

UNIT 8

Political, Social and Economic Processes in Ethiopia Mid- 16th to Mid- 19thC.

Introduction: Between the mid-16th and mid-19th centuries, Ethiopia experienced significant socio-economic and political changes. Following the decline of the Christian Kingdom, various local states emerged across different regions of the country, each developing its own political, economic, and social systems. This period was marked by a decentralization of political power and the rise of independent local polities.

Independent Polities in Southern, Western, and Eastern Ethiopia:

1. Kafa Kingdom:

- **Location and History:** Kafa was situated south of the Gojeb River and north of the Omo River. It has been known since the 14th century.
- **Political Structure:** The kingdom was ruled by a king known as Tato. The kingship was hereditary, but the selection of the successor was determined by an advisory council called Mikkerecho.
- **Economy and Society:** Kafa's economy was based on agriculture and trade, with coffee being a major crop. The kingdom was known for its defensive trenches and its long-standing independence despite external pressures.

2. Yem State:

- **Historical Background:** The Yem state existed before the late 16th century, transitioning from a local dynasty to one influenced by Gonder.
- **Political Structure:** The Yem were governed by a king called Tato or Amno and were supported by a council of twelve advisors.
- **Economy and Conflicts:** The Yem engaged in trade and were involved in regional conflicts, especially with the neighboring Jimma Abba Jiffar.

3. Omotic States (Wolaita, Gamo, Dawuro, Konta):

- **Political Organization:** These states had similar political structures, with Wolaita and Gamo ruled by kings called Kawo and Dawuro by Kati. The Gamo state was organized into autonomous units called dere.
- **Economy:** The economy was primarily agricultural, focusing on enset and other crops. These states were known for their fortifications and had complex relationships involving trade and warfare.

4. Cushitic States (Hadiya, Kambata, Sidama, etc.):

- **Political Systems:** These states used traditional systems of governance based on cultural norms called Sera. The woma (king) was the highest authority in these states.
- **Economy and Society:** The Cushitic states were predominantly agricultural, growing crops like enset, sorghum, and millet. They had advanced agricultural practices, such as terracing in Konso.

Changes and Continuities in the Christian Kingdom:

1. Gondarine Period (Mid-16th to Mid-19th Centuries):

- **Recovery and Regional Power Struggles:** The Christian Kingdom, after being defeated by the Sultanate of Adal, began to recover but faced ongoing regional power struggles. This era is known as Zemene-Mesafint (the period of regional warlords).
- **Efforts at Consolidation:** The kingdom's attempts to consolidate power were often disrupted, leading to a period of internal chaos by the mid-19th century.

Key Terms:

- **Tato:** Title of the king in the Kafa Kingdom.
- **Kawo:** Title of the king in the Gamo and Wolaita states.
- **Sera:** Traditional administrative system used by the Cushitic states.
- **Zemene-Mesafint:** Period of regional warlords in the Christian Kingdom.
- **Yejju Dynasty:** A significant dynasty during the Zemene-Mesafint period.

This overview highlights the diverse political, economic, and social systems that characterized different regions of Ethiopia during this period, providing a foundation for understanding the formation of modern Ethiopia.

Western and Eastern States in Ethiopia

Western States

A. Oromo Monarchies: Gibe States

- **Gadaa System and Transformation:** Initially, the Oromo people followed an egalitarian and republican socio-political system called the Gadaa, organized around age groups. However, during the early 19th century, as they expanded into the Gibe and Wallaga regions, they transitioned from the Gadaa system to form monarchies. This change was influenced by their shift from pastoralism to agriculture and the class divisions it created, as well as the impact of continuous warfare.
- **Formation of Gibe States:** By the early 19th century, several small states emerged in the Gibe region:
 - **Limmu Ennarya:** Founded in the early 19th century, it controlled important trade routes and was the most powerful Gibe state. Its notable ruler was Abba Bagibo (r. 1825-1861).
 - **Jimma:** Became a dominant power in the mid-19th century under Sanna or Abba Jifar I (r. 1830-1855). Jimma's prosperity came from its involvement in the coffee and slave trade.
 - **Gumma:** Established in the 1820s, it gained significance under Oncho Jilcha and was the first Gibe state to adopt Islam.

- **Gera:** Rose to prominence around 1835 under Tullu Gunji, known for his military and administrative skills.

A key feature of these states was their conversion to Islam in the 19th century.

B. Oromo Monarchies: Leqa States

- **Leqa Naqamte:** Founded by Bakare Godana and strengthened by his successors, Moroda and Kumsa Moroda. The state gained Christian influence under Kumsa, who became Dejazmach Gabra-Egziabher.
- **Leqa Qellem:** Founded by Tullu and consolidated by his son Jote. It engaged in trade with Sudanese merchants and interacted with neighboring sheikhdoms.

C. Sheikdoms and Peoples of Beni-Shangul Gumuz

- **Geography and Society:** Located along the Ethio-Sudanese border, Beni-Shangul Gumuz was inhabited by Nilo-Saharan speakers like the Gumuz, Shinasha, and Benishangul. These groups practiced shifting cultivation and used traditional methods to manage natural resources.
- **Gumuz:** Practiced slash-and-burn agriculture and maintained a positive relationship with their environment. They rotated crops and allowed land to regenerate.
- **Shinasha:** Also engaged in shifting cultivation and cattle herding. They valued forest preservation and traditional medicine.
- **Benishangul:** Mixed farmers involved in agriculture, trade, and beekeeping. They had organized local governance and were influenced by Islam through trade with Sudanese merchants.

D. Local Chiefs of Gambella Peoples

- **Gambella:** Inhabited by groups like the Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Komo, and Opuo, who had decentralized political structures. For example:
 - **Anywaa:** Villages were governed by noble leaders or headmen.
 - **Majang:** Known for their egalitarian society and religious leaders called tapad.

Gambella was connected through trade with Northern Sudan and other regions, influencing cultural and economic exchanges.

8.1.3 Eastern States: Harar, Afar, Somali

Harar

- **Historical Background:** Originally part of the Sultanate of Adal, Harar became an independent emirate in the 17th century. It was an important center of Islamic culture and

trade. After periods of Egyptian occupation and internal strife, Harar was incorporated into Menelik's Empire in 1887.

- **Cultural and Political Influence:** Harar was a significant trade hub and Islamic learning center, maintaining its importance through marriage alliances and military resistance.

Afar

- **Geography and Economy:** The Afar people lived in the “Afar Triangle” and were historically organized into sultanates such as Aussa, Bidu, Gobaad, Tajura, and Rahayito. They engaged in trade through ports and supplied Ethiopia with salt.
- **Political Structure:** Each sultanate was ruled by a Sultan and had its own culture and customs. The Afar resisted external domination and maintained independence through strategic alliances and warfare.

Somali

- **Governing Structure:** The Somali people had a council of elders known as Guurti, which managed criminal and civil cases and governed various aspects of life. This council was democratic and respected for its role in conflict resolution and governance.

This overview highlights the diverse political, economic, and social structures of different states and peoples in Ethiopia, showcasing their evolution and interactions over time.

Gondarine Period (1636-1769)

1. Establishment of Gondar:

- **Founding:** Gondar was founded by Emperor Fasiladas around 1636. It became the capital of the highland Christian Kingdom, shifting the political center from the Shewan highlands to the Lake Tana region.
- **Strategic Location:** Gondar was strategically positioned on major trade routes connecting southwestern regions with Massawa and Mettema. This location made it a key commercial and political hub.

2. Architectural Achievements:

- **Structures:** Gondar is renowned for its impressive architecture, including palaces, churches, bridges, and even swimming pools. Notable kings like Fasiladas, Yohanes I, and Iyasu I oversaw these constructions, making Gondar a center of prosperity and technological advancement.

3. Urban Development:

- **Population:** The city grew to around 70,000 inhabitants, featuring diverse communities including Ethiopian Muslims (Jeberti) and the Bete Israel, who engaged in various crafts.
- **Economic Life:** Gondar became a commercial center with a bustling market, fostering urban-rural interactions and economic growth.

4. Decline:

- **Political Instability:** After the reigns of Fasiladas, Yohanes I, and Iyasu I, Gondar faced political instability. The city struggled with internal conflicts, court intrigues, and the weakening of central authority.
- **Military Weakness:** The Gondarine monarchy became unable to control regional lords, leading to a decline in political power and economic stability.

Zemene-Mesafint (Era of Warlords) (1769-1855)

1. Rise of Regional Warlords:

- **Power Struggles:** Following the assassination of King Iyoas in 1769, the era of the Zemene-Mesafint began, marked by power struggles between regional warlords. Notable figures included Ras Mikael Sehul of Tigrāi, who initially restored order but later faced defeat.
- **Yejju Dynasty:** In 1786, Ali Gwangul (Ali I) from the Yejju Oromo family established the Yejju dynasty. This dynasty controlled northern Ethiopia through puppet kings until the mid-19th century.

2. Political Disorder:

- **Conflicts:** The era was characterized by conflicts among regional lords and battles for dominance. The Zemene-Mesafint period saw extensive warfare, impacting the social and economic life of the peasantry.

3. Economic and Social Impact:

- **Agriculture:** Continuous wars disrupted agricultural production, leading to economic hardships for peasants. Farmlands became battlegrounds, and villages were often destroyed.
- **Trade:** Trade was severely affected by the instability, with merchants facing difficulties and high taxes. Enslaved people became a significant trading item due to increased conflict.

4. End of the Era:

- **Transition to Centralization:** The era of the warlords ended with the rise of Kasa Hailu (Tewodros II) in 1855, marking the beginning of a new phase in Ethiopian history.

The Kingdom of Shewa:

- **Emergence:** During the Gondarine period, Shewa was initially detached from the central Christian Kingdom but later emerged as a significant power in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.
- **Consolidation:** Under rulers like Nigus Sahle Sellase, Shewa consolidated its power and established diplomatic relations with Britain and France.

Summary: The Gondarine period (1636-1769) saw the rise of Gondar as a major political and economic center, known for its architectural achievements and urban development. However, internal strife and external pressures led to its decline. The subsequent Zemene-Mesafint era (1769-1855) was marked by regional conflicts and the dominance of local warlords, ending with the rise of Tewodros II and the consolidation of power in Ethiopia.