves, coffee), and tax collection.
- The Kingdom of Shekka
 - Location: West of Kafa, east of the Baro River.
 - Governance: Ruled by kings with the title "Tato," divided into provinces with provincial governors.
 - Economy: Agriculture, with occasional influences from Christianity and warfare with neighboring groups.

1.1.2 Kawo/Kati System

- The Kingdom of Wolaita
 - Location: South of the Sultanate of Hadya.
 - Governance: Ruled by kings with the title "Kawo," with a strong warrior class.
 - Economy: Based on agriculture, with additional trade and handicrafts.
 - Defense: Used defensive walls known as Ijajo Kalla.
- The Kingdom of Dawuro
 - Location: Omo River basin.
 - Governance: Ruled by Kati (kings) with notable figures like Kati Halala. Known for defensive walls constructed by Kati Halala.
- The Kingdoms of Gamo and Gofa
 - Gamo: Located between Lake Chamo and the Gughe mountains, with decentralized political units called Darie, each led by a hereditary ruler.
 - Gofa: Bordered by the Omo River and other kingdoms, with a dual administrative structure and extensive agricultural economy.

Other Omotic Peoples: Zayse, Basketo, Oyda, Kara, Malle, and Kore had similar socio-economic and political structures.

1.2 Cushitic States and Peoples

1.2.1 Sera-Woma System

- Sidama
 - Governance: Woma (village level governance) and Sera (customary law), with an age grade system called Luwa.
 - Administration: Luwa officials had military and leadership responsibilities, with elections based on societal recognition.
- Kambata
 - Governance: Managed by the Sera system and a council called Hambarcho, with a structure based on clan representation.

1.2.2 The Gedeo People

- Location: East of Lake Abaya.
- Governance: Administered by a council of elders (ballee), organized into seven grades with a 70-year cycle.

1.2.3 The Konso People

- Location: Southwest Ethiopia.
- Governance: Village-based with a rotating council of elders called Hayyota. Notable for their soil conservation techniques and generation set system.

1.2.4 The Gurage Chiefdoms

- Groups: Sabat Bet and Kestane Gurage.
- Governance: Lineage-based with indigenous political institutions like Yajoka (Sabat Bet) and Gordanna (Kestane).

The Silt'e

- Location: Southern Ethiopia.
- Governance: Customary legal system known as Ye Silt'e Sera or Malga Sera.

2. Historical Developments in the Christian Highland Kingdom (1559-1855)

2.1 Consolidation and Catholicism

- King Gelawdewos: Dealt with the Sultanate of Adal and Oromo expansion.
- Pedro Paez and Alfonso Mendez: Missionary efforts to spread Catholicism, with varied achievements and challenges.

2.2 Gondarine Period and Zemene Mesafint (Era of Warlords)

- Gondar: Emerged as the capital of the Christian highland kingdom with significant political and cultural developments.
- Zemene Mesafint: Characterized by internal strife and the rise of regional warlords.

2.3 European Travelers

- 19th Century: European explorers and travelers began to document and influence Ethiopian history.

The Gibe and Leqa Oromo States, Benishangul-Gumuz Region, Local Chiefs of Gambella Peoples, and the Eastern States

1. The Gibe and Leqa Oromo States

The Gibe States: In the Gibe Valley and Wallaga regions, the Macha Oromo established dominance in the 16th and 17th centuries, leading to the decline of earlier states like Bizamo and Anfillo. By 1800, the Gadaa system of governance, which was a traditional Oromo democratic system, had been replaced by monarchies due to factors like long-distance trade and the spread of Islam. This shift was marked by the rise of powerful Abbaa Duulaa (war leaders) who accumulated wealth and power, transitioning into kings (Mootii).

Five prominent Gibe monarchies emerged:

1. Limmu-Enarya: Established around 1800 by the Limmu branch of the Macha Oromo. It controlled important trade routes and flourished under kings like Abba Bagibo.
2. Gumma: Formed around 1810 by the warrior Oncho Jilcha. It was involved in conflicts with neighboring states.
3. Gomma: Established by Abba Manno, who also Islamized the state.
4. Jimma-Kakka: Founded around 1830 by Sanna, who became the first Muslim king of Jimma and made it a rival to Limmu-Enarya.
5. Gera: Founded by Tullu Gunji in the 1830s and later ruled by Abba Baso and Abba Rago.

The Leeqaa States: In the Wallaga region, the Leeqaa Oromo formed two main polities:

1. Leeqa Naqamtee: Unified by Bakaree Godana, who established a resourceful polity centered at Wacha. His successor, Moroda Bakaree, expanded the influence.
2. Leeqa Qellam: Unified by Tulluu, who developed a strong polity and engaged in trade with Sudan and neighboring sheikhdoms.

2. The Benishangul-Gumuz Region

Sheikhdoms and Peoples: The Benishangul-Gumuz region saw the rise of three key Muslim Sheikhdoms:

1. Assossa (Aqoldi)
2. Benishangul
3. Khomosha

These Sheikhdoms emerged due to the influence of Islam from Sudan and trans-border trade. The region's wealth in gold attracted invasions from Egyptians and Mahdists. Additionally, the Gumuz established the Sheikhdom of Gubba in the 19th century.

3. Local Chiefs of Gambella Peoples

Gambella was home to five ethnic groups: Nuer, Anywaa, Majang, Opuo, and Komo, with languages from the eastern Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan family.

- Nuer: Practiced pastoralism with social status based on cattle ownership.
- Anywaa, Opuo, Komo: Engaged in agriculture, fishing, gathering, and hunting.
- Majang: Combined shifting cultivation with hunting and gathering.

The Anywaa had a village-based administrative system with hereditary roles of Kwaari (village headman) and Nyiye (noble). The Nuer had spiritual leaders like Khor Muon for peacemaking and Khor Touch for water issues.

4. Eastern States

Harar: Harar, the center of the Walasma Sultans of Adal, was fortified by Emir Nur ibn al-Wazir in the 16th century. The city was a significant trade center and a hub of Islamic learning. The Harari people had an influential Afocha system for self-governance. Harar was occupied by Egyptians from 1875 to 1885, and Richard Burton's visit in 1855 highlighted its strategic importance.

Afar States: The Afar people, predominantly pastoralists, were influenced by the Sultanate of Ifat and later by the Imamate of Aussa. Major Afar Sultanates included Tajura, Rahayito, Aussa, and Goba'ad. Tajura was a crucial economic center with long-distance trade connections.

Somali People: In the Ogaden region, the Somalis, primarily pastoralists, settled in the area historically influenced by the Sultanates of Ifat and Adal. They adopted Islam by the 16th century and had a traditional council of elders (Shir) for governance.

The Gondarine Period (1636-1769)

The Gondarine Period, spanning from 1636 to 1769, marked a significant era in Ethiopian history characterized by the establishment and flourishing of Gondar as the capital of the Christian highland kingdom.

Foundation of Gondar

- **Establishment:** Under Emperor Fasiledes (reigned 1632-1667), Gondar was established as a permanent capital around 1636. This strategic move aimed to centralize governance and control trade routes.
- **Architectural Achievements:** The city saw the construction of magnificent castles, palaces, and churches, blending Aksumite and Zagwe architectural styles. The imperial quarter was complemented by religious and educational institutions.

Cultural and Economic Flourishing

- **Cultural Hub:** Gondar became renowned for its centers of education, music, and poetry. Scholars in various disciplines flocked to the city, and local art forms like church paintings, calligraphy, and cross-making flourished.
- **Economic Center:** Gondar thrived as a major trade hub. It was strategically located on important trade routes linking the southwestern Ethiopian region to Massawa and Metemma. The city's markets became bustling centers of commerce where goods like cattle, honey, butter, and grain were exchanged for urban products from weavers, potters, blacksmiths, and goldsmiths.

Diverse Community and Administration

- **Multicultural Population:** The city was home to a diverse population, including Muslims, Bete-Israel (Ethiopian Jews), Armenians, Indians, and Persians. However, these groups often lived in separate quarters outside the city.
- **Administrative Challenges:** Despite its prosperity, Gondar faced political instability. The kings, while living in luxury, struggled to maintain control over the kingdom as regional lords grew increasingly powerful.

Reigns of Prominent Kings

- **Fasiledes, Yohannis I, and Iyasu I:** The period was marked by the strong leadership of Fasiledes, Yohannis I, and particularly Iyasu I (nicknamed Iyasu the Great). Iyasu I's reign saw significant military campaigns, administrative reforms, and strengthened trade relations with Egypt.
- **Iyasu I's Decline:** His later years were marred by internal conflicts and external influences. The king's attempts to open up to foreign influence, including inviting a French physician and missionaries, led to political intrigue and his eventual assassination.

Political Instability

- **Post-Iyasu I Era:** Following Iyasu I's death, the kingdom experienced a turbulent period with frequent changes in kings and increasing power struggles among regional lords.
- **Bekaffa and Iyasu II:** The reign of Bekaffa (1721-1730) was relatively stable, but his successors, including Iyasu II, faced growing opposition from regional lords and complex political dynamics involving the Oromo and other ethnic groups.

Role of Empress Mintiwab

- **Political Influence:** Etege Mintiwab, the regent mother of Iyasu II, wielded significant political power. She was known for her effective administration, strategic marriages, and efforts to manage regional tensions.
- **Challenges and Conflicts:** Mintiwab's tenure saw increased influence of the Oromo in Gondar and persistent conflicts between different factions.

Decline of the Gondarine Period

- **Political Disintegration:** By the late 18th century, regional lords, particularly the Yejju Oromo, had increasingly dominated Ethiopian politics. The kings of Gondar became largely powerless and were often manipulated by these regional powers.
- **End of the Era:** The Gondarine Period ended with the rise of Emperor Tewodros II in 1855, who began the process of restoring centralized authority and ending the era of regional fragmentation known as the Zemene Mesafint (Era of the Warlords).