

# UNIT EIGHT

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## **MAJOR EVENTS OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ETHIOPIAN REGION AND THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THEIR IMPACTS**

### **Introduction**

The sixteenth century witnessed two major events in the Ethiopian region and the Horn of Africa. These were the conflicts between the Christian and Muslim states of the region and the Oromo population movement. The conflicts of the sixteenth century were the continuation of the conflicts of the earlier centuries. They were the results of a desire to control the trade routes between Zeila and the interior of the Ethiopian region. Before the sixteenth century, the Christian kingdom had been a dominant power in the region. This dominance began to decline after the death of Zar'a Ya'eqob in 1468. The period that followed his death saw the reign of young and weak kings. This also coincided with the growth of threat from the sultanate of Adal. As a result, the Christian kingdom and the sultanate of Adal were once again drawn into a bloody conflict in the years between 1529 and 1543. This event was followed by the great population movement of the Oromo people from their original homeland to different parts of the Ethiopian region.

These two great events of the sixteenth century were also coupled with an international development. During this period Portugal and Ottoman Turkey were the major world powers struggling for political and economic dominance in the Red Sea region. To promote their interest, the rival powers interfered in

the military conflicts between the Christian kingdom and the sultanate of Adal. As we shall see in this unit, all these events of the sixteenth century had considerable impacts on the history of the Ethiopian region and the Horn of Africa.

## Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- examine the causes of the war between the sultanate of Adal and the central Highland Christian Kingdom;
- explain the involvement of the Portuguese and the Ottoman Turks in the war between the sultanate of Adal and the Christian Highland Kingdom;
- explain the causes and processes of the Oromo population movement and expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and its consequences;
- analyze the traditional Oromo social and political organizations and practices.

### Terms to Know

- |             |                       |                     |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| - Abba Boku | - Imam Ahmed          | - Queen Elleni      |
| - Abba Dula | - Madda Walabu        | - Sea-route         |
| - Abba Muda | - Prester John of the | - Shimbra           |
| - Crusade   | Indies                | Qure                |
| - Fugitive  | - Qallu               | - Waqa              |
|             | - gada grades         | - Weyna Dega battle |

## 8.1. Portuguese and Ottoman Turkish Rivalries in the Ethiopian Region and the Horn of Africa

### Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Identify the origin of the story of the Prester John of the Indies.

Discuss in group why the land of the Prester John was associated with the highland Christian kingdom of Ethiopia.

Explain the main cause for the Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean.

The legend of the Prester John of the Indies was important for the revival of the foreign relations of Ethiopia with Christian Europe. The legend was developed by the Christian Europeans during the time of the Crusade in the mid twelfth century, when the European Christians were defeated by the Muslim forces in the Holy Land. The legend was about the existence of an extremely wealthy and powerful Christian king somewhere in the East. The objective of creating the legend was to reinforce the religious morale of the European Christians. It promised that a fabulously rich and strong Christian king known as the Prester John of the Indies was marching from India to the Middle East in support of his fellow Christians and fight against the Muslims. For this he invited the kings of Christian Europe to join in his mission. As a result, the European Christian states hoped to form an alliance with this powerful king against Islam. However, they did not know the where about of the kingdom ruled by the Prester John.

Beginning from the fourteenth century onwards, however, the country of the Prester John came to be identified with the medieval highland Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. This was mainly because of the information which the Europeans got from the Ethiopian religious communities living in different parts of the Christian world and the Arab Muslim merchants. Both confirmed the existence of a strong Christian kingdom in the Horn of Africa, which defeated and conquered the Muslim sultanates of the area. The Ethiopian pilgrims who visited the Holy Land also spread exaggerated news about the power of the Christian kingdom of their country. As a result, any European who got this information began to associate the name Prester John with the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and some European powers even sought to establish closer relationship with it. In fact, the highland Christian kingdom of that time was very strong and it expanded at the expense of the Muslim states in the southeast.

Therefore, some European monarchs began to communicate with this Christian state through letters. For instance, in 1400 King Henry IV of England wrote a letter to the Christian king addressing him as the Prester John. In this letter he requested the king to provide a military help to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims. Moreover, the Portuguese, the Christian superpower of the world, continued to search for the country of the Pester John and before the end of the fifteenth century they succeeded to send a delegation to Ethiopia in 1494.

Before the Europeans came to know about the Christian kingdom, the latter had made a series of attempts to establish contact with them. But these attempts were always frustrated by the Egyptian sultans who did not want to see the rise of a Christian power in the Horn of Africa. The Egyptian sultans put pressure on the Christian kingdom through the Coptic Patriarchs who appointed bishops for the kingdom. The Egyptian authorities also prevented Ethiopian Christian delegates from traveling to Europe through their country. The early attempts of King Yishaq and Zar'a Ya'eqob to establish contacts with Europe failed, because the Egyptian authorities stopped the delegates on their way to Europe.

The Portuguese expansion of the early sixteenth century in the Indian Ocean was the result of the voyages of exploration of the preceding century. In the middle ages, the overland route which connected Europe with the Far East passed through the Middle East. This territory fell under the rule of the Ottomans, the Muslim rivals of the Portuguese, who captured the city of Constantinople in 1453. Subsequently, the Turks monopolized the trade and imposed high taxes on the goods coming from the Far East.

Among the goods coming from the Far East, spices were highly valuable in Europe. The Europeans used spices for making perfumes, cosmetics, medicines and, above all, for flavoring and preserving meat. The spices were produced only in

the Far East. The people of the Far East sold spices to Arab, Indian and Chinese merchants. These merchants shipped the spices to Egypt, where they were sold to Venetian merchants. Finally, the Venetian merchants sold the spices in the European markets at a high price. European states such as Portugal were jealous to the profit reaped by the Venetians. Therefore, they wanted to trade directly with the Far East. This economic motive led the Portuguese government to finance sea voyages to explore a new sea route to the Far East. Finally, the Portuguese sailors succeeded in discovering a new sea route with the voyages of Vasco da Gama who reached India in 1498.

After Vasco da Gama's voyage, the Portuguese launched a huge naval expedition to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, where they looted and destroyed a number of merchant ships. They set up a series of posts along the coasts of India, the Persian Gulf, Arabia and East Africa. They also blockaded the Red Sea and diverted the trade to the new sea route around the continent of Africa. In this way, the Portuguese monopolized the spices trade between the Far East and Europe.

The Portuguese monopoly over the trade dealt a crushing blow to the economic interests of many groups. The Arab, Indian and Chinese merchants were pushed out of the trade. The Egyptian economy, which had largely depended on this trade, was seriously affected. Above all, the Portuguese dominance in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean undermined the economic and political interest of the Ottoman Turks. Thus, the Turks immediately challenged the Portuguese. In 1517, they defeated the Egyptian Mamluks and extended their power over the whole country. The Turks used Egypt as a base from where they attacked the Portuguese naval forces in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Consequently, the sixteenth century rivalry between the Portuguese and Ottoman Turks was intensified.

Already before the coming of the Ottoman Turks to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese were surrounded

by enemies such as the coastal merchant communities, who lost control over the trade of the region. This forced the Portuguese to look for allies in the region, who will help them chase their rivals from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. During the search for a new sea route to the Far East, a Portuguese named Pedro de Covilhao reached the court of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in 1494. But he was not successful to establish closer relationship between Ethiopia and Portugal.

Just as the Europeans were eager for a Christian ally in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the Ethiopians were also keen to obtain the Christian European technical assistance. They began to request for European artisans, craftsmen, masons and other technicians who could build churches and bridges, make firearms, train their army and help in the improvement of state administration. But the attempt on the whole was not successful.

As stated earlier, the late fifteenth century was marked by the decline of the Christian kingdom and the growth of threat from the sultanate of Adal. As a result, the Christian kings were in need of the military help of their European Christian counterparts against the Muslim threat from the southeast. To that end, Queen Elleni, the wife of Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob and the regent ruler of the Christian kingdom, sent a mission to Portugal in 1512. The mission was led by an Armenian merchant called Matthew. In her letter, Elleni requested the Portuguese government for military help against the sultanate of Adal. In 1520, the Portuguese sent an official diplomatic mission to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. But this mission stayed for six years and left Ethiopia in 1526, on the eve of the wars of **Imam** Ahmad without concluding any agreement with King Lebne Dengel (r.1508-40). The king ignored the mission mainly because of his military victory over the forces of Emir Mahfuz, who was killed in battle in 1517. Yet, although both countries were eager for military alliance, they could not come to any agreement for their military targets were very different..

Christian kingdom needed help against the lowland sultanates, while Portugal wanted a maritime ally to chase Turkish ships out of the Red Sea. Whatever the case, it was this contact which prepared the ground for the later involvement of the Portuguese in the military conflict between the Christian kingdom and the sultanate of Adal. In 1541 the Portuguese expeditionary force, which played a significant role in the final defeat of Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim, arrived in Ethiopia.

### **Questions for Discussion and Practical Work**

How far did the Portuguese military assistance contribute to the victory of the Christian kingdom over the sultanate of Adal?

Explain the consequences of the military conflicts of the sixteenth century.

## **8.2. Conflicts Between the Sultanate of Adal and the Highland Christian Kingdom**

After Zar'a Ya'eqob's victory over the army of Sultan Ahmed Badley of Adal in 1445, the sultanate of Adal was reduced to a tributary status. However, Zar'a Ya'eqob's successors were not strong enough to maintain their hegemony over Adal.

Meanwhile, in Adal there was strong opposition against the status of dependency. From the very beginning various emirs, imams, shaykhs and powerful merchants put strong pressure on Sultan Muhammad, the son and successor of Ahmed Badley, to lead a revolt against the Christian kingdom. However, the sultan continued to pay annual tribute to the Christian state. After the death of the sultan in 1470, they formed a strong opposition and challenged the power of the reigning sultan. Subsequently, a civil war broke out in Adal which lasted for a long period of time. The Afars from the lowlands also began to make incursions into the highland agricultural regions.

During the years of the civil war the sultans lost their power. Actual power was held by Emirs or Imams who completely dominated the sultans. The emirs and imams fought for power. Only few imams held power for long years. Mahfuz was one of the powerful emirs who strengthened the sultanate and launched a series of attacks on the Christian kingdom from the last decade of the fifteenth century onwards. Mahfuz's attacks continued throughout the reigns of Eskindir (r. 1478-1494) and Na'od (r. 1494-1508). Finally, he was killed in a battle with the army of Lebne Dengel (r. 1508-1540) in 1517. After the death of Mahfuz, various emirs fought against one another for power. But finally the leadership of the Muslim sultanate of Adal passed to a powerful imam called Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al- Ghazi, who was commonly known in Ethiopian Highland Christian tradition as Ahmad Gragn (the left handed).

The family background and early life of the Imam are not sufficiently known. According to his chronicler, he was born to a clan called Balaw in Hubat, a place located between Harar and Jijiga, near the present-day Babile. He served as a cavalry officer of Mahfuz and also married to his daughter, Bati Dil Wambara. He was an energetic and a very tactful man. As such, he systematically got rid of his rivals one after the other and became the Imam of Adal.

As soon as he took power in Adal and before launching his campaigns against the highland Christian kingdom, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim tried to consolidate his rule in the lowlands. As stated earlier, the Afars had already started to make incursions into the agricultural highlands. Apart from them, the Somali and other pastoral peoples of the region also began to move, along with their cattle, to the relatively fertile highland regions of Harar. These population movements created violent conflicts among the Muslim communities of the south east. Thus, after much internal fightings between the Afar, Somali and Harari, Ahmad was able to restore peace in the area. He persuaded the

fighting groups to make up their differences and launch a war against the highland Christian kingdom. By playing the role of an arbitrator, he restored peace in the lowland regions and recruited soldiers from the peoples of the area. Moreover, he also strengthened his army by instilling the spirit of **Jihad** into the conflict.

However, it should be noted that the conflict between the highland Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates was not over religious issues. This inter-state rivalry was the extension of the earlier conflict. The conflict was between the Solomonic and Walasma rulers over the basic economic interest. That is the control of the lucrative Zeila trade routes and the lands through which these routes passed. The Muslims were also fighting to regain the independence which they lost to the Christian kingdom earlier and create a Muslim empire of their own. Therefore, as soon as he consolidated his power in the lowlands, Imam Ahmad began to make preparations for a war against the Christian kingdom.

Ahmad opened his campaigns on the Christian kingdom in 1527. These campaigns were mainly launched along traditional lines of raiding the frontier districts under the Christian control and return to the lowlands with large booties. In this year, Ahmad's forces successfully raided Dawaro, Fatagar and Bali, the tributaries of the Christian kingdom. Emperor Lebne Dengel, who defeated and killed Mahfuz in 1517 and who never expected a serious Muslim threat after Mahfuz's death, responded by ordering Degelham, the governor of Bali, to march to Adal. But Degelham was defeated by the Muslim forces of the Imam in Adal. Since then the Christian forces took defensive position. Ahmad then undertook a series of expeditions which took him further westwards into the highlands. In all this he faced no strong resistance from the Christian kingdom. This strengthened his confidence and forced him to launch a conventional war against the Christian kingdom. Finally, Ahmad

fought a major battle with the Christian army led by Lebne Dengel in March 1529 at a place called Shimbra Qure, near Mojo. At this battle Lebne Dengel and his army suffered a crushing defeat from which they could not recover. So, Lebne Dengel retreated to the center of the kingdom. In fact, many of the Imam's soldiers were also killed or wounded in the battle and consequently the victorious Imam returned to Harar to celebrate his victory and reinforce his army for the next campaign.

Whenever the different sultanates in the region had the power, they used to attack each other to control the trade routes. They also carried out raids on the borders of the Christian kingdom. Beyond this, they rarely attempted to extend their hegemony over the Christian kingdom. However, the Imam wanted to change this strategy. His ambition was to build a big empire in the Horn of Africa. To this end, he fought and defeated the Christian army in the first phase of his campaigns and began to make preparations for the total conquest of the Christian kingdom. Therefore, in 1531 he resumed his campaign and led the Adal army to Dawaro and Bali. The two sultanates were easily defeated and were annexed to Adal. After that he proceeded with his all out attack on the Christian kingdom. He wanted to force the retreating King Lebne Dengel to surrender. As such, from 1531 onwards no part of the kingdom was left untouched. But the Imam could not capture the King who fled from one place to another with a small group of his followers.

After two years of campaign, the Imam gave up the idea of pursuing the King. Instead he prepared for another major campaign to control the states and peoples in the southern, southwestern and western parts of the Ethiopian region. At the time, the Imam's command centers were Debre Berhan, Waj and Dawaro. From these centers, the commanders of his army moved to the south, southwest and west. The campaign took a little more than a year and was completed in the middle of 1533.

This campaign put almost all states and peoples of the southern half of the Ethiopian region under the hegemony of Adal. Welayita was the only state which successfully resisted the Imam's army led by Wazir ibn Mujahid.

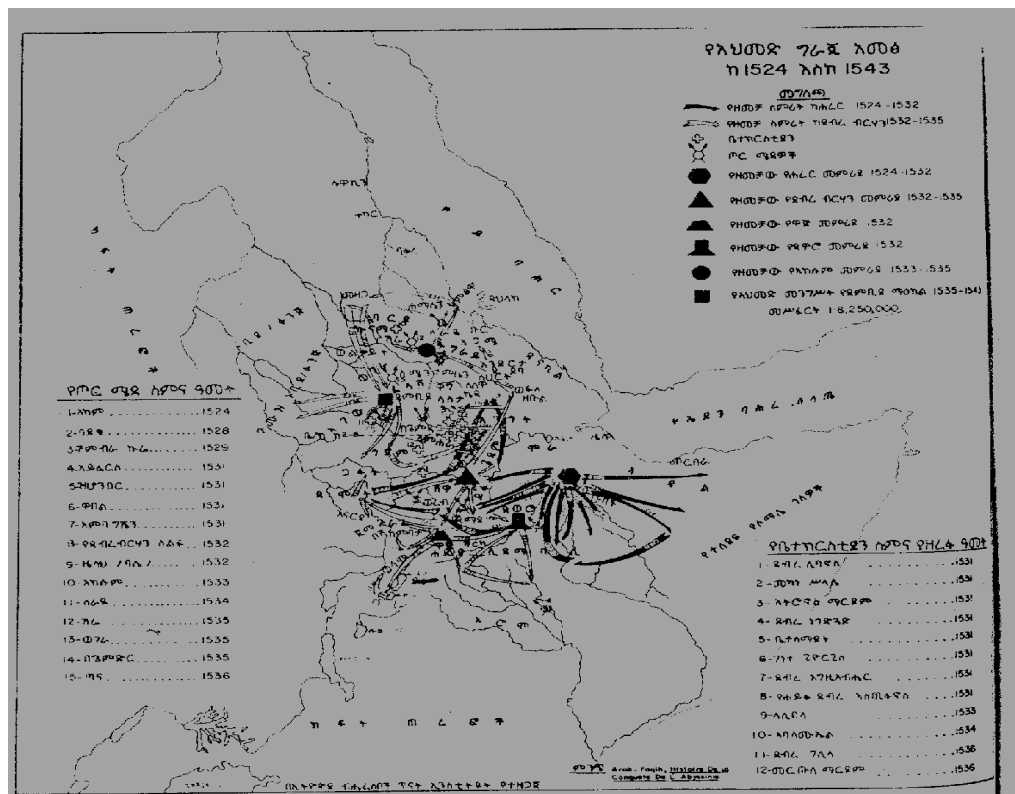
During the last phase of the Imam's campaign, the northern half of the Ethiopian region was attacked. During this campaign, Debre Berhan had served as a command centre. When the campaign was completed in 1535 the northern part of the kingdom, particularly the present regional state of Tigray and the adjoining settlements along the Red Sea coast were put under the rule of Imam Ahmad. Finally, the sultanate of Adal established its hegemony over the Ethiopian region and a large part of the Horn of Africa. The territory was divided into provinces which were ruled by governors appointed by Imam Ahmad. At first, the Imam established his centre in Aksum. Later on, the centre shifted to Dembiya, near Lake Tana. From this centre, the Imam ruled the empire until his defeat and death in 1543.

### **Questions for Discussion and Practical Work**

How did the defeat of the Imam come about?

Why did how did the Portuguese soldiers come to Ethiopia?

Since the 1529 Battle of Shimbira Qure, Lebne Dengel had lived as a fugitive. However, he remained optimistic about defeating the Imam one day. Nevertheless, in several battles the Christian army did not gain any victory. In all battles, the outcome was always a crushing defeat for the Christian army. Finally, Lebne Dengel lost any hope of defeating the Imam by himself. Therefore, he decided to ask the Portuguese for military assistance.



### Map 8.1 The campaigns of Imam Ahmed

You remember that the Portuguese diplomatic mission to the Christian kingdom stayed in the country for six years, until 1526. When the mission departed for Portugal, one of its members called John Bermudez remained in the court of Lebne Dengel. In 1535 Lebne Dengel sent Bermudez to Europe with two letters addressed to the Pope of Rome and the King of Portugal.

It took Bermudez six years to accomplish his mission. He first went to Europe and submitted the letters to the Pope of Rome in Italy and to the King of Portugal in Lisbon. Then he took a letter of order from the king of Portugal to the Portuguese colony of Goa in India. According to the order, the Viceroy of India in Goa was empowered to send a strong military

force to the Christian kingdom. In 1541, Bermudez arrived with 400 soldiers led by Christopher da Gama, the younger son of famous sailor, Vasco da Gama. Lebne Dengel did not live to see the arrival of the military assistance. He had died in 1540 in the monastery of Debre Damo in Tigray and was succeeded by his son Gelawdewos (r.1540-1559).

The Portuguese army disembarked at Massawa and took control of the coastal town of Arkiko which was governed by an appointee of Imam Ahmad. At the time, Gelawdewos was in the southern part of the kingdom. Therefore, the Portuguese headed south to meet the king. On the way, the Portuguese fought their first major battle in which they defeated the Adal army garrisoned in Agame. After this battle, the Portuguese stopped their southward march and returned to Debarwa on the Red Sea coast. This was the result of the Imam's counter-attack. Up to the battle of Agame, the Imam was at his center in Dembiya. He immediately moved to the Simen mountains and established a new command center in Deresge. The strategy of the Imam was to stop the Portuguese from joining force with the army of Gelawdewos in the south. He wanted to isolate the two forces and attack them separately.

On the basis of this strategy, the Imam first led his army to attack the Portuguese in Seharti. With the help of their canon, the Portuguese defeated the Imam's army. The Imam himself was seriously wounded and narrowly escaped capture. The Portuguese pursued the defeated army and two weeks later they gave another battle. After heavy fighting, the Portuguese again defeated the Adal army. The wounded Imam and his army retreated to the southeast of Lake Ashenge. The Portuguese also moved southwards and camped in Wafla south of the Lake, where they awaited the coming of King Gelawdewos.

In the meantime, the defeated Imam realized that he could not prevent his final defeat and downfall. To avoid this he turned to the Ottoman Turks, the rivals of the Portuguese, for military

assistance. The Ottomans responded immediately by sending 900 infantry men armed with muskets and canons. As soon as the military assistance arrived the Imam marched against the Portuguese who were still awaiting the king in Wafla. In the battle that followed, the Portuguese suffered a crushing defeat. Their wounded commander, Christopher da Gama, was captured and killed.

The defeated and demoralized Portuguese army retreated to the northwest and met with Gelawdewos towards the end of 1542. Meanwhile, the victorious Imam returned to his former center in Dembiya and sent back most of the Ottoman troops. By doing so, the Imam committed a fatal mistake. The Portuguese were not completely defeated. They were so furious at the death of their commander which they wanted to avenge. Moreover, the Portuguese presence had raised the morale of the Christian army under Gelawdewos. Immediately, Gelawdewos led the combined forces against the army of the Imam in Dembiya. The decisive battle was fought in February 1543 at a place called Wayna Dega, near Lake Tana. In the course of the battle, the Imam was shot by one of the Portuguese soldiers. A little later, the Imam died and his army retreated to Adal.

The battle of Wayna Dega brought the dominance of the sultanate of Adal in the Ethiopian region to an end. Ultimately, the war weakened both fighting sides. Indeed, the war had exhausted both the Christian kingdom the sultanate of Adal.

The military conflict which lasted for about two decades caused much destruction. Several churches, monasteries and mosques were looted and burnt to the ground. Invaluable documents deposited in these institutions were also destroyed. It was a loss of several cultural heritages. Besides, a large number of men died on both sides. As a result, there was a severe population reduction in the region. It was a loss of an

immense wealth both in human and in material. Above all, the war undermined the power of the Christian kings by destroying the earlier professional soldiers built over the preceding centuries. This resulted in the outbreak of a rivalry between the monarchy and the nobility. Subsequently, the authority of the kings was challenged by regional lords who became more powerful than the kings. Consequently, the Christian kingdom was never the same again after the wars with the Muslim sultanate of Adal.

The military conflict was also responsible in part for population movements in the region. Many people changed their settlement area to avoid the conflict. The war also led to the intermixing of different ethnic and religious groups of the region. For example, the Muslim lowlanders settled amidst the highland Christians. This minimized the religious and ethnic differences in the region. Because of the population movement and chaos which accompanied the conflicts, the trade routes to Zaila became more and more unsafe for caravans. In fact, some trade continued to trickle through to Zeila until 1559, when Harar was abandoned and the Muslims shifted their center to Awsa in the Afar region.

### 8.3. Oromo Population Movement

In the last section, we have mentioned the population movements of the Somali and the Afar. But they were not the only population movements of the medieval period. Several other population movements have occurred in the region. One of them was the Oromo population movement, which was one of the great events of the sixteenth century Ethiopia.

The Oromo are one of the indigenous and oldest peoples of Ethiopia and the Horn. Different linguistic evidences ascertain that they belong to the Cushitic -speaking group of peoples, who are culturally and linguistically interrelated.

#### Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

How far are oral traditions reliable sources of history?

What methods are required to make them more reliable?

What traditions have you heard about the original homeland of the Oromo people? Discuss them in group.

What was the Oromo traditional religion?

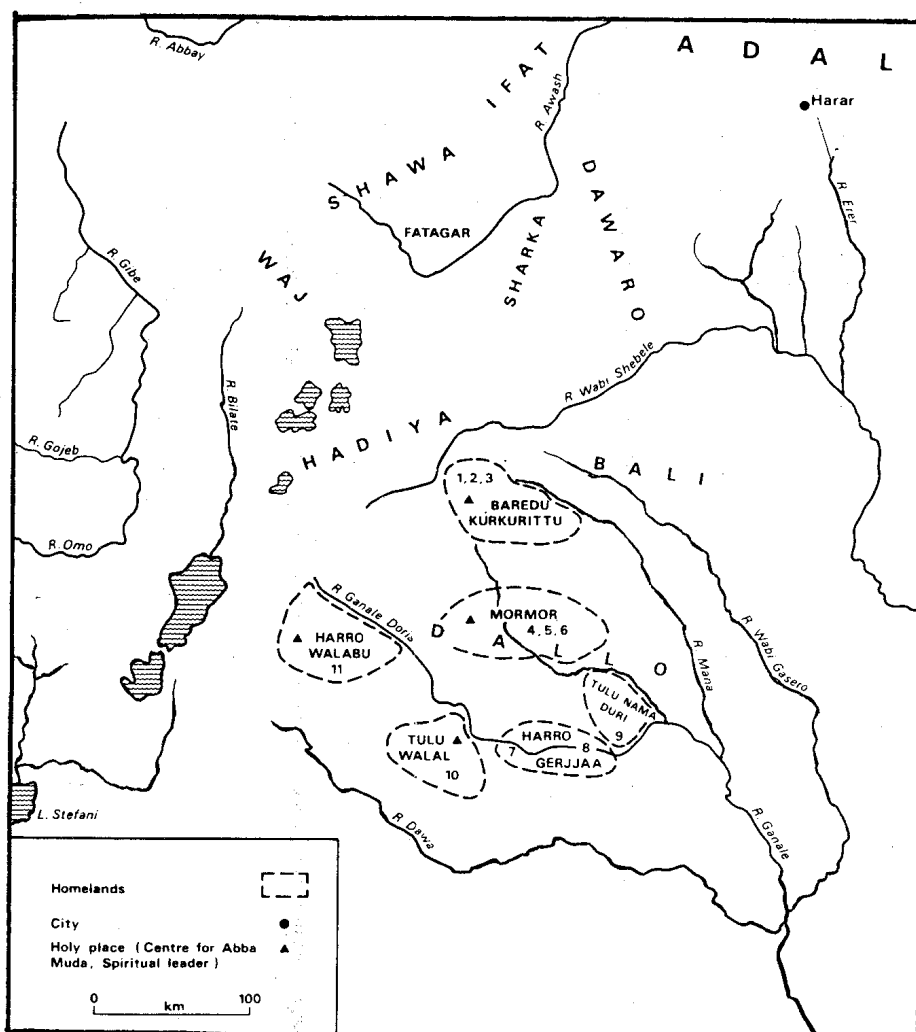
Discuss how the *gada* system operated.

Analyse the importance of the *gada* system for the Oromo population movement.

#### 8.3.1. Original Homeland of the Oromo

Until recently, the issue of locating the original homeland of the Oromo has been the subject of controversy among historians. But this controversy has now been resolved because of the growing availability of historical evidences. One type of the evidence is the Oromo oral traditions, which were collected from various Oromo clans who now live in different parts of the Ethiopian region. According to these traditions, the original homeland of the Oromo people is the highlands of the present Bale and Sidamo provinces. This is because almost all of the Oromo clans in Ethiopia attribute their origin to either one of the following places: Harro Walabu, Tullu Walal, Tullu Qurqur

and Harro Girja, all located in the two provinces. Before the sixteenth century, this region had been part of the territory of the medieval sultanate of Bali.



**Map 8.2 The centers of Oromo land before the sixteenth century**

But this does not mean that the homeland of the Oromo before the sixteenth century was only the highlands of historical Bali. While the ritual and political centers, more specifically known as Madda Walabu, of various Oromo clans were located in the highlands, a number of Oromo groups also lived outside these centers. For instance, sedentary Oromo groups existed in the sultanate of Sharka and Dawaro. Some of them also existed in the sultanate of Adal, particularly around the middle course of the Awash river. Still, some pastoral groups moved with their

cattle to the lowlands of the Rift Valley and the valley of Genale river. Yet, the main centre of the Oromo was the highlands of Bale and Sidamo in the south-central part of the Ethiopian region from where the movement of the sixteenth century started.

### **8.3.2. Oromo Institutions and Social Organization**

On the eve of the sixteenth century movement, the Oromo were organized into two separate confederacies called Borana and Barentu. The Borana confederacy consisted of the Macha-Tulama, Guji and southern Borana clans while the Barentu consisted of Karayu, Ittu, Marawa, Akachu, Warantisha and Humbana. At the time, the major part of the population of the confederacies lived in the highlands of Bali and practiced mixed farming. The lowlands in the immediate south and northwest of the highlands provided an excellent pasture, where young men took cattle for grazing. In the course of time, these young men evolved into separate clans with a predominantly pastoral economic life. Thus, the Oromo who practiced mixed farming permanently settled in the highlands, while the pastoral groups constantly moved with their cattle in the lowlands.

### **Religion**

Before their conversion to Islam or Christianity, the Oromo worshipped their own traditional religion. In this traditional religion, the Oromo believed in one supreme God called *Waqa*, which refers both to the sky and the sky God. They believed that *Waqa* is the ultimate power in the universe and it is also the source of life and nature. The power of *Waqa* is manifested through a spirit called *Ayana*. The spiritual leader in the Oromo traditional religion was known as *Qallu*. He was a high priest and believed to be possessed by the *Ayana*. He served as an intermediary between the *Waqa* and Oromo people. He was also the guardian of the laws of *Waqa*. As a result, *Qallu* was highly respected by the people and can exercise great

influence beyond the spiritual sphere in the economic, political and social life of the people. Young and adult men visited the *Qallu* to get his blessing. Children were also taken to him for the same purpose.

The *Qallu* was also called *Abba Muda*, i.e., father of anointment. He got this name from the ceremony named *muda*. This ceremony was celebrated once every eight years in honour of the *Qallu*. In the ceremony, the *Qallu* gave his blessing and anointed the *gada* officials who governed the Oromo for eight years. Thus, the *muda* ceremony was the point at which the *gada* system and the *Qallu* institution intersected.

During the movement of the sixteenth century, the *Qallu* did not leave his centre in the Bale highland. It was his delegates who accompanied the various Oromo clans. Because of this, after the sixteenth century movement, the Oromo clans who had settled in far away territories had to maintain their link with the *Abba Muda*. They maintained this link through the pilgrimage undertaken once every eight years to the *Abba Muda*. This pilgrimage was a piece of evidence which confirms that the highlands of Bale were the centre of Oromo land before the sixteenth century.

## **The Gada System**

The social and political life of the Oromo people was directed by an institution called the *gada* system. We do not know when the Oromo first adopted the *gada* system. However, at the beginning of their movement in the 1520s, the Oromo had an elaborately organized system that worked in a complex manner. Because of this, many scholars suggest that the system must have existed long before the sixteenth century.

The *gada* system is a complex socio-political and military organization of the Oromo people. Some scholars who made a thorough study of the *gada* system defined it briefly as a system of classes that succeeded each other every eight years in

assuming military, economic, political and ritual responsibilities among the Oromo people.

Two distinct categories existed in the *gada* system, which are very important to understand how the system worked. The categories, called the *gada* grade and *gada* class, worked in parallel or side by side. There were ten different grades and five different classes. In particular, the *gada* grades were important, because they made the system work in a cycle. The full cycle of the system had ten grades and each grade had a life-span of eight years. Therefore, the full cycle of the *gada* system had a life span of eighty years. The first five grades or forty years were the practical schools during which the young men were trained militarily, politically and ritually to take over the leadership of the nation. These trainings will qualify them for leadership. Let us see how the system worked by means of the two categories.

All male Oromo joined the *gada* system at their birth. Joining the system was marked by membership to one of the five classes. At the same time, the members of the class would enter the first grade. Those who became members of one of the classes would remain for the rest of their lives as members of that class. But this was not the case with *gada* grades, because members of *gada* class would not remain in the same grade. Rather, they would stay for eight years in one grade and then pass to the next grade, where they again would stay for another eight years. In short, every eight years members of *gada* class passed from one grade to the next grade until they completed the last eight years of the tenth grade. After completing the eight years of the last grade, the members of the *gada* class would leave the *gada* system.

In the *gada* system, specified social and political duties were assigned to members of *gada* class which they accomplished during their stay for eight years in each grade. In this regard, the sixth *gada* grade is very important, because members of *gada* class would assume political leadership. The

right of political leadership was held by members of the *gada* class as a whole. But before assuming the political power, they have either to raid new territories which their ancestors did not raid, or achieve something new for the Oromo society. Nevertheless, the *gada* government called *Chaffe* (assembly) was set up by officials elected from the members of the *gada* class. Officials were elected on the basis of their ability and merit. Among the officials, the highest authority was vested upon the *abba bokku* or *abba gada* (father of the *gada*, i.e the spokesman). However, the *abba gada* was just first among equals. Under the *abba gada* various other officials such as *abba sera* or chief of judge and *abba dula*, or commander of the army, were elected. These elected officers were simply the representatives of the reigning set.

The elected *gada* officials would assume executive power for eight years. They administered the clan in accordance with the laws of the *gada* system in which the will of their class members and that of the Oromo people at large is embodied. After eight years, the *gada* officials and their class members would hand over power to the class in the fifth grade during the term of their office. In this manner, the *gada* system functioned among all Oromo clans for many centuries even after their movement and expansion. However, due to various factors, the system lost its traditional elements through time and finally collapsed.

### 8.3.3. Cause and Directions of the Oromo Movement

#### Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Identify and explain some of the general factors which cause population movement.

Discuss in group about the major cause of the Oromo population movement.

Trace the direction of the movement of the Oromo people.

~~What were the factors for the success of Oromo population movement?~~

The main cause for the movement of the Oromo was population pressure. However, the conflict between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim states seems to have accelerated their free movement in the region. As we have already stated, the major part of the Oromo people lived in the highlands of historical Bali, where they practiced mixed farming. The abundant products and the healthy climate of the highland seem to have caused rapid population growth among the Oromo.

Beginning from the fourteenth century, an increase in the number of cattle resulted in the shortage of pastureland in the highlands. This forced young men to move with their cattle to the valley of the Genale river in the south. But a similar movement to the Rift Valley in the north was hindered by the southward expansion of the Christian kingdom. Moreover, in the subsequent centuries, the Rift Valley became a zone of acute conflict between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates. As a result, some Oromo pastoralists who had already moved to the Rift Valley were forced to change the direction of their movement to the south. Nevertheless, the centuries-long conflict between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim states reached its climax with the wars of *Imam Ahmad* in the sixteenth century which weakened the border defense of the Christian kingdom and accelerated the northward movement



However, they could not break-through the strong resistance put up by the Welayita state. Therefore, they gave up the attempt and headed northwards to the lakes region of the Rift Valley. In the course of the movement, they launched a number of swift attacks on the states of Hadiya, Bali, Sharka, Dawaro and Fatagar. The Christian army under Gelawdewos (r.1540 - 1559) failed to stop the rapid advances of the Oromo who controlled the territories of all these states in the 1550s.

At the beginning of the 1560s, the Oromo established their new center in Fatagar, at a place called **Oda Nabi**, in Dukam, about 30 kilometers, southeast of Adis Ababa. From this centre, the Oromo launched periodic campaigns in the western direction against Waj, Bizamo, Damot and Gafat. In the course of these campaigns, the Christian army led by Sarse Dingil (r.1563 - 1597) scored a victory over the Oromo warriors. But this temporary success did not curb the Oromo attack and consequently the above mentioned states were all defeated and controlled in the 1580's. As a result, part of the population of Bizamo and Damot fled across the Abbay to southern Gojjam, while others were assimilated by the Oromo settlers.

In the southwest, the Oromo met stiff resistance from the medieval state of Enarya. The Oromo attack against this state

began in the first decade of the seventeenth century. But the heroic resistance of Enarya continued throughout the century until it was finally defeated by the Limu Oromo in 1710. South of the Gojeb river, the kingdom of Kafa successfully repelled the attack of the Oromo and curbed their expansion to the south of the river.

The direction of the movement we discussed above was the one taken by the Tulama and Mecha pastoralists.

- The Arsi who left the highlands of Bale and moved towards the northwest to their present territory around Lake Zway.
- The southern Borana who left their centre in northwestern Bale and moved southwards to their present territory.
- The Karrayyu who lived in the upper course of Wabi Shebele, from where they moved eastwards to their present territory in the eastern lowland.
- The Ittu and Humbana clans who left the highlands of Bale and moved to their present territory around Harar.

Moreover, the Oromo clans such as the Guji had already launched their northward movement earlier. According to the Guji traditions, in the vicinity around Lake Zway, they were hard hit by the Christian army under Zar'a Ya'eqob. Consequently, the Guji were forced to change the direction of their movement towards the south. In general, the pastoral groups of all major Oromo clans took part in the movement that took them to distant territories through different directions.

The Oromo population movement was almost completed within eighty years, i.e, in the period of one full *gada* cycle. The movement began at about 1522 and subsided around 1604. The exception was the resistance of Enarya which lasted up to 1710.

There are two important reasons for the success of the Oromo population movement. First, the strong nature of Oromo

socio-politico-military organization gave them superiority in military tactics. Under the *gada* system, all male members are trained in various military practices from their early childhood. Before coming to power, the *gada* class have also to do something new in order to deeply imprint its reign among the Oromo. Above all, young boys grew amid the society where warriors were praised and served with special funeral ceremony. Because of this, young boys were always eager to become warriors. Second, the civil war which had exhausted the major states of the Horn of Africa also contributed a lot to the success of the Oromo population movement. As a result of the conflict, both the highland Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates were weakened militarily and they could not withstand the Oromo expansion of the second half of the sixteenth century.

#### **8.3.4. Consequences of Oromo Population Movement**

##### **Question for Discussion and Practical Work**

- Explain some of the consequences of the Oromo population movement

The movement took various Oromo clans to faraway places in Ethiopia. In so doing, the movement brought the Oromo into contact with various peoples of the Ethiopian regions. The Oromo also engaged in war with various states of the period. The consequences of the movement equally affected both Oromo and the states and societies of the period.

The medieval states of the Ethiopian region were the first to be affected by the population movement. The Christian kingdom was restricted to the north of River Abbay. In the eastern lowland, the sultanate of Adal was reduced to a city-state surrounded by the wall of Harar. In the southwestern and southern part of the Ethiopian region, the Kingdom of Kafa and Welayita survived mainly because of their heroic resistance and sacrifices. But the others such as Damot, Gafat, Bizamo, Bali,

Hadiya, Ifat, Dawaro and Fatagar were highly influenced and some of them were completely destroyed.

The motive behind the movement was a search for better grazing land. During their movement, the Oromo were governed by one major principle. The communities who accepted the Oromo peacefully were treated kindly. Their property would not be looted. Instead, they would be adopted by Oromo clans and enjoyed every right this position entailed. But those who resisted were cruelly treated and their property was plundered. This was what happened to the states of Damot and Bizamo. Part of their population fled to Gojjam, while the rest was assimilated by the Oromo settlers.

The movement also increased the interaction between the Oromo and the people with whom they came into contact. The result was an exchange of socio-cultural values and institutions. Several ethnic groups in the neighbourhood of the Oromo adopted the *gada* system. The Oromo also took various socio-cultural elements from the peoples among whom they settled or from their neighbours. A number of Oromo clans who settled in the neighbourhood of Christian communities were converted to this religion, while others took the religion of Islam, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The consequence of the population movement on the traditional political system of the Oromo people was particularly severe. Earlier the *gada* system worked effectively in a geographically-limited territory. But the movement dispersed the Oromo clans over a large territory. In this condition, it was impossible for the Oromo clans to live under one *gada* system. The immediate result was the disintegration of the political system, because each sub clan evolved its own *gada* system in the new areas where they settled.

Changes in the economic life also affected the *gada* system. Pastoral economy fits with the political life of the *gada* system. As we have already stated, it was the pastoral Oromo

who took part in the population movement. However, in the territories where they settled, they adopted sedentary mixed farming economy that led to the formation of classes. They were also involved in the long-distance trade of the region, which revived immediately after the population movement had subsided. The revival of the trade brought about an acute competition for the control of trade and trade routes. The competition created constant wars which gave rise to powerful warlords in the first half of the nineteenth century, who began to defy the authority of *gada* officials.

Using the income from trade and agriculture, some successful *abba dulas* or war leaders began to build private armies by which they controlled land, markets and trade routes. They also began to impose their authority first on their clans and then expanded their territories at the expense of their neighbours. Unfortunately, the traditional *gada* system did not provide for a mechanism of controlling such ambitious war leaders, who remained in power for long period of time and eventually assumed the title of *moti* (king).

In addition to these internal factors, there were also external factors which affected the *gada* system. In this regard, the Oromo borrowed some elements of the political system of kingship from the neighbouring peoples. Consequently, the authority of the *gada* system was gradually undermined and the political system based on kingship developed among the Oromo of the Gibe basin, where Limmu-Enarya, Jimma, Gera, Goma and Guma were the major states of the region. Similar states also developed in Wallagga: Leeqaa Qellem, Leeqaa Naqamtee and Horo-Guduru.

## Summary

The sixteenth century was known in Ethiopian history for two great events. During the first half of the sixteenth century, the Christian-Muslim conflict of the earlier centuries reached its

peak with the wars of **Imam** Ahmad. The second half of the same century was dominated by a very great population movement of the Oromo people. These two events had long lasting social, political and economic consequences in the region of Ethiopia and the Horn. The main reason for the military conflict of the sixteenth century was the rivalry between the Christian kingdom and the sultanate of Adal to monopolize long-distance trade and control territories. The consequences of the conflict were far-reaching. A great number of people lost their lives and there was also a huge material destruction. The end of the conflict was followed by the Oromo population movement. Before the sixteenth century, the centre of the territory of the Oromo was in the highlands of the present provinces of Bale and Sidamo. From this center, the population movement of the sixteenth century took several Oromo clans to new territories. As a result, they came into contact with many peoples and states of the Ethiopian region. The contact brought about greater interaction and intermingling of the Ethiopian peoples, resulting in the exchange of diverse social and cultural values. Today many peoples of Ethiopia share several common social and cultural values. This reality is one of the consequences of the Oromo population movement of the sixteenth century.

## **Review Questions**

### **I. Identify the following**

1. Legend of the Prester John of the Indies
2. Vasco da Gama
3. King Lebne Dengel
4. **Imam** Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim
5. battle of Shimbira Qure
6. the coming of Portuguese military expedition to Ethiopia
7. Harro Walabu
8. Qallu
9. Abba Bokku

10. Moti

**II. Match items of column 'A' with their appropriates under 'B'.**

| <b>A</b>                    | <b>B</b>                                        |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| ____ 1. Queen Elleni        | a) commander of Portuguese soldiers in Ethiopia |
| ____ 2. Battle of Wyna Dega | b) spiritual father of the Oromo                |
| ____ 3. Waqa                | c) expert of traditional Oromo laws             |
| ____ 4. Christopher da Gama | d) requested for Portuguese military help       |
| ____ 5. Abba Sera           | e) end of Muslim hegemony in Ethiopia           |
|                             | f) sky God                                      |
|                             | g) Oromo war leader                             |

### III. Choose the correct answer

1. The wars of Imam Ahmad Ibrahim has paved the way for
  - a) the decline of imperial power
  - b) the successful Oromo expansion
  - c) expansion of trade in the region
  - d) a and b
2. Which of the following does not belong to the Barentu confederacy?
  - a) Ittu
  - b) Guji
  - c) Karayu
  - d) Akachu
3. The major cause of the Oromo population movement was
  - a) to control trade routes
  - b) to expand their traditional religion
  - c) population growth
  - d) to collect tributes
4. At the battle of Wayna Dega
  - a) Lebne Dengel was defeated
  - b) the Muslims strengthened their rule
  - c) **Imam** Ahmad Ibrahime was killed
  - d) a and b

### IV. Explain with concrete examples

1. The consequences of the Oromo population movement for the states and societies of the Ethiopian region.
2. The consequences of the population movement for the Oromo themselves.
3. In what way was the story of the Prester John related to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia during the medieval period?