

Unit 8

Political and Social Transformations in Ethiopia: Mid-16th to Mid-19th Century

The unit focuses on two interconnected themes:

1. **The emergence and development of diverse states and societies in southern, western, and eastern Ethiopia**, highlighting their unique political structures, social organization, and economic activities.
2. **The challenges and transformations experienced by the Christian highland kingdom**, including attempts at consolidation, religious conflicts sparked by the imposition of Catholicism, the fragmentation of power during the Zemene Mesafint (Era of the Warlords), the rise of the Shewan kingdom, and the growing influence of European travellers, explorers, and missionaries.

Southern Ethiopian States: Indigenous Systems and Adaptations

Building on the themes of diversity and indigenous governance explored in Unit 7, Unit 8 examines the states and peoples of southern Ethiopia, emphasizing the persistence of local traditions alongside adaptations to changing political and economic circumstances.

- **Omotic States:** The sources provide further insights into the Omotic peoples, highlighting the diversity of their political structures.
 - **Monarchical Systems:** As noted in Unit 7, kingdoms like Kafa, Shekka, and Yem were ruled by hereditary monarchs holding the title of *Tato*.
 - **Other Forms of Governance:** The sources also mention other Omotic groups with distinct systems:
 - **Dorze:** Known for their beehive-shaped houses and their weaving skills, the Dorze people had a system of governance that relied on respected elders and assemblies.
 - **Wolaita:** Located in the fertile Wolayita Zone, the Wolaita people had a hierarchical society with a king at its apex.
 - **Yem, Dizi, Bench, Ari, Dasanach, Tsamayi, Erbo, Hamar, Surma, Nyangatom, Bodi, Male:** The sources list these groups as examples of Omotic peoples with diverse languages and cultural practices. While details about their specific political systems are not provided, their inclusion underscores the theme of diversity that pervades this unit.

- **The Sidama and the Luwa System:** Unit 8 revisits the Sidama people, providing a more in-depth examination of their unique *Luwa* system of governance.
 - **Cyclical Age-Set Organization:** The *Luwa* system revolved around age-sets (groups of men born within a specific time frame) that rotated through various political, military, and ritual roles over eight-year cycles. This system ensured the participation of different age groups in governance and provided a structured framework for leadership transitions.
 - **Elected Officials and Assemblies:** Key positions within the *Luwa* system, such as the *Gadanna* (leader) and *Jalawa* (assistant), were filled through elections. The system also featured assemblies (*Chimeyye*) composed of respected elders responsible for upholding Sidama laws (*Sera*) and resolving disputes.
 - **Military Training and Social Order:** The *Luwa* system incorporated five months of mandatory military training for young men, emphasizing the importance of defense and maintaining social order within Sidama society.
- **The Gedeo and the Balle System:** Similar to the Sidama's *Luwa* system, the Gedeo people, known for their expertise in coffee cultivation, had a cyclical age-set system called *Balle*, which structured their political and social organization.
- **The Konso and the Hayyota System:** Residing in the Konso Cultural Landscape (a UNESCO World Heritage site), the Konso people were organized into age-sets called *Hayyota*, which played a central role in their governance, land management, and cultural practices.
- **Gurage Chiefdoms and the Mootii:** Unit 8 further explores the Gurage people, focusing on their chiefdom structure.
 - **Sabat Bet Gurage:** This Gurage group maintained a monarchical system headed by a king known as the *Mootii*.
 - **Diversity within Gurage Chiefdoms:** While the sources primarily discuss the Sabat Bet Gurage, it's important to note that the Gurage people, like many other groups in Ethiopia, comprised various subgroups with their own distinct customs and political structures.

Western Ethiopian States: From Gadaa to Monarchy

Shifting focus to western Ethiopia, Unit 8 explores the political transformations experienced by some Oromo groups, particularly those residing in the Gibe Valley and Wallaga, as they transitioned from the *Gadaa* system to more centralized monarchical states.

- **The Gibe Oromo and the Rise of Monarchies:** The sources attribute the shift from *Gadaa* governance to monarchy among the Gibe Oromo to several interconnected factors:

- **Revival of Long-Distance Trade:** The resurgence of trade routes, particularly those connecting the Gibe region to the Red Sea coast, brought increased wealth and influence to those who controlled them. Ambitious individuals, often successful military leaders (*Abbaa Duulaa*), leveraged this wealth to consolidate power and establish hereditary rule.
- **Spread of Islam:** As Islam expanded into the Gibe region, often alongside trade, it influenced political structures. Some Oromo leaders converted to Islam, adopting the title of *Sultan* and incorporating Islamic legal and administrative practices into their rule.
- **Emergence of Powerful War Leaders:** The sources highlight the role of charismatic and successful military figures, like *Abbaa Duulaa*, who commanded large followings and, through conquest and alliances, established themselves as hereditary rulers (*Mootii*). This process often undermined the cyclical and consensus-based nature of the *Gadaa* system.
- **Notable Gibe Oromo States:** The sources provide glimpses into specific Gibe Oromo states that emerged during this period:
 - **Limmu-Ennarya:** As discussed in Unit 7, the Oromo conquest of the Ennarya kingdom in the late 16th century led to the establishment of the Limmu-Ennarya state, highlighting the Oromo's impact on the region's political landscape.
 - **Jimma:** Ruled by the Abba Jifar dynasty, Jimma emerged as a powerful and prosperous kingdom in the 19th century, known for its coffee production, trade, and its centralized administration.
 - **Leeqa Naqamte:** Founded by Abba Bahrey, Leeqa Naqamte controlled important trade routes and played a significant role in the Gibe region's political dynamics.
 - **Gomma:** Another prominent Gibe Oromo state, Gomma's history is intertwined with its interactions with neighbouring kingdoms and its role in regional trade.
 - **Gera:** Located in the fertile upper Gibe Valley, Gera was known for its agricultural production and its strategic location along trade routes.
- **The Leqa Oromo and the Persistence of Gadaa:** In contrast to the Gibe Oromo, the Leqa Oromo, residing in western Wallaga, largely maintained their *Gadaa* system of governance, demonstrating the resilience of indigenous traditions in some areas.

The Christian Highland Kingdom: Instability, Fragmentation, and External Pressures (1559-1855)

Unit 8 traces the turbulent history of the Christian highland kingdom during a period marked by internal divisions, external threats, and the growing influence of European powers.

- **Attempts at Consolidation and Shifting Political Centers:** The sources highlight the challenges faced by the "Solomonic" dynasty in maintaining control and consolidating their authority.
 - **Oromo Expansion and the Move North:** The continued expansion of the Oromo people southward presented a significant challenge to the Christian highland kingdom. This pressure forced rulers to relocate their political center several times, initially from the Shewa region to Mengiste Semayat in Gojjam and finally to the Lake Tana region during the reign of King Minas (r. 1559-1563).
 - **Lake Tana: Strategic Advantages:** The Lake Tana region offered several strategic advantages:
 - **Natural Defenses:** The lake and surrounding terrain provided a natural barrier against Oromo incursions.
 - **Economic Resources:** The fertile lands surrounding Lake Tana were conducive to agriculture, providing a stable food supply.
 - **Religious Significance:** The region held strong religious importance for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, with numerous monasteries located in the area.
- **Religious Conflict: The Imposition of Catholicism and Its Aftermath:** Unit 8 examines a period of intense religious conflict triggered by attempts to convert the Christian highland kingdom to Catholicism.
 - **Arrival of the Jesuits:** Jesuit missionaries, seeking to expand Catholicism's reach, arrived in Ethiopia during the 16th century, initially welcomed by some rulers who saw potential advantages in forging alliances with European powers.
 - **Religious Controversy and Resistance:** The Jesuits' efforts to replace the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church's practices and doctrines with Catholicism sparked widespread resistance from the clergy and many within the population. Religious debates, forced conversions, and the destruction of churches fueled social unrest and weakened central authority.
 - **King Susenyos and the Catholic Interlude:** King Susenyos (r. 1607-1632), influenced by Jesuit missionaries, converted to Catholicism and

attempted to make it the state religion. This decision ignited widespread rebellion, forcing Susenyos to abdicate in favor of his son, Fasiledes, who restored the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church's dominance.

- **The Gondarine Period: Cultural Revival and Political Fragmentation:** The establishment of Gondar as the permanent capital by King Fasiledes (r. 1632-1667) ushered in a period known as the Gondarine Period (1632-1769), characterized by a cultural revival and continued political instability.
 - **Gondar: A Center of Power and Culture:** Gondar flourished as a political, economic, and cultural hub. The city's impressive royal enclosure, with its palaces, castles, and churches, stands as a testament to the architectural achievements of the era. Gondar also became a center for religious learning, music, poetry, and art, attracting scholars and artisans from across the kingdom.
 - **Notable Gondarine Rulers:** The reigns of Fasiledes, Yohannis I (r. 1667-1682), and Iyasu I (r. 1682-1706), known as Iyasu the Great, marked a period of relative stability and expansion. Iyasu I, in particular, undertook successful military campaigns to regain territories lost to the Oromo and reasserted the Christian highland kingdom's authority over Shewa.
 - **Growing Influence of the Oromo:** Despite attempts at consolidation, the Oromo's influence continued to grow. Their military prowess and strategic alliances with some factions within the Christian highland kingdom allowed them to secure important positions of power. The Oromo language gained prominence in the Gondarine court, highlighting their growing integration into the kingdom's political fabric.
 - **Etege Mintiwab: A Powerful Female Figure:** The sources highlight the remarkable influence of Etege Mintiwab, the wife of Emperor Bekaffa (r. 1721-1730). Following Bekaffa's death, Mintiwab skillfully maneuvered within the Gondarine court, securing her own position and that of her son, Iyasu II (r. 1730-1755). Her ability to navigate the kingdom's complex political landscape and exercise power in a male-dominated arena underscores the agency and influence wielded by some women in Ethiopian history.
- **The Zemene Mesafint: Descent into Chaos and Regionalism:** The assassination of Emperor Iyo'as (r. 1755-1769) in 1769, orchestrated by powerful regional lords, marked the beginning of the Zemene Mesafint (Era of the Warlords), a period of profound instability and fragmentation that would last until 1855.
 - **Weakening of Central Authority:** The Zemene Mesafint witnessed the erosion of the "Solomonic" dynasty's authority as regional lords, often of Oromo descent, consolidated power in their respective domains and

engaged in constant warfare for dominance. The once-unified Christian highland kingdom fractured into a patchwork of competing provinces, each ruled by a powerful warlord.

- **Rise of the Yejju Dynasty:** The Yejju Oromo, led by powerful figures such as Ras Mikael Sehul and Ras Ali Gwangul (Ali the Great), emerged as dominant players during the Zemene Mesafint. They established the Yejju dynasty, effectively controlling the Gondarine emperors and exerting influence over much of the Christian highland kingdom from their base in Debre Tabor.
- **Impact of the Zemene Mesafint:** The era of the warlords had a devastating impact on the Christian highland kingdom:
 - **Economic Decline:** Constant warfare disrupted trade, agriculture, and craft production, leading to widespread economic hardship.
 - **Social Disruption:** The breakdown of law and order resulted in insecurity, banditry, and a decline in living standards for much of the population.
 - **Political Fragmentation:** The Zemene Mesafint solidified the fragmentation of the Christian highland kingdom, laying the groundwork for the emergence of regional power centers that would shape Ethiopia's future.

The Rise of Shewa: Isolation and Expansion

As the Christian highland kingdom descended into chaos during the Zemene Mesafint, a new power emerged in the south: the kingdom of Shewa.

- **Establishment and Early Years:** Founded in the late 17th century by Negasi Kirstos, who claimed descent from the "Solomonic" line, Shewa initially paid tribute to the Gondarine emperors but increasingly asserted its autonomy. The kingdom's strategic location, south of the areas most affected by the Oromo expansion, allowed it to develop in relative isolation.
- **Expansion and Consolidation:** Under the leadership of ambitious rulers such as Sebestie (r. 1703-1718) and especially Amha Iyasus (r. 1744-1775), Shewa embarked on a period of expansion, incorporating neighboring Oromo territories and consolidating its control over important trade routes.
- **Administrative Reforms:** To manage their growing kingdom, Shewan rulers implemented administrative reforms, dividing their realm into provinces (including Yifat, Menz, Ankober, and Merhabete), each headed by a governor (Abegaz) responsible for collecting taxes, maintaining order, and raising troops. This system strengthened central authority and laid the foundation for Shewa's rise as a regional power.

- **Asfa Wossen and a Policy of Integration:** Asfa Wossen (r. 1775-1808), considered one of Shewa's most capable rulers, continued the kingdom's expansion and implemented policies aimed at integrating the diverse population under his rule. He encouraged intermarriage with Oromo clans, promoted religious tolerance, and emphasized social equality, fostering a sense of unity and loyalty that would serve Shewa well in the turbulent years to come.

The Growing Influence of Europeans: Travelers, Explorers, and Missionaries

Unit 8 concludes by examining the increasing presence of Europeans in the Ethiopian region during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, foreshadowing the challenges and opportunities that external engagement would bring.

- **Motivations for European Interest:** European travelers, explorers, and missionaries ventured into Ethiopia driven by a complex mix of motives:
 - **Curiosity and the Search for Knowledge:** Some were driven by a thirst for knowledge, eager to explore unknown lands, document their discoveries, and learn about different cultures.
 - **Economic Ambitions:** Others, often representing European trading companies or governments, sought to establish trade relations, secure access to resources, and expand their economic influence.
 - **Religious Zeal:** Missionaries, primarily from Catholic and Protestant denominations, were motivated by a desire to spread Christianity, often seeking to convert Ethiopians from what they viewed as "heretical" beliefs.
- **Notable European Figures:** The sources mention several key European figures who visited Ethiopia during this period:
 - **James Bruce (1730-1794):** A Scottish explorer, Bruce traveled extensively in Ethiopia, documenting its history, culture, and the source of the Blue Nile. His writings, while sometimes criticized for their inaccuracies and biases, introduced Europeans to the wonders and complexities of the Ethiopian region.
 - **William George Browne (1768-1813):** An English traveler, Browne journeyed through parts of Ethiopia, providing valuable insights into the political fragmentation and social dynamics of the Zemene Mesafint.
 - **Henry Salt (1780-1827):** An English traveler and diplomat, Salt undertook two missions to Ethiopia, establishing contact with powerful regional lords, including the ruler of Tigray, and negotiating trade agreements.
 - **Samuel Gobat (1799-1879):** A Swiss Protestant missionary, Gobat spent several years in Ethiopia, primarily in Tigray, attempting to establish a

mission and spread his faith. His experiences highlighted the challenges faced by European missionaries in navigating Ethiopia's complex religious landscape.

- **Early Treaties and Agreements:** The growing European presence led to the signing of early treaties and agreements between Ethiopian rulers and European powers.
 - **Treaty of Commerce and Friendship (1841):** This treaty, signed between Captain William Cornwallis Harris, representing the British East India Company, and Sahle Selassie of Shewa, aimed to establish trade relations and promote British interests in the region.
 - **Treaty of Commerce and Friendship (1843):** Similar to the 1841 treaty, this agreement, signed between Rochet d'Héricourt, representing France, and Sahle Selassie of Shewa, aimed to secure French commercial and political interests.
 - **Significance of Early Treaties:** These early treaties, while seemingly focused on trade, laid the groundwork for increasing European involvement in Ethiopian affairs. They also reflected the growing ambitions of regional rulers like Sahle Selassie, who sought to leverage European alliances for their own political and economic gain.