Chapter 4

Politics, Economy and Socio-Cultural Processes from the Late Thirteenth to the beginning of the Sixteenth Centuries

The “Restoration” of the “Solomonic“ Dynasty

Yekuno-Amlak‟s victory over the last Zagwe ruler and his enthronement as a king led to the “revival or restoration of Solomonic” dynasty and also marked the beginning of Ethiopia‟s medieval period. The Kibre-Negest is a national epic that glorifies a particular monarchical line and also indelibly associates Ethiopia with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

From about 1270 when Yekuno-Amlak took power from the hands of the Zagwe until the deposition of Emperors Haile Sillasse I in 1974, all Ethiopian monarchs claimed descent from the family of Yekuno-Amlak.

Succession Problem and the Establishment of „Royal Prison‟

Yekuno-Amlak ruled peacefully, and after his death in 1285, his successor eldest son, YegbaTsion‟s reign (r. 1285-94) and the following decade or more was characterized by constant power struggles among the sons and grandsons of Yekuno Amlak. The existence of power struggle civil war was reflected in a letter written by Yegba-Tsion to the Sultan of Egypt and the Patriarch of Alexandria in 1290.T he serious and dangerous power struggle reached in its zenith or a worse situation during Yegba-Tsion‟s sons (Senfe-Ar‟ad, Hezbe-Asseggid, Qedme-Asseggid, Seb-Asseggid and Jan-Asseggid) reign.

This continuous succession problem was resolved around 1300, during the reign of WidimRa‟ad (r. 1299-1314); when Amba-Gishen was established as „royal prison to avoid further power struggle among contending princes. According to the rule, all males tracing descent from Yikunno Amlak except the sons of the reigning emperor were imprisoned at AmbaGishen. This practice continued until Amba-Gishen was destroyed by Imam Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Ghazi in 1540.

Consolidation and Territorial Expansion

The center of the “restored” dynasty was at first in medieval Amhara (today‟s South Wallo) around Lake Haiq. But, it gradually shifted its center into Shawa, in to the districts like: Menz, Tegulet, Bulga, Yerer, Entoto, Menagesha, Wachacha, Furi and Zequalla. From 1270, until the establishment of Gondar in 1636, the medieval monarchs spent their reign in mobile court/ roving capital.

until the coming of Amde-Tsion, the center and the territorial limit of the Christian kingdom was mainly in nowadays areas of Tigray, Lasta, the Amhara regions of Wallo and Shawa. Apart from the previous rulers, in relatively speaking, there was stability during the reign of Widim-Ra‟ad. The Christian kingdom could bring extensive territories during the reign of Emperor Amde-Tsion (r.1314 to 1344). He was the first Solomonic king, who embarked upon a policy of wider and rapid territorial expansion. During this period commodities flowed to the coast along, one: from Sudan to Massawa

north of Lake Tana via Lasta; second, from central provinces through southern Shawa to Massawa or Zeila; and third from southern provinces with the route through Shawa to Zeila.)

Amde-Tsion subdued rebellions and was able to bring an end to the centrifugal tendency, which threatened the unity of the Christian Kingdom. He made territorial expansion in to:

- The Agaw (Awi) of Gojjam: Amde-Tsion annexed the region around 1323-24. followed by the establishment of churches and monasteries.
- Bizamo: this was conquered c. 1316/7 and existed until the end of the 16th century under the control of the Christian Kingdom.
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- The Falasha/Bete-Israel: Amde-Tsion around 1332 pushed the people further into the inaccessible mountain districts north of Begemder.The Felasha continued to resist and rebel against the growing Christian Kingdom‟s domination throughout the medieval period.
- The Red Sea Coast: Amde-Tsion e desire to share in or control the northern trade route between interior of Ethiopia and Muslim powers of Egypt, the Middle East and also beyond. To consolidate the control of the Christian state over the provinces of the north extending to the coastal areas of Massawa, Amde-Tsion claimed to get back territories once belonging to the great kings of Aksum. The north Muslims resented his campaign against the Muslim State of Ifat and Shawa and they might have cooperated with the rebellious army at Indarta in northern Tigray, led by Yaibeka-Igzi in 1320s. He first gave Indarta to his queen Bilen-Saba. However, BahrSagad, the son of Amde-Tsion, became the governor of Tigre. It seems then that Amde-Tsion took immediate campaign in today‟s Eritrea region in 1325. After controlling the whole region he appointed a governor with a title of Makale Bahir which later on changed into Bahire Negash.
- In the south, the Gurage speaking areas and some of the Omotic kingdoms like Wolayta and Gamo were also brought under the control or at least under the influence of the Christian state. Amde-Tsion was in full control of all the trade routes and sources of trade of the Ethiopian region in the early 1330s

Evangelization and Religious Movements.

I. Evangelization

- As the 14th century marked the maximum expansion of the Christian kingdom, at the same time, it contributed more for the expansion of Orthodox Church to the peoples of different areas.
- Shawan plateau played the most important role for both the military activities of the Christian army and also propagating Christian teaching.
- According to Taddese Tamrat (Church & State, 300 & 305), the province of Amhara was exposed to Christian influences much longer during the medieval period, but they were lacking cultural Christian centers of learning and monastic activities until the time of Iyesus-Mo'a.
- Saint Tekle-Haymanot, who was born at Tsilalish in Zorere (in today Bulga), contributed more for the revival of Christianity in Shawa and the regeneration of the church in the southern part of Ethiopia including medieval Damot.

- Egyptian bishop in Ethiopia Bishop Yaqob spread to non-Christians areas.
- to east direction- Yohannes for Kil'at, Tadewos for Tsilalish and Matyan for Fatagar . to north-west-Anorewos "the junior" for Moret & Wegda and Merqorewos for Merhabite. . to the south and south-west- Anorewos "the elder" for Wereb and Sigaj Adhani for Damot, Iyosyas for Wej, and Yosef for Enariya.

II. Religious Movements

A. **The Ewostatewos Movement**

- Monasticism assumed a dominant position in Ethiopian church only in the mid-13th C. the period witnessed rapid development of monasticism, and a religious movement called Ewostatewos movement arose.
- Ewostatewos established his own monastic community in Sara'e. His main argument was Sabbath, one of the Ten Commandments given to Moses.
- According to him, Sabbath should be strictly observed as holiday.
- At the beginning of the movement, he was opposed by an organized religious rival group of the clergy in Sera'e. Then he left the country in to Egypt. At the end he passed on to Jerusalem, on the way, he died in 1350s.
- the movement got renaissance when some of his followers such as Bekimos, Merkoryewos and Gebre –Iyasus returned back to home from Armenia after his death.
- The king and the Abun opposed their movement as the observance of the Sabbath is rejected as a Jewish custom by the Egyptian Coptic Church. They were imprisoned and punished.
- In their search for suitable places, they were forced to withdraw into frontier areas or settle in peripheral areas, and founded the monasteries of Debre Bizamo Philipos, Debre San.
- Towards the end of the reign of the King Dawit, the Ewostatian seem to have acquired complete freedom of movement throughout the kingdom based on Dawit's decree in 1404.

B. **the Religious Reforms of Zara-Yaqob**

- Zara-Yaqob (r. 1434-68) who was the son of Dawit ascended to the throne with definite proSabbath convictions. Emperor wanted to end non-Christian practices by strengthening Orthodox Church.
- He introduced a severe punishment against non-Christian practices and the abolition of worshiping traditional religions in his kingdom.
- He made peace with the House of Ewostatewos reviving Sabbath in the Ethiopian church and the Ewostatian agreed to receive Holy orders from the Ethiopian prelates.
- He urged the clergy to be sent to remote areas to preach Christianity or teach and guide the people.
- Lack of sufficient religious books was a problem, thus the king encouraged the establishment of a library in every church.
- He himself wrote some books like MetsafeBirhan, Metsafe-Me"lad, Metsafe-Sillasie, Metasfe-teqebo Mister etc. In addition, during his reign; **Te"amre-Maryam** was translated

Political Developments in the Muslim Sultanates and the Rise of Adal

- According to Taddese Tamrat, rulers of Ifat were tributary to the king of Damot at the beginning. Yet, Ifat freed itself from Damot in short period of time and extended its hegemony into neighboring Sultanates.
- one branch of the Walasma exiles family, which realized that Ifat was becoming an easy target to the Christian kingdom due to its location, moved further to the southeastern lowlands and established new and vigorous Muslim Sultanate of Adal in the highland districts around Harar in 1367.
- The first center of this extended Walasma Dynasty was at a place called Dakar (Deker), a place located on the southeast of Harar.
- The center of Adal later on in 1520 changed to the city of Harar and after the defeat of Imam Ahmad; a growing threat from a new force-the Oromo forced the sultanate to change its capital to Awsa in 1576/7, to the present Afar region.

Trade and the Expansion of Islam

- During this time Islam was strongly established in the southeastern lowlands of the region that was the territory controlled by most of the Muslim sultanates.
- Islam spread into the central and southwestern parts of the Ethiopian region through Muslim merchants and scholars.
- Trade was not only used as means for expansion of Islam in the Muslim Sultanates rather it was the base of their economy. The most known Muslim Sultanates during this period were Ifat (1285-1415) and Adal (1415-1577).

Rivalry between the Christian Kingdom and the Muslim Sultanates

- Zeila was the main outlet for the medieval period long distance trade. The ambition to control this trade route and commodities that passed through Zeila, led to rivalry between the “Solomonic” rulers and the Sultanate of Ifat.
- The first recorded conflict between the Christian kingdom and Ifat took place in 1328.
- The sultan of Ifat Haqaddin I stopped merchants belonging to the Christian king, Amde-Tsion, confiscating the goods and capturing and imprisoning Amde-Tsion‟s agent, Ti‟iyintay returning from Cairo.
- These actions forced Amde-Tsion to wage a campaign against Haqaddin I; defeated and took him prisoner and eventually replaced him by his brother Sabradin.
- Both Ifat and Fatagar became under Sabradin. Sultanates of Hadiya and Dawaro were showing their alliance to Sabradin.
- However, in 1332, Sabradin broke his allegiance to Amde-Tsion, mobilized all Muslims Sultanates from the lowlands and declared three pronged attacks(interestingly with the alliance of the Jewish inhabiting north fringe of Lake Tana)
- Ifat was defeated and sacked, Sabradin escaped to Dawaro. Amde-Tsion followed and imprisoned him together with the ruler of Dawaro, Haydara.
- fter the defeat of Sabradin, Ifat was placed under Jamaldin (another brother of Sabradin) as tributary ruler to Amde-Tsion and Fatagar & Dawaro were incorporated.
- me members of Walasma moved their seat of power further east to Adal, from where they continued their struggle.

- In 1376, internal struggle to the throne of Ifat resulted in Haqadin II‟s coming to power. He refused to pay tribute and rebelled against son and successor of Amde-Tsion, Sayfa-Arad (r.1344 -71). he was defeated and killed in battle in 1386.
- The successor of Haqadin II, Sa‟adaddin II (C. 1386-1402) gained initial success but king Dawit I (r. 1380-1412) in 1402/3 extended his expansion and defeated him.
- Sa‟adaddin II became refuge in Zeila and later on during the reign of King Yishaq (r.1413- 30) in 1415 he was killed.
- Tens of sons of Sa‟adaddin took refuge in Yemen and then came back from their exile to bear the title of "sultan of Adal" rather than Ifat.
- Muslim Sultanates fought each other rather than united. The expansion of the Christian kingdom to these Muslim Sultanates turned Ethiopian kings in to „Kng of Kings‟ or emperor. Yet, Yishaq lost his life fighting somewhere in Adal.
- The "Solomonic" dynasty reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Zare-Yae‟qob when the Christian kingdom gained some accesses to the Red Sea commerce and again maritime, imperial power become strong politically and religiously
- Zare-Yaqob controlled Zeila, reoccupied Massawa and Dahlak became his tributary.
- In 1445, Sultan Ahmad Badley mobilized all his forces and invaded the Christian kingdom but, he was defeated in the **battle of Yeguba**.
- The son and successor of Ahmad Badley, Muhammad Ahmad Badlay (r.1445-71) sent a message of submission to successor of ZaraYaqob, Ba‟ede Mariam (r. 1468-78) to continue to be tributary vassal of the Christian kings. On the death of Muhammad, however, Adal resumed its power and began struggle.
- Walasma sultans of Adal were obliged to change their policy of war against the Christian state. They preferred peace to war. They began to acknowledge the power of the Christian Emperor by paying annual tribute. One of these sultans of Adal was Mohammad ibn Azhar ad-Din (1488-1518)
- However, the various Emirs of the southeastern region of Harar such as Leday Uthman, Mahfuz and Abubakar in collaboration with Garads, Emirs, Wazirs, Imamas, Qadis, army leaders continued to resist the Christian kingdom.
- Mahfuz died in 1517 in a battle with Emperor Lebne-Dengel (r. 1508-1540) and his son-in-law, Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim alGhazi, popularly known as Ahmad Gragn or the left-handed, took ove

External Relations

With Egypt

- In 1272, Yekuno-Amlak sent an embassy to Egypt‟s Sultan Baybars requesting an Abun from Alexandrian Coptic Orthodox Church.
- Mohammed ibn Qala‟un in Cairo persecuted the Copts destroying their churches while Ifat dynasty interpreted this as a sign of political weakness.
- Amde-Tsion demanded restoration of churches destroyed with threat that failure to do so result in diversion of the Nile waters. Patriarch Marqos (1348- 63) sent words to Sayfa-Arad announcing his imprisonment by the Sultan.
- Sayfa-Arad mobilized a huge army and began a move towards Egypt, but the Sultan after hearing the news released the patriarch and sent a delegation and a gift to the king.

- Dawit also took offensive against Egypt, but was settled by patriarch Matewos (1328-1408) and by the Amir delegated.
- Zara-Yaqob wrote a letter to Sultan Barsbay in the year 1437/8. The letter was friendly, requesting the protection of Christians. However, three years later, Patriarch Yohannes XI wrote to Zara-Yaqob announcing the demolition of the famous church of Mitmaq. He then sent envoys to Sultan Jaqmaq (1438-53) with a strongly worded letter.

Ethiopia‟s Relations with Christian Europe

- **Refer page 80**
- The earliest known message to Ethiopia from a European monarch is the letter of King Henry IV dated 1400 A.D. and addressed to the king of Abyssinia, Prester John.
- Soon after the letter of king Hennery, the first embassy to Europe, was responded in 1402 led by a Florentine called Antonio Bartoli.
- Alphonso de Paiva V of Argon received a delegation from Yishaq in the city of Valentia, in 1427. Yishaq‟s delegation to Europe was to ask for more artisans and military experts.
- Neapolitan Pietro, a Spaniard and a Frenchman reached Ethiopia in the reign of Yishaq. In 1432, Pietro only surviving the return journey was at Pera recruiting craftsmen to go back to Ethiopia.
- King Zara-Yaqob sent delegates to Alphonso to get political and military technical aid. Alphonso wrote to Zara Yaqob and informed him that he sent him artisans and masons he requested.
- The most authentic pieces of evidence for Ethio-Europe links are Egyptus Novelo (c. 1454) and Fra Mauro's Mappomondo (1460) which clearly depicted many places and peoples. Venetian Gregorio or Hieronion Bicini visited Abyssinia in 1482. Pedros da Covilhao/Peter de Covilham arrived at Abyssinian court of Eskindir
- Among the famous female personalities in Ethiopian history, Queen Elleni who was an exMuslim chief of Hadiya baptized about 1445 on marrying King Zara-Yaqob (1434 - 68) is said to have possessed great wisdom and sound political judgment.
- Queen Elleni had foreseen the danger of Ottoman expansion and played role in establishing military alliance with Portugal against Ottoman Turks.
- Around 1512 Queen Elleni, the mother and regent of Lebne-Dengel sent her envoy an Armenian called Mathew to Portugal. The Portuguese court doubted his authenticity and was received coldly
- The Portuguese Embassy led by Rodrigo di Lima, Duwarto Galliba and Francisco Alvarez reached Ethiopia in 1520 and left after six years. The objective was to establish a naval port against expanding Turkish power in Red Sea Area. The mission was not successful.