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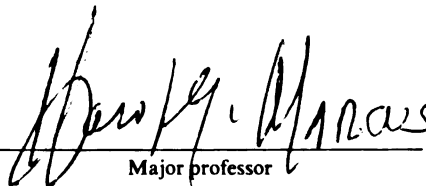
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Building Bridges, Drying Bad Blood:  
Elite Marriages, Politics and  
Ethnicity in 19th and 20th Century  
Imperial Ethiopia  
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Heran Sereke-Brhan

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**BUILDING BRIDGES, DRYING BAD BLOOD: ELITE MARRIAGES, POLITICS  
AND ETHNICITY IN 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IMPERIAL ETHIOPIA**

**By**

**Heran Sereke-Brhan**

**A DISSERTATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BUILDING BRIDGES, DRYING BAD BLOOD: ELITE MARRIAGES, POLITICS AND ETHNICITY IN 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IMPERIAL ETHIOPIA**

**By**

**Heran Sereke-Brhan**

**According to most scholarly inquiries in Ethiopian studies, forceful incorporation and submission were the main mechanisms by which empire was built and sustained. Power is often associated with an "elite ethnic" group identified as Amhara whose particular characteristics are detailed in Donald Levine's sociological study, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Like most other primordialist interpretations of ethnicity, this work does not account for issues of ethnic change, immigration, dissolution and intermarriage, thus presenting difficulty in historicizing the process of identity formation. Critical assessment of Levine's study serves as a prelude to broadening constructs of identity and marriage among the elite is chosen here as the suitable prism through which to refract issues of ethnicity, state building, women and power.**

**This dissertation is a study of the social history of power, the narrative of which has been created from documenting the lives and activities of central and regional elite families (men and women) over several generations. The remarkable continuity of elite family histories points to an important link between their collective presence and the crafting of empire. From their extensive inter-**

marriage emerged a national elite that could claim origins from different parts of the country. Though difficult to assess, the symbolic and practical implications of this had arguably little chance to evolve or impact public perception in light of the 1974 Revolution. Despite that, this study establishes the significance of elite marriages as a more peaceful mechanism used by the statecraft to forge nation, thus contributing another dimension to existing literature on Ethiopian political history.

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**To my father and mother who kept safe my sense of wonderment about life**

**To my aunt Samayawit and her irrepressible spirit**

**To Tewodros, Yemane and Noah - guiding lights on the path**

**To the elders whose stories I revisit and continue to cherish**

**To my friends who have shared the joys and pains of the journey**

**To the many activists, artists & musicians who have inspired me in  
word, sound and color**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My graduate experience at MSU is probably more unusual than most. I was recruited almost by accident when I obtained Dr. Harold G. Marcus' address from the back of a book he'd written and contacted him for more information on the Ethiopian resistance movement during the Italian invasion for a paper I was writing as a junior at Mills College in Oakland, California. He invited me to a conference of Northeast African Studies and introduced me as the new recruit to the History Department, a prophetic statement which eventually led to my attending MSU.

I have benefited greatly from the graduate courses I have taken here. Besides African history, I had interests that I was able to explore and develop in African Art History and African-American & Diaspora histories. My committee members actively participated in guiding my personal passions towards academic pursuits. I learned differently from my female professors – from Dr. Eldredge, I learned the importance of including gender and theory in historical analyses. From Dr. Hine, whom I consider a mentor, I learned the art of holistic critiquing and the possibilities of comparative analyses in African and Diaspora studies. The many distinguished scholars that participated in her seminars added another dimension to my learning process, as have the many speakers, activists and artists who have presented at MSU and whose perspectives have engaged and informed my thinking in various ways over the years.

My family has been unstintingly supportive throughout my long tenure as graduate student – even at times when they did not fully understand what I was trying to accomplish. My parents have poured their body and soul into our well-being and educational development. More importantly, they have raised me with a sense of wonderment about life that has shaped and guided my broader interests and intellectual pursuits in African and African Diaspora cultures and histories. I thank them for that.

There are many who have shared close friendships with me, from near and far – affirming the importance of this venture, sharing their own graduate experiences and greatly enriching mine with their steadfast presence. It is the strength of this community that has kept any sense of isolation at bay over the years. African history was no longer confined to the books as I had incredible opportunities to befriend and commune with colleagues from different parts of the continent. These interactions, along with my travels in Africa, have made my academic training and interests tangible and real.

I am thankful for the elders that opened their lives and pasts to me in vignettes and anecdotes during my fieldwork. When I finally understood their ways and rhythms, my frustration at not accomplishing what I had set out to do within the specific days and weeks I had scheduled gradually gave way to a deeper appreciation of their slowly unfolding stories. I have been blessed with vivid moments that captured memory in motion. Many of the elders have died since, and I am often haunted by the surreal feeling of grasping after a

disappearing world. If I had overlooked it before, this has etched the urgency of historical research in my mind for always.

The Institute of Ethiopian Studies and its staff as well as the members of the Addis Ababa University History Department have offered warm hospitality during my stay. Shiferaw Bekele has been a particular inspiration both in his scholarship and his generous personality, continually nurturing my thoughts and offering encouragement. I thank them all for the welcome I continue to receive.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>afa negus</i>	'mouth of the king' the supreme judge of the land under the king
<i>alaqa</i>	head of a church, learned priest
<i>balambaras</i>	'head of the <i>amba</i> ' a low-level administrative title
<i>batten geta</i>	A title signifying learning. An exalted version of <i>blatta</i> , given to government officials of the ministerial level
<i>bitwoded</i>	most favored courtier, imperial counselor, often officiating in the name of the king
<i>dejzmach</i>	'commander of the gate,' a politico-military title below <i>ras</i> (contracted form <i>dejach</i> )
<i>fitawrari</i>	'commander of the vanguard,' a title below <i>dejzmach</i> but of higher import in the case of Habte Giyorgis Dingade, Minister of War 1907-1926
<i>kantiba</i>	mayor
<i>leul/li'it</i>	'prince/princess' title born by sons and daughters of the royal family and by the upper nobility
<i>lij</i>	'child' honorific title usually reserved for sons and daughters of the royal family and the children of upper nobility
<i>liqa makwas</i>	official serving as the king's double to divert attacks directed against the king
<i>makwanent</i>	nobility whose rank is earned by service
<i>masafent</i>	hereditary nobility
<i>naggadras</i>	'head of merchants,' chief government official in charge of collecting customs
<i>ras</i>	'head' the highest traditional title next to <i>negus</i>
<i>ras bitwoded</i>	a rare title, combining the power of <i>ras</i> and the imperial favor of the <i>bitwoded</i>

**Woyzero, Wzo.** 'lady' now used for 'Mrs'

**Adopted from:** Bahru Zawde. *History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974*. London:  
James Currey Ltd., 1991.



## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation grew from my Master's paper exploring the parameters of so-called "Amhara" ethnicity and its primacy in Ethiopian history as detailed in the influential work of Donald Levine's *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Levine's portrayal of "Amhara dominance" has encouraged and influenced burgeoning alternative, albeit controversial, interpretations on the socio-economic and political effects of the rapidly expanding nineteenth-century Ethiopian state. My own interest in this work was not so much to prove or disprove "Amhara dominance" as to question who becomes labeled Amhara and how the content of this group changes over time.

My critique was informed by theories that argued for the situational nature of ethnicity whose inherent fluidity seemed constrained by the primordial nature and fixed boundaries proposed in Levine's study. This theoretical angle allowed for the essential historicizing of ethnicity, giving time and place relevant bearing on an ever-evolving process. My doctoral research resumed where the earlier critique ended. Marriage among the power elite seemed a suitable prism through which to refract issues of ethnicity, state building, women, and power, exploring how each related to the other and to Ethiopian political history as a whole.

### **Universality of Theme**

Throughout time, dynastic or elite marriages among those in proximity to power has held universal appeal in its social and political usefulness for the internal and external affairs of kingdoms and states. Although seemingly less

important in the contemporary world, such alliances continue to occur in various settings, attesting further to the persistent relevance of the practice. Though lacking in express political intent, twentieth century African history provides us with such recent examples as Nelson Mandela's marriage to Mozambiquan Graca Machel. In neighboring Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's first wife was Ghanain. In North Africa, Moroccan rulers are said to prefer wives from the fiercely independent mountainous Berber area – although this is a closely guarded story since the wives are all but invisible in public life. In East Africa, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, upon his return from England, after about a 15 year absence, married his third wife, the daughter of Senior Chief Koyange, who died after childbirth. His fourth wife, Mamangina, was a daughter of another influential senior chief, Muhoho, and both marriages helped gain him and his leadership legitimacy among the Kikuyu.

In West Africa, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana married Helena Ritz Fathia, a close relative of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in 1958 – no doubt partly as an expression of solidarity in Pan-African affairs in which both were prominent actors. They had three children together (Gamal Gorkeh, Sania Yarba and Sekou Ritz) and, as recently as 1997, there was express interest to maintain ties and family property in Ghana for one of the sons who resides in Accra.

Ghanaian kente cloth weavers commemorated the occasion of this marriage by designing patterns like *Fathia fata Nkrumah* (which means it is befitting to have Fathia as Nkrumah's wife) and *Obaakofo Mmu Man* (one person does not rule a nation).

In European history, British royalty from the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries married extensively with their European counterparts. In the Houses of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Windsor, for instance, Fredrick III Emperor of Germany (1831-1888) married Princess Victoria (1840-1901) and they had William II, Emperor of Germany 1859-1941. Edward VII (1841-1910) married Alexandra of Denmark (1844-1922) whose sister Marie was married to Alexander III, Tsar of All the Russias (1845-94). Their son Nicholas II also Tsar (1868-1918) was married to Queen Victoria's granddaughter, Alix of Hesse (1872-1918). Also inter-married in this group were royalty from France, Prussia, Spain, Germany, Denmark and England, to name a few.

Elsewhere, in pre-Colombian and colonial Latin America, Marysa Navarro argues that 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquistadores had multiple successive relationships with indigenous Amerindian women, whom they took as concubines, sometimes marrying them.<sup>1</sup> Some were noblewomen, and these unions created the first generation of *mestizos* or *mestizas*. The pro-marriage policy of the Crown did not carry over well since most conquistadores were in a position to marry well-situated women from Spain. The eventual multiplication of *mestizo* population undermined the Spanish strategy to create two separate worlds – Indian and Spanish. This was mediated by Amerindian nobility who were considered landed gentry with economic and social privileges.

These marriages or interchanges were not without political dimensions. First, in connection to military conquest, it was necessary strategy to gain allies

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<sup>1</sup> Marysa Navarro, "Women in pre-Columbian and Colonial Latin America and the Caribbean," in Marysa Navarro, Virginia Sanchez Korrol & Kecia Ali, *Women in Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

for soldiers. In the post-conquest period, ties were strengthened, legitimacy widened, control over indigenous population tightened, and the acceptance of Spanish rule encouraged. Amerindian male nobility also had the advantage of retaining their class privileges, gaining new legitimacy, strengthening their powers of negotiation and successfully transforming themselves into mediators between the two groups. Amerindian noblewomen used the situation to gain a foothold in the emerging social structure for themselves and their descendants. They retained influence while maintaining distance from “commoners” and engaged in gainful mercantile activities

### **Ethnicity**

The conventional conceptualization of ethnicity is within a continuum with primordialism on one end, constructivism on the other, and instrumentalism somewhere between them. Primordialists view ethnicity as inner essence, a condition ascribed at birth by which consciousness and affiliation is guided by the intrinsic knowledge of one’s identity. They focus on the emotional charge of ethnic behavior and the psychological and cultural dimensions in ethnic conflict. Instrumentalists hold a material focus on ethnicity and examine how ethnicity is mobilized in political combat or social competition. Constructivists argue that ethnic identity cannot be assumed and needs to be explained and accounted for in dynamic terms. In their view, ethnicity is a product of human agency, a creative social act through which such commonalities as speech code, cultural practice, ecological adaptation and political organization become woven into a consciousness of shared identity. Constructivists invite consideration of the

complexity, fluidity and multiple forces that shape ethnicity. This approach has an inherently historical orientation that holds theory accountable to the context of time and place and it is what I utilize to examine Levine's works.

Historians of Africa have begun to account for particularities in which ethnic boundaries or identity markers are negotiated, sometimes even submerged, for mutual gains or shared interests. Among the examples discussed further on are the Zulu in South Africa, the Hausa in West Africa, the Ijwi in pre-colonial East Africa and the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana. In the Ethiopian case, issues of ethnicity continue to be highly political and laden with charged sentiments limiting dialogues that would frame a scholarly discussion. Nonetheless, an emerging body of literature explores interactive moments and syncretic identities indicating the growing interest of scholars and bringing some measure of balance towards thinking of ethnicity as a dynamic process in constant flux.

In light of all this, my own interests converged to shape a study on marriage relations of the Ethiopian power elite and their changing composition with initial focus on the twentieth century. It soon became obvious, however, that limiting the time period to the final era of the Ethiopian monarchy would disregard the continuity of elite family histories that spanned the last two hundred years. This continuity pointed to an important link between the presence of these families and the crafting of empire. Closer examination of the sources further suggested the significant role of elite women in this process, thus presenting an opportunity to explore preliminary efforts toward engendering Ethiopian political history.

Studying the history of the national power elite inevitably meant researching the families of regional nobility and, where possible, their marriage patterns before incorporation into the political center. The first challenge lay in documenting and constructing the lives and activities of elite families over several generations while maintaining the necessary regional scope. Next, from this information, the narrative of a social history of power had to be created which would interface and dialogue with existing historiography to develop a parallel complimentary account highlighting one significant aspect of political history – that of marriage alliances. The third challenge was that of striking a balanced approach between presenting individual family histories, the dense details of each being an overwhelming task to trace or simplify for the reader, and following the larger story of an inter-connected power elite that evolved over several eras from diverse regional, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

In Ethiopia, as elsewhere in the world, political marriages were arranged to neutralize potential threats, legitimize positions and widen networks of power by forging new alliances. The path to power provided by such marriages assumed a certain level of assimilation to the political center and a coalescence of shared values and interests among elite families. Traditional historian Tekle Tsadik Mekuria describes these types of marriages as a commodity of the administration. Ascribed to such marriage arrangements are the mutual benefits of expansion into neighboring territories on the one hand, and gaining access to power and protection, or creating lineages that will rule at the center on the other. These marital arrangements also played a key role in roping in deviants, which,

when successful, threaded a line of continuity and ensured that ruling families would have some representation in royal courts even when removed from power.<sup>2</sup> Gebre Igziabher Elias describes Iyasu's plan to wed his niece Menen to Ras Tafari as "wegenin lemabzat, zemedin lemaderajet" – an effort to multiply relatives and establish networks. Lij Iyasu's courting of the Adal and his liaison with the daughter of Naggadras Abbo Seron was credited to his wanting to be connected through marriage and progeny.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary oral informants use concepts such as "dem madrekyā gabicha" or "wenz yemyashagir gabicha" to convey "blood-drying marriage" or "marriage that allows for crossing of the river." In the first type, any bad blood spilled literally or figuratively between adverse families usually engaged in power struggle, would dry or heal by virtue of a particular marriage arrangement that would symbolize forgiveness, acceptance, and political alignment. The second phrase casts elite marriages as bridges that stretch over metaphoric rivers, thus alluding to the expansive networks created and suggestively relating such alliances with notions of migration and empire building. The title of this dissertation, "Building Bridges, Drying Bad Blood: Elite marriages, Politics and Ethnicity in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Ethiopia," derives from these two concepts.

As noted here, marriage patterns of the elite followed the locus of power from Gondar to Tigre to Wello to Shoa, laterally including Lasta, Gojjam, and Wellegga. Political marriages occurred within and between regional families

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<sup>2</sup> Tekle Tsadik Mekuria, *Atse Tewodros inna yeltyopia Andinet*, (Addis Ababa: Kuraz Publishing Agency, 1981 E.C.), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Gebre Igziabher Elias, *YeTarik Mastawesha (1901-1922)*, MS IES 2284.

usually in connection to other power negotiations – sometimes as a prelude indicating good will, other times as a measure of how well relations were between regional powers, or alternately, as an attempt to right past wrongs and draw families closer. Seldom were they arranged outside of this larger context.

Perhaps due in part to such built-in pressure, elite marriages were inherently fragile by design and carried their share of irony and pain. This was particularly evident in the stark predicament of certain elite women, although political outcomes for the greater good sometimes involved personal sacrifice in the case of elite men as well. In spite of this and the unsuccessful liaisons, serial marriages and frequent divorces that characterized marital relations, the Ethiopian power elite evolved and maintained remarkable continuity over two centuries. It is this process that my dissertation attempts to document and discuss.

The first chapter of this work lays the methodological framework, confers with relevant historiography, and provides contextualization for the dissertation subject within the larger discourse. Readings in political science and anthropology are consulted to highlight theoretical debates around terms such as “elite” and “ethnicity”. Select works in African history are presented as examples that illuminate the application of these and related theories. For the Ethiopian case, Donald Levine's work in sociology is examined for what it informs us of Amhara “ethnicity” and its critique is used as a point of departure for developing an alternate view considering elite marriage alliances in connection to issues of ethnicity. Guided by scholarly literature in African women's history, I then



investigate how and where to situate elite Ethiopian women in the narrative in order to reconstruct their individual and collective role in family alliances throughout the period under study. The few scholarly works on marriage and political history are reviewed as context for this dissertation and the first chapter ends with a brief discussion of sources used and challenges encountered during my research.

The second chapter is thematically organized and serves as background for the following sections by canvassing regional histories and marriage patterns in various locations and time periods. This primarily supports the fact that the practice of political marriages predates the period under study and occurred among neighboring elite families and kingdoms throughout the country. Mostly secondary but some primary sources are used to underscore themes of migration and marriage alliances in the histories of Walaita, Enarea and Kafa in the south, Shoa, Gondar, Wag and Lasta in the north.

The third chapter more directly follows elite marriage patterns in connection to struggles for power at the center. This is well demonstrated by the marriages that occurred around Wagshum Gobaze (later Emperor Takla Giyorgis), Kassa Mercha (later Emperor Yohannes IV), Menilek (then king of Shoa) and Ras Adal Tessema (later Nigus Takla Haimanot). Lasta, Tigre, Shoa and Gojjam were linked in these alliances that took place from the 1860s to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marriage relations and political history are considered for Shoa and Tigre, followed by a closer look at how similar themes unfolded in the western province of Wellegga around the same period. Again based on a

combination of primary and secondary sources, elite families of Gojjam and Shoa are examined in detail as are select women who wielded direct and indirect power through marriage arrangements. Emperor Menilek's consort Bafena, his wife Empress Taitu, Wzo. Kefei Wele and others are discussed in this context in an effort to suggest various roles for elite women in past politics.

The chronological order of chapter four follows similar themes of power struggle, family alliances and women in elite families under Iyasu, Zawditu and Tafari. As in the preceding era, marriages were obvious in their political intent and their arrangement was elevated to art form in the capable hands of Empress Taitu who used this mechanism to ensure her position at the helm of the ailing Menilek's empire. The short reign of Iyasu (1911-1916) is especially significant both for his efforts in casting wider nets of marital relations and in indicating a certain coming of age of the power elite who showed protective signs of shared purpose in their support of the young heir. The political playing field shifted to Wello, and the family of Nigus Mikael and his descendants briefly assumed central role. This chapter follows the rise of Ras Tafari to power along with a focused look at elite women of the times – namely, Menen Asfaw, Sehin Mikael, Tsehaiworq Darge and Zawditu. Their various placement and responses to politics and family relations is reconstructed from the meager sources available.

The fifth and final chapter covers Haile Sellassie's era and issues of family and power with the backdrop of a modernizing state. The core elite families from Menilek's time largely reproduced in the subsequent generation while adjustments were made in marriage patterns to absorb the newly created

educated elite and increasingly important “outsiders” to the center. Descriptions of wedding ceremonies are used where available to enrich the discussion and trace the shifts and changes in customs and content. Marriage alliances before and after the Italian invasion are considered in light of rapid power consolidation and the launching of a modernized state based on education and the new meritocracy. In the final years of Emperor Haile Sellassie’s reign, the power elite, which had throughout maintained its feature of continuity, seemed to have reached the final stages of its formation. In its regional, linguistic and cultural composition, it was as varied as the dictates of power would allow and represented, within certain limitations, unmistakable national diversity at the center.

This dissertation concludes with certain observations comparing elite family marriage histories of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically, Haile Sellassie’s reign (especially the post-Liberation years after 1940) to that of the preceding (Menilek, Iyasu, Zawditu) era. The nature of changing marriage patterns and meaning is thus broadly outlined. Despite the difficulty of precisely evaluating the impact that such an inter-related national elite had on the political and social landscape, this work argues the case for studying marriage as an important mechanism of Ethiopian statecraft. This investigation would have succeeded in its task if new lines of inquiry could develop to more thoroughly explore the intricate relationships between ethnic identity, state formation, marriage alliances and the hitherto largely uncharted territory of elite women to enrich our understanding of Ethiopian, and by extension, African political history.

## CHAPTER I METHODOLOGY, HISTORIOGRAPHY & CONTEXTUALIZATION

This dissertation is an attempt to document the social history of power in nineteenth and twentieth century imperial Ethiopia through a consideration of family histories and marriage alliances of those in proximity to power – the elite. Power in Ethiopian studies is often associated with an “elite ethnic” group identified as Amhara. In much of the discourse, the assumed meaning attached to the terms “elite” and “ethnic” obscures the lack of generally recognized criteria endorsed in theories of political science and anthropology. I will briefly present readings in these disciplines, highlighting conceptual challenges attached to these terms before reviewing select illustrations of their applicability in African contexts.

I will then discuss Donald Levine’s two authoritative sociological studies as an example of how “ethnicity” in general, and Amhara identity in particular, has been approached in Ethiopian studies. In line with critiques of ‘primordialist’ accounts which point to ethnic change, dissolution, immigration and intermarriage in an effort to historicize the process of identity formation<sup>4</sup>, my discussion of Levine’s works serves here as a prelude to the possibilities of broadening constructs to include the complexities of layered identities created, in this case by marriage alliances, from which a diverse national elite, hitherto subsumed under the label “Amhara”, emerged. Although an important subject of

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<sup>4</sup> John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Oxford Readers: Ethnicity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 32.

study in and of itself, Amhara ethnic identity and the characteristics attributed to it are not the focus of this dissertation. Instead, the question of who gets labeled “Amhara” and how that changes over time is indirectly addressed by the history of elite marriage alliances.

The intersection of political power, marriage alliances and nation building suggests a role for women. Due primarily to the nature of documentary sources that focus on public persona of “big men” of leadership and the institutional activities of the state, gendered considerations that account for women as part of the nation-building process in Africa are relatively few. With limited exceptions, mention of women in Ethiopian political history is minimal both because of a similar emphasis in the historiography and the daunting task of reconstructing women’s lives from a lacunae of sources. In light of this, I will identify relevant scholarly literature in African women’s history within which my interest in women of the Ethiopian power elite may be situated. I will also attempt a gendered reading of Ethiopian sources old and new to explore the suggested role played by these women.

This chapter contains two interwoven parts of methodology and historiography with a third section on contextualization. For methodology, I will discuss selective theories of elite studies, marriage and nation building, and ethnicity, followed by brief overviews of their particular application in examples from African history. To the extent possible, each of these themes will then be explored in contemporary Ethiopian historiography in an effort to assemble existing insights from secondary literature and develop questions with which to

approach the sources of my inquiry. In the third section of this chapter, I will position this research in its larger context and briefly discuss the sources used to support my research. The broader concerns of this dissertation are in exploring the triangular relationship between the formation of the Ethiopian state, the social form of marriage and transformations of ethnic identity, thereby forging a new direction for scholarly interest and laying the groundwork for future research on marriage and politics - a commonly acknowledged, albeit largely under-studied phenomena in Ethiopian history.

### **ELITE: TERM & THEORY**

The term “elite” has no precise definition because there are few agreed upon measures with which to identify actual holders of real power.<sup>5</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the work of two sociologists, Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) established the study of elites as part of political science to offer a way of understanding modern political structure, and in particular, the relationship between leaders and masses. In the view of classical elite theorists, the key to historical change lay not in technological and economic trends but in the metamorphoses of the political elite, making them an essential subject of study.<sup>6</sup>

The core of classical elite doctrine is that there may exist in any society a minority of the population which makes the major decisions. Because of their

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<sup>5</sup> Eric U. Gutierrez, *All in the Family: A Study of Elites and Power relations in the Philippines*, (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1992), p.8.

<sup>6</sup> The elite may also play a critical role in transitions from traditional politics to a modern political system, as illustrated in twentieth century Spain. See Sholomo Ben-Ami, “The Crisis of the Dynastic Elite in the Transition from Monarchy to Republic, 1929-1931,” in Thomas N. Bisson, ed., *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth Century Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 71.

power, their organization, their political skill or their personal qualities, members of this group termed the elite are potentially capable of exploiting their positions so as to preserve their domination. An important implication of this is that the elite constitute a coherent, united and self-conscious group – essential characteristics. Group consciousness, coherence and conspiracy or a “common will to action” appear in nearly all the definitions though establishing the degree to which these elements are present is difficult to evaluate.<sup>7</sup>

Classical elite theorists stress the sense of mutual respect, trust and solidarity that constitute “consciousness” as an essential dimension of elite integration. The mark of a unified elite is not the absence of disagreement but the presence of sufficient mutual trust, so that its members will, when necessary, forego short-run personal or partisan advantage in order to ensure stable rule.<sup>8</sup> According to the theorists, the numerical size of an elite also affects its level of integration with smaller groups showing greater solidarity and consensus than larger ones.<sup>9</sup> The cohesiveness of the elite is seen as one of its chief strengths. Among the ways that cohesiveness is created is through common social and educational backgrounds and recruitment patterns that in combination strengthen bonds of communication, friendship and influence. C. Wright Mills contends that

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<sup>7</sup> James H. Miesel is credited as the originator of the three C's, consciousness, coherence and conspiracy, in elitist doctrine. See James H. Miesel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the Elite*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958). Establishing the degree to which a given elite is cohesive, conscious and 'conspiratorial' is difficult for the researcher because major elite theories are often weak on these points. The tendency is to assert rather than prove that the dominant group in society was bound together by ties of common interest, shared values or similar upbringing.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1976), pp. 121-122.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Putnam argues that if size is related to integration, several conclusions follow. First, that the elites of smaller countries should be more integrated, all other things being equal. Second, as a nation grows elite integration should tend to decline and finally that elite integration should be markedly greater in local communities than at the national level. He cautions that if this is so, it is dangerous to infer the structure of a national elite from studies of community power. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

one of the keys to the unity of US “power elite” is its social homogeneity. Social origins constitute probably the most often discussed manifestation of elite integration.<sup>10</sup>

Kinship bonds, a notable facet of social homogeneity, provides a particularly intimate type of elite cohesion. Politics of lineage is seen to characterize many traditional societies while kinship also links leaders in modern societies particularly, but not exclusively, where elements of a premodern aristocracy persist. Research on policy making in British public finance, for example, found that the intertwining branches of a few aristocratic family trees included a substantial number of the “top decision makers,” while in America the family ties among the Rockefellers illustrate how members of a bourgeois elite can be related by blood and marriage.<sup>11</sup>

The close connection between the educational system and elite formation and cohesion are often apparent. Elite educational institutions foster integration by providing similar training for many elite members, and nurturing personal contacts and friendships. In many countries, educational institutions also sift and channel aspirants to elite positions. Elite requirement based on educational

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<sup>10</sup> The conventional assumption of political sociology, that the social background and upbringing will influence the attitudes and policies of a decision-maker, is widely debated. Critics of this assumption argue that this inference is deterministic and that the study of backgrounds reveals more about the society in which the elite exist than the politics which the elite will pursue. Among the reasons why the link between social background and elite political orientation may be weak are the process of recruitment, which may favor “class traitors” with differing views than the group from which they come, and the effects of post-recruitment socialization by political institutions. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-105.

A different approach known as seismology provides another justification to studying social backgrounds of elite members. Proponents argue that such studies serve well as indicators of the structure of social power. Background studies may tell us more about the selecting than the selected. Because elite composition is more easily observed than are the underlying patterns of power, background studies serve as a kind of seismometer for detecting shifts in the foundations of politics. See, *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> Putnam notes that the political significance of family ties can easily be exaggerated as lineage can divide as well as unite. Moreover, kinship has become a much less important base of elite integration in modern political systems as most leaders have no elite family ties. *Ibid.*, p. 108.



credentials is often seen as a means of breaking the patterns of political inheritance by which elites have traditionally maintained power. When success rests on learned and testable skills rather than on inherited prerogatives, access to elite positions is presumably meritocratic. The problematic nature of this assumption lies in the circular link between social status and access to education.<sup>12</sup>

Theorists have this to say about elite relationship to power. The qualities of self-consciousness, coherence and unity are all held to reinforce the advantageous position of the elite in its relation with other groups in society. Power is used as a means to obtain other social goods - wealth, economic influence, social status, and educational advantages for elite children. Power is cumulative, with wealth and status seen as forms of power.<sup>13</sup> Elitists and their opponents, pluralists, have focused their attention on 'decision-making' as the point at which the possession of power is made manifest. Their discussions lead to a formal definition of power as the probability of influencing the policies and activities of the state.<sup>14</sup>

This largely institutional focus is evident in how social scientists identify elite. Three strategies are used: positional analysis, reputational analysis and decisional analysis. Positional or institutional analysis is the most commonly used method relying on records kept by formal institutions to locate powerful individuals. Critics of this technique argue that power may not be perfectly correlated to institutional position, and that individuals placed as figure-heads in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 32 and p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

the power structure may be easily confused as key decision-makers. Reputational analysis relies on informal reputations of power which, depending on the choices made by the researcher on whom and what to ask, may lead to conclusion with wide margins for error. The selection of informants who may or may not have access to inside information will affect the picture of power relations accordingly. Decisional analysis, also known as event analysis, studies how specific decisions are reached and how votes and vetoes align. Critics of this method argue that this is best suited for studying matters that have already become public issues, and that few decisions can be studied in sufficient detail leading the researcher to infer the broader structure of power from small sample cases.<sup>15</sup>

Implicit power, though more elusive, can also be detected. Putnam notes that this is demonstrated when the ultimate decision maker fails to anticipate the reactions of some powerful actor and that actor reveals his/her power by direct action. Indeed holders of implicit power may from time to time revalidate their claim to power by acting against some objectionable decision.<sup>16</sup> Though actual examples may be few and far between, slight modification of this concept suggests a theoretical place for women who wield implicit influence, if not outright power, in elite studies.

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<sup>15</sup> Putnam, *ibid.*, pp. 15-20. Robert Dahl and his associates express strong criticisms of the elite concept in general and offer the modern pluralistic approach for analysis. Their central criticism is that elitists have failed to define the 'scope' of influence wielded by members of the elite. These critics argue that elitists, believing power to be cumulative, have given the impression of a monolithic undifferentiated entity of power in the hands of a few. As noted by Putnam, elite studies have grown and been refined partly because of these criticisms, resulting in comparative, multi-dimensional methodological approaches. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> Putnam cautions that implicit power must not be confused with *potential power*, where an actor who seems to have the ability to influence policy forebears from exerting that influence. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

In statistical terms, women are almost uniformly the most underrepresented group in political elites of the world. Studies on the world of politics thus mostly overlook the relationship women have to power and their ability to affect formal manifestations of power through informal means. In a study of wives of aristocracy in northern France (from 1050 to 1235), George Duby explores how women take part in the power of command and of punishment.<sup>17</sup> Rendered incapable of exercising public power, women of aristocracy reigned over private life where they were charged with the responsibility of raising and instructing daughters of good birth, their own and those of vassals.

More importantly, women participated in power through the valor they represented which depended on their birth. This was emphasized in cases of real inequality in the couple when the wife was of higher nobility than the husband. Duby argues that when the husband took possession of his wife's body, her part of the power came into his hands and it was him who wielded his wife's power, not she. Thus the brothers-in-law were generally the prime enemies of the husband while she was relegated to being at his side in token of adhesion, of assent and of association.<sup>18</sup>

At the birth of children, the power women wielded in private increased noticeably. Despite the fact that at six or seven years of age, sons were withdrawn from their mothers to continue their education among men, powerful

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<sup>17</sup> Georges Duby, "Women and Power," in Thomas N. Bisson, *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74 - 80. Duby also discusses the desire women instigated in men and the fear which they evoked, which was heightened by the persuasion that womanhood was invested with mysterious power as elements enhancing their access to power.

early childhood bonds established between mothers and sons provided aristocratic women of this period with a different source of power. Basing his assumptions on genealogical narrations, Duby notes that women drew force from their sons, especially from their second sons, who were naturally jealous of their first-born. This love which the sons bore the mothers secured their respect and the assurance of being heard in their old age.

Duby's article implicitly suggests the direct and indirect effects of socialization and the role of women in orchestrating power relationships from a place beyond those granted in formal institutions. As a relevant aspect of political culture, the position of women in proximity to power can be explored through marriage alliances and family networks in elitist theory. By virtue of instructing a new generation of children, women guide and maintain the values and aspirations of a new elite. Further, the participation of aristocratic women in arranging marriages among this same group contributes to the reproduction of the power structure.

## **ELITE THEORY IN AFRICA**

Most African elite studies were launched in connection to understanding post-colonial experiences, and more specifically, to examine the role of African nationalist elite actively involved in leading the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. For obvious reasons, Ethiopia was excluded from this focus. Elite concepts accordingly underwent useful theoretical modifications. McGowan and Bolland summarize elite studies in Africa as qualitative descriptions of new elites, with some social background studies and a few noteworthy works that

combine these approaches in Dahomey, Ghana and Ivory Coast.<sup>19</sup> Theoretical modifications noted the emergence of functionally specialized elites or “technocrats” as a political force in the then newly independent states, and how social background and socialization experiences were related to political ideologies.<sup>20</sup>

According to their review, a volume edited by P. C. Lloyd summarizes the main characteristics of African elites found in previous research. Among these: that the elite are found in urban centers, usually the national capital; that the rapid growth of the elite began around 1950 and therefore that the elite are young; colonial salary scales assure high elite income and long terms of service, thus they are affluent; and differences among the elite tend to center around ethnicity, generation and functional specialization.<sup>21</sup> Due to the fact that the elite comprise a small group in each society, their common experiences, education and occupations acquaint and bind them together resulting in increasingly “corporate” behavior.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES ON THE ETHIOPIAN ELITE

Not much is available by way of systematic research on the Ethiopian elite as a subject of study. With necessary modifications, Christopher Clapham and John Markakis have traced such factors as the source of recruitment to

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<sup>19</sup> Patrick J. McGowan and Patrick Bolland, *The Political and Social Elite of Tanzania: An analysis of Social Background Factors*, (Syracuse University: Program of Eastern African Studies, 1971), pp. 12 - 22.

<sup>20</sup> The authors cite William H. Lewis, “Functional Elites: An Emergent Political Force,” in *New Forces in Africa*, ed., W. H. Lewis (Washington, D. C. 1962) and I. Wallerstein, “Elites in French-Speaking West Africa: the Social Basis of Ideas,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* III (May 1965).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>22</sup> Thus the elite draw friends from among status equals, marriage of elite children occur among social equals, and are a part of informal networks through education, membership to social clubs and the like. These indicate, according to the studies reviewed, that the wealthy elite are becoming a hereditary group with ruling class tendencies. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

government office during Haile Sellassie's reign. The methodological challenges of applying categories from elitist theory to study Ethiopian political processes may partly be due to the dual importance of traditional sources of power and newer sources based on education for 20<sup>th</sup> century imperial history. In a political context in which personal loyalty is of primary value, both agree that the genealogical aspect of relations among the ruling elite was of paramount importance. According to Markakis, this kinship factor that produced tangled webs of connections indicates a strong propensity for class endogamy among the nobility.<sup>23</sup>

The nobility as a group was a major source of recruitment until the process of centralization which proportionately strengthened the emperor's control over selection to office.<sup>24</sup> The dominant political position of the nobility in the provinces, however, continued to make their support vital for the emperor's rule. By the twentieth century, although political posts were not distinguished from civil ones and there were no political parties to provide distinctive recruitment patterns, a "new nobility" of holders of major governor posts, ruling class of administrators and others who enjoyed position in the government through personal connections and status was evident.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to trace when and how the term elite is used in the Ethiopian context. Although not sufficiently substantiated, Assefa Bequele identifies the emperor (or the elite of one), the religious elite and the nobility as forming the traditional power elite that have remained on top of the political and economic

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<sup>23</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia – Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Clapham, *Haile Sellassie's Government*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), p. 64.

system. He contrasts this with the intellectual or potential elite which was formed by the post-Italian war educated group.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, the term elite is used interchangeably with the concept of intellegentsia to refer to educated Ethiopians in general.<sup>27</sup> Most recently, Messay Kebede, influenced by the writings of V. Y. Mudimbe, defines African elitism as the entitlement to uncontested leadership inferred from the privilege of exposure to western education. Although Ethiopia escaped colonization, Messay argues that the unmitigated embrace of western education under the guise of modernization deeply entrenched the alienating effects of elitist attitudes for which the country continues to pay a high price.<sup>28</sup>

For the purposes of this research, Shiferaw Bekele deploys a useful concept that has been adopted here - that of the power elite - to serve as a third category to the Ethiopian concepts of *makwanent* and *masafent*. According to him, the *makwanent* cover the entire ruling class while the *masafent* are restricted to those who were of royal blood. Instead, Shiferaw's proposed term of the power elite is inclusive of princes, high court officials, provincial governors, high ecclesiastical dignitaries, and most importantly, the women who belonged to the families of such men.<sup>29</sup> This broader definition allows room for a social history of individuals and families in proximity to power without which, as Shiferaw rightly points out, discussions of the state would be remiss.<sup>30</sup> Although both Markakis and Clapham are largely focused on 20<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia when detailing family

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<sup>26</sup> Assefa Bequele, "The Ethiopian Elite and Intelligentsia," *Dialogue*, 1967-68.

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Greenfield, "Some thoughts on the Ethiopian Elite," and Negussie Zerihoun, "The Ethiopian Intellegentsia," both in *Tewodros*, 1:1, (London, 1965), pp. 38-44.

<sup>28</sup> Messay Kebede, "From Marxism-Leninism to Ethnicity: the Sideslips of Ethiopian Elitism," *Northeast African Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>29</sup> Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate (1786-1853)," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. 15 (1990), p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

inter-connections in Haile Sellassie's government, this research will trace and document patterns of continuity from Menilek's era, thus setting the ground for assessing the importance of marriage, women and family alliances to Ethiopian political history.

## **AFRICAN WOMEN, MARRIAGE & STATE BUILDING**

Although major gaps in knowledge remain, early scholarly interest in the field of women in African history explored an array of topics ranging from queen mothers, slaves and prostitutes as well as the impact of colonialism, capitalism and migrant labor on economic systems. This was followed in the 1980s by a focus on domesticity, marriage, sexuality and the legal dimensions of family relationships.<sup>31</sup> According to recent reflections, the challenges associated with this historical discourse include the sparsity of documentary sources, especially for precolonial years, and the silence or obliqueness of 'traditional' historical sources available, as well as the distorted gender views of most European travelers' accounts which in turn make the presence of women in such realms as agriculture, health, politics, social and economic activity, difficult to detect or study with some degree of accuracy.

Needless to say that women continue to play important roles despite the literature that often suggests their contributions as exceptional, negligible or irretrievable for any period beyond the present.<sup>32</sup> Writing about women in African history, like scholarly endeavors on women elsewhere, thus requires persistence

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<sup>31</sup> 'Introduction' in Iris Berger and E. Frances White, eds., *Women in Sub Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 1-3.

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel, "Conceptualizing the History of Women in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa," Series Editor's introductory essay in Iris Berger and E. Frances White, eds., *Women in Sub Saharan Africa*, *ibid.*, p. xxxi.



and a reliance on different sources – such as oral histories, genealogies, life-histories – in order to reconstruct a shared narrative. According to Claire Robertson’s assessment, the benefits of research efforts on the history of African women include a reanalysis of views on a number of topics, ranging from economic relations and agricultural production to the rethinking of the cultural and political impact of colonialism, thus lending transforming visions for African history and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

In considering the position of women in politics, general histories of Africa do not usually employ gender as an analytical tool to study power. In the early 1960s, attempts to redress this imbalance were undertaken by ‘revisionists’ who generated scholarly literature that elaborated on African women as political actors pursuing individual and collective goals.<sup>34</sup> In his historiographical critique of the revisionist paradigm, Emmanuel Konde questions the underlying assumptions of these conceptual shifts, pointing to limitations of revisionism which, he argues, has reduced the history of politics of post-colonial Africa in particular, to a struggle between the sexes. He calls for a “holistic, all-inclusive, gender-balanced” paradigm that would provide a third alternative to the traditionalist/revisionist dichotomy and would address political issues involving women, not as isolated cases, but as social relationships within a shared political context.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Claire C. Robertson, “Never Underestimate the Power of Women: The Transforming Vision of African Women’s History,” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 5, 1988, pp. 439-453.

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Konde attributes this trend to the publication of Denise Palume’s 1963 publication of *Women in Tropical Africa* which brought focus to previously overlooked factors of African societies. Emmanuel Konde, *Reconstructing the Political Roles of African Women: A Post-revisionist Paradigm*. Working Papers in African Studies, No. 161, (Boston: African Studies Center, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Konde, *ibid.*, p. 20.

Though individual women exercised direct power by ruling and exerting influence both within and outside political structures, it is difficult to determine how the existence of women rulers affected the status of other women.<sup>36</sup> Like their counterparts elsewhere, African women's participation in politics seldom appears in obvious places leading to the perception that it is absent or peripheral. This in turn limits our definitions and understanding of the complex processes through which power is exerted in various societies. As wives, daughters, and consorts of powerful men, women wielded power and influence in politics although the very intimate contexts in which such situations occurred make documentation difficult.<sup>37</sup> In laying the theoretical framework for studying the role of African women in centralization, bureaucratization and state formation, Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Stroble place tremendous importance and potential for women's autonomy and power as marriage partners who centralize wealth, cement alliances and merge cultures.<sup>38</sup>

Indirect power was exercised by queen mothers whose power generated from their proximity and access to the ruler, as well as the formidable financial and personnel resources they commanded.<sup>39</sup> In her study of West and West-Central Africa, E. Frances White identifies the relationship between increasingly powerful states and kinship relations as perhaps the most significant factor for

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<sup>36</sup> Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel, "Conceptualizing the History of Women in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa," in *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Spring 1989, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> The influence of the women in shaping ideas of greater education in the nineteenth century Islamic reform movement led by Uthman dan Fodio in West Africa is cited as an example. Five generations of women from dan Fodio's family left written bodies of intellectual work in Fula, Arabic and Hausa. Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Examples given include the West African kingdom of Dahomey, the Hindus and Muslims in India and the Spanish who sought unions with Amerindian women for legitimacy and control over indigenous societies. Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

women in the process of state formation.<sup>40</sup> This was exemplified by the history of the kingdom of Dahomey whose mid-18<sup>th</sup> century centralization was largely accomplished by the practice of choosing a queen mother from newly acquired territories. The king demanded a daughter from each lineage of the kingdom while queen mothers served as informants on captured territory, as well as important representative presences in the state structure.

Similarly, Edna G. Bay's exploration of the political culture of Dahomey from ca. 1700 to French colonialism in 1894, traces the problems of state integration encountered by an expansionist kingdom. New land and people were constantly incorporated and military, economic and political allegiance had to align to fit the goals of the center at Abomey. Kinship structures were critical mechanisms of state control as political links between individuals were established through the idiom of kinship.<sup>41</sup> Likewise in Benin, women from around the kingdom were among the wives of the royal family and they continued to maintain their ties to their birth-places successfully contributing to empire-building efforts.<sup>42</sup>

Theoretical findings suggest that as the state bureaucratized, relationships such as those discussed above, became less significant to state organization thus largely displacing the importance of royal women who lost their potential for being central to state power. The accompanying shift from kinship to a merit-based system in places like Dahomey, thus slowly moved the king's reliance on

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<sup>40</sup> E. Frances White, "Women in West and West-Central Africa," in Iris Berger and E. Frances White, eds., *Women in Sub Saharan Africa: Restoring women to History*, *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>41</sup> Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*, (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> E. Frances White, *ibid.*

lineage connections for strengthening his rule.<sup>43</sup> However, gendered studies on the Zulu state in early nineteenth century South Africa and the formation of the Buganda kingdom (pre-13<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries), caution against presumptions of the monolithic effect and response of royal African women to expanding state structures.

In an article entitled "Women, Marginality and the Zulu state: Women's Institutions and Power in Early Nineteenth Century," Sean Hanretta argues that with the militarization of Zulu society and state, the potential for both exploitation and acquisition of power and prestige for women increased.<sup>44</sup> Power of individual women over their own material conditions and Zulu kingdom politics heightened with the placement of royal *amaKosikazi* wives as representatives of the king in military installations. Meanwhile, another class of royal women, the *umNdlunkulu*, were seemingly controlled by the king who set rules that governed their sexuality, their acquisition and their distribution through marriage among the men of the kingdom. Hanretta argues that despite the appearance of disempowerment, these women also enjoyed increased status in relation to other women and 'common' men.<sup>45</sup> This study underscores two important points: that the growth of the centralized state may not always have resulted in a loss of status for women, and that women as a class did not respond uniformly to transformations of Zulu society.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Stroble, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Sean Hanretta, "Women, Marginality and the Zulu State: Women's Institutions and Power in Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, 39 (1998): pp. 389-415.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

Nakanyike B. Musisi's article "Women, "Elite Polygyny," and Buganda State Formation" considers polygyny in the context of elite strategies used to create and control economic, political and social components of the state apparatus. According to Musisi, elite polygyny played an essential role in the emergence, consolidation and expansion of the Buganda state with the king using marriage to link himself to populations of conquered territories. Although exchange and distribution determined the fate of most royal women, princesses were awarded selective freedom, perhaps because such privileges sustained class interests of the Buganda royal family.<sup>47</sup>

As the Buganda state developed, the range of sources from which elite wives, or *bakembuga*, were recruited widened to include women from the servile masses, slave women from conquered areas, wives inherited from the dead king, the relatives of *bakembuga* and women given by men and women who sought to establish links with the royal center.<sup>48</sup> Because the Buganda kingship lacked a clan totem of its own, elite wives grew in importance as they became central figures through which the kingship rotated to different clans or rallied to bid for mastery of the throne.

Elite wives were also privy to state secrets by virtue of keeping company with their husbands, thus their status was a lifelong occupation as no elite wife could be married again to a non-elite man for fear that she would reveal sensitive information. Though subordinate to their chiefly husbands, elite women

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<sup>47</sup> The privileges included holding land in different parts of the country, administering small-scale governments in designated areas and, in some cases, supervising chiefs. Nakanyinke B. Musisi, "Women, "Elite Polygyny," and Buganda State Formation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1991, pp. 773-74.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 777.

commanded unprecedented respect from ordinary men and women as well as overseeing chiefs and other appointees of the state. Musisi concludes that elite polygyny in political and economic terms meant the extension and stabilization of alliances and relations for the state. Most importantly, despite the negative impact of the process of Buganda state formation on women, not all were excluded from direct involvement in politics as they played vital roles on the state level, balancing internal and regional alliances.<sup>49</sup>

Certain themes and insights are gleaned from this cursory view of African women's history relevant to developing an approach toward integrating Ethiopian women in past politics. First, it is clear that the scarcity of source material on Ethiopian women and the difficulty of locating them in the historical narrative is a shared phenomenon with African women elsewhere. Second, Emmanuel Konde's call for a paradigm that addresses issues involving women not in isolation, but in the context of shared social and political relationships, is well noted as a methodological emphasis in this research.

Finally, in the Ethiopian case, select individual women did exercise direct power but their influential activities, often in hidden spaces beyond institutional structures, are difficult to detect much less study systematically. One such sphere is the role and contribution of Ethiopian women in state formation, more specifically, their relationship and responses to power and their activities to maintain or reproduce the social infrastructure that bears it. As far as sources allow, it is these themes that will be examined through elite marriage alliances and family histories.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 786.

## **ETHNICITY: TERM, THEORIES & DEBATES**

In an insightful article entitled "Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology," Ronald Cohen reports that the previous tendency of anthropological studies had been to overlook issues of multi-ethnic societies in favor of selecting a specific group for study. He explains: "... many of us were led by theoretical concerns to underplay the multi-ethnic quality of the societies we studied and chose one dominant ethnic group as our main focus."<sup>50</sup> The primary preoccupation of the discipline was in understanding non-Western societies as isolates (ethnography), or as a universe of such units (cross-cultural comparison).<sup>51</sup> Works that did choose to focus on the multi-ethnic dimension were relegated to the outskirts of mainstream scholarship.

In tracing the intellectual shifts attached to the history of the term, Cohen finds that the steadily accelerating acceptance and application of the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic" to refer to what was before subsumed under "culture", "cultural" or "tribal" signals a change that should be understood from several angles - historical, theoretical and ideological. Part of this change is characterized by a shift in focus from studying "ethnic" groups in isolation, to one that accommodates the multi-ethnic context. Ethnicity, as it is presently used in anthropology, thus marks the milieu of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic interaction.

Despite the attention awarded to notions of ethnicity in the social sciences, however, scholars have yet to agree on a representative model. Instead, the term "ethnicity" is used in a variety of contexts without definition. Writers in these

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<sup>50</sup> Ronald Cohen, "Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 7 (1978), p. 381.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

fields take it for granted that the term refers to a set of named groupings singled out by the researcher as ethnic units.<sup>52</sup> As a widely used concept in sociology, ethnicity is seen as a set of socio-cultural features that differentiate groups from one another. In the Weberian tradition, ethnicity has long been suggested as a function of primordial ties.<sup>53</sup> These ties are generally characterized by a sense of solidarity rooted in what Weber refers to as “the mystic effects of a community of blood.”<sup>54</sup>

A comprehensive critique of the primordial thesis is provided in John and Jean Comaroff’s chapter “Of Totemism and Ethnicity.”<sup>55</sup> According to them, primordialism is based on three related notions. The first is that culturally defined communities, or “status groups,” sustain intrinsic knowledge of their own identity. Secondly, the loyalties created and vested in this identity provide a source of “ethnic consciousness and affiliation.” Third, collective action and relations among groups are guided by the latter.<sup>56</sup>

The distinction drawn by the Comaroffs is that identity, as a means of classifying and bringing meaning to the world, is an inevitable condition of social existence. Collective social identity invariably precludes identity of “ourselves” in marked opposition to “others”. Identity is thus a relation inscribed in culture, and

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<sup>52</sup> Cohen cites research that examined 65 studies of ethnicity in sociology and anthropology, and found only 13 that defined the term. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>53</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity,” in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p.50.

<sup>54</sup> As part of a discussion on the formation of pluralistic or consensus societies, Stanford M. Lyman indicated how primordialism was believed to have prevailed and been further articulated by processes of industrialization and urbanization. Stanford M. Lyman, *Ethnicity, Pluralism and their Implications for Africa and the World*, (Maiduguri: University of Maiduguri: Public Lecture Series, 3, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The counter thesis suggests that expressions of ethnicity arise when communities respond to threats against their independence or existence. Without these pressures, ethnic expression are considered dormant or non-existent. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.



the marking of identities in opposition to one another is “primordial” or inherent. The Comaroffs suggest that the content of these identities are constantly in flux, and are subject to social, economic and political changes. One may conclude therefore, that ethnicity is a set of contextual relations.<sup>57</sup> Such a definition provides a more dynamic context in which individuals and group interactions are active agencies in creating and maintaining ethnicity.

It is this latter focus that is reflected in Fredrick Barth’s seminal introductory work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. In his brief overview of anthropological literature, Barth explains that ethnic groups have generally been understood to designate a population meeting one or more of these criteria: is largely self-perpetuating, shares fundamental cultural values, makes up a field of communication and interaction, or has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.<sup>58</sup> He objects to the fact that common culture is given central importance in designating ethnic groups, partly because common culture is a derivative of their existence. In order to distinguish between “ethnic groups” and culture, Barth maintains that the last criterion must be given central importance.

In his proposed model, Barth suggests that culture is a way to describe human behavior, and ethnic groups are the most general identity preemptively determined by origin and background. These discrete groups of people or ethnic units correspond to each culture and possess certain boundaries that

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 10.

differentiate their group, as opposed to other groups. Most significantly, Barth asserts, that boundaries persist despite the movement of individuals across them. According to him then, ethnic distinction is not determined by the absence of mobility and contact among ethnic groups. Instead, they entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership.<sup>59</sup>

Barth's proposal was very influential in leading to the acceptance of ethnicity as a subjective process of group identification in which people use ethnic labels to define themselves and their interaction with others.<sup>60</sup> The subjective/objective issue in ethnicity was one of considerable debate. If there was a lack of agreement between categorization by non members (objectivist perspective), and the individuals own identification with an ethnic group (subjective perspective), it would be noted but largely ignored in the analysis. Barth's work firmly re-instated the importance of including a subjective emphasis in the methodology. His work also proved useful in understanding ethnic groups as a form of social organization with ethnic cohesion attained through the maintenance of ethnic group boundaries. Although Barth's approach adds dynamic transactions across ethnic group boundaries, critics argue that the exchanges are seen to strengthen seemingly permanent borders guarded by linguistic and cultural symbols while ethnic groups are regarded as fixed ascriptive categories.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>61</sup> John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *ibid.*, p. 33.

In addition, Barth's model sheds little light on the inner workings of an ethnic group. Differences within an ethnic group that may in turn affect inter-group relations can not be revealed by the study of a constantly maintained boundary. The very permanency of this boundary may be questioned by applying its existence in a different context. For instance, introducing the political elements of ethnicity narrows or broadens its definition in boundary terms in relation to the specific needs of political mobilization.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in different circumstances, areas of the boundary could be negotiable and re-shaped by the ethnic groups in question.

The study by John and Jean Comaroff offers a concise alternative theoretical means by which to understand ethnicity. Among the issues relevant for this discussion is the Comaroff's assertion that ethnicity exists as a set of relations. As a necessary condition of its existence, it is a mode of social classification, a marker of identity and collective relationships. This initial definition, however, becomes somewhat distorted. With the emergence of class formations in which positions in the division of labor are signified by the labels of ascribed status and cultural distinction, ethnicity becomes a dominant medium through which social order is to be interpreted and navigated.<sup>63</sup> In other words, where it becomes the basis of social classification and status relations, ethnicity, rather than the forces that generate it, ascribes individuals and groups. The Comaroff's caution how social classification manifests in particular forms of

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<sup>62</sup> Barth, *ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>63</sup> Comaroff, *ibid.*, p. 59.

collective identity (such as ethnicity) but is determined nonetheless by the “material and cultural exigencies of history.”<sup>64</sup>

The substance of ethnic identification is thus changing with “mercurial fluency”<sup>65</sup> over time, and appears elusive to analysis. Cohen supplements this arguing that the interactive situation is the major determinant of categorization of ethnicity. Individuals can thus be identified by occupation, education, or ethnicity in different situations. The labels are applied in order to explain different behavior. The ethnic label, for instance, suggests other culturally related characteristics and provides an explanation, an origin in socialization and tradition, concerning the behavior of actors.<sup>66</sup> The Comaroff’s summarize that “... ethnicity... is not a unitary “thing” but describes a set of relations and a mode of consciousness.”<sup>67</sup>

Through differentiating types of ethnicity, research undertaken by P. Kunstader and cited by Cohen, further explains the fluidity of notions of ethnicity. According to Kunstader’s definition, the ethnic group comprises of a set of individuals with mutual interests based on shared understandings and common values. Ethnic identity is a process by which individuals are assigned to one group or another. Ethnicity classifies people according to real or presumed cultural features and behavior. The most important point made here is that depending on where, when and by whom the categorization is being made,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>66</sup> Cohen, *ibid.*, pp. 388-89

<sup>66</sup> Comaroff, *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Comaroff, *ibid.*

ethnic categories may or may not correspond even when they share the same name.<sup>68</sup>

The final issue relevant to this discussion is the relationship of class or stratification and ethnicity or ethnic consciousness. According to Henry Bienen's "The State and Ethnicity: Integrative Formulas in Africa," it is difficult analytically to separate ethnicity and class. Both provide a network of supporting groups and institutions through life, both may have common cultural identification, and both encompass the full range of sex and age divisions within society.<sup>69</sup>

While many anthropologists define class as a non-birth ascribed status, Bienen explains that most ideas of class have birth and holistic lifestyle characteristics attached to them. If the ethnic-communal group is defined as one where people claim to share a commonality of identity across many relationships, class groups can be classified as "communal" following Bienen's explanation.<sup>70</sup> His suggestion for analytical distinction refers us back to Cohen's discussion of situational ethnicity. Bienen contends that both class and ethnicity must be understood in specific social, political, economic and spatial contexts. A number of outcomes are possible: communal identities may change and/or become politically subordinate to income and class differentiation, or class and ethnicity may fuse in particular situations. In some instances communal identities may be eroded, or displaced temporarily, hardened or created anew.

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<sup>68</sup> Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 386.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Bienen, "The State and Ethnicity: Integrative Formulas in Africa" in *State versus Ethnic Claims*, Donald Rothchild and Victor Olorunsola, eds., (Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), p. 104.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

In summary, the basic themes that emerge from the discussions above are the specificity of ethnicity, despite its primordial element, and its locality in particular time and place. This historicizing allows us to consider ethnicity or ethnic categories, and the various factors involved in creating or maintaining it, as a fluid and on-going cultural dialogue or transaction. In the words of Jonathon Glassman's assessing Leroy Vail's important work on the creation of tribalism in modern Africa: "... ethnic categories are rarely as clear-cut as ethnic nationalists would have them seem, and ... where such clarity exists, it is only momentary, having arisen out of complex and messy historical processes."<sup>71</sup>

#### **ETHNICITY IN AFRICA: FOUR CASES OVERVIEWED**

The situational nature of ethnic identity is well illustrated by its conscious construction and reconstruction in different regions of Africa. Four examples of the Zulu in South Africa, the Hausa in West Africa, the Ijwi in pre-colonial East Africa and the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana provide clues to the driving forces of such changes. An important factor shared by the first two examples is increasing urbanization which is partly responsible for reconfiguring identity to fit a changing socio-economic environment. The second two examine internal dynamics that illustrate the existence of ethnic sentiments before the advent of colonialism.

#### **The Zulu of South Africa**

The political landscape of twentieth century South Africa has been marked, among other things, by the increasing significance of Zulu ethnic associations and cultural nationalism. Distinguished by their heritage of the most

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<sup>71</sup> Jonathon Glassman, "Sorting out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar's Newspaper Wars," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 41 No. 3 2000.

powerful and cohesive state in nineteenth century southern Africa, the Zulu comprise the single largest ethnic group in contemporary South Africa. Using language, “customs and traditions” and past history, the aim of these movements was the reconstructing of ethnic identity around symbols of Zulu monarchy and history.<sup>72</sup> The primary architects of this reconstruction were Christian Africans and the state intelligentsia who particularly perceived the gains of diffusing class based organizations and fracturing national movements through ethnic associations.

Both groups stood to gain from this restructuring of identity. With the *amakholwa* or ‘the believers’, the efforts of nineteenth century missionaries to establish totally self-contained communities were successful to the extent of setting the standard for what was socially acceptable and respectable. These Christian communities were faced with the poignant dilemma of seductive assimilation into European life-styles and the impossibility of achieving these ends in the racially stratified setting of apartheid South Africa. An added element of anxiety with middle-class and Christian Africans was the effects of social dislocation on black communities and the disintegration of Zulu life under increasing proletarianization.

In the 1920’s, the sharpening class conflict in urban centers like Natal and Zululand, and the increase of the African population in these centers in the following decade caused much consternation. Forging the new Zulu identity was

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<sup>72</sup> Shula Marks, “Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity: Natal and the Politics of Zulu Ethnic Consciousness,” in Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

of keen Afrikaner interest and partly coincided with the design of Zulu men.<sup>73</sup> Thus, fear of miscegenation converged with the desire of African men to control the economic and social role of the women.<sup>74</sup> The idea of returning to “traditional” Zulu culture was heightened. This reconstructed Zulu identity was aided and influenced by the incisive tools of anthropological studies, which included collecting Zulu traditions and folklore for publication, creating a Zulu anthem and gaining state recognition for the Zulu monarchy.<sup>75</sup> The need to preserve the perceived past for posterity, and for guidance in the uncertain political, economic and social climate was priority.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Hausa of West Africa**

Elsewhere in twentieth century African urban centers, the paradoxical processes set in motion by changing socio-economic and political conditions was characterized by simultaneous assimilation and heightened distinctiveness of ethnic groups. On the one hand, new possibilities of social and financial mobility opened up, seemingly in reach of the politically situated and those willing to

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<sup>73</sup> As part of Afrikaner nationalist ideology, this fear of miscegenation and idea of race was highlighted by reference to scriptural injunction and historical precedent, as well as biological degeneration. For an analysis of the ideological and theological justifications for apartheid see Saul Dunbow, “Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid and the Conceptualization of ‘Race’” *Journal of African History*, 22 (1992): 209-237.

<sup>74</sup> Before the expansion of manufacturing, the vested economic interest of the state was tied to its dependence in rural resources. In keeping African women away from urban centers, the costs of the migrant work-force would be subsidized while production and supply of labor would be monitored. See Shula Marks, *ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

Urban and economic developments poised a threat to prior arrangements that emphasized the importance of African women as laborers in their own right, and producers of potential laborers in the pre-capitalist setting. Zulu men reacting to this threat may have perceived the socially subordinate position to which the women were mostly confined as a form of protection from sexual exploitation by men of another race.

<sup>75</sup> Support for “traditional” was by no means unconditional as can be seen by the concerns of some on the effects of glorifying violence in the Zulu ‘warrior tradition.’ See Shula Marks, *ibid.*, p. 225 and p. 232.

<sup>76</sup> This process illustrates well the often commented upon Janus-like face of ethnicity, its ability to look at future prospects, imagine them for the present, and access them through the past. The mobilization of national sentiments or ethnic consciousness everywhere carries within it this element.



adapt or share different customs with another, perhaps equally powerful group. On the other hand, as members of various cultural groups left isolated areas and entered industrial settings and new political contexts, differences were highlighted and stereotypes about themselves and others strengthened.

The extensive indigenous long-distance trade that evolved against the background of various ecological and cultural conditions has partly determined the historical roles assigned to various communities in Africa. Abner Cohen's *Custom & Politics in Urban Africa* is a study of Hausa traders and migrants in Ibadan, north of Lagos, which documents and discusses the socio-cultural identity of this group within the context of a changing political system.<sup>77</sup>

As active participants in the centuries old trade, the Hausa represent among the most well-known Islamic ethnic groups organized in localized and diasporic networks. Their highly developed economic-political organization provided the institutional framework that facilitates mobility of Hausa traders and goods over long-distances. The numerous men connected to this culturally distinct Hausa community traded cattle and kola nuts within the indigenous framework between savanna and forest in the northern and southern geographic zones of Nigeria.

Particular to this community in Sabo was the intense religious activity in which its members were engaged. Though an Islamic community, the development of this religious intensity caused by the massive affiliation of the majority to the Tijaniya mystical Order in the 1940's was relatively recent. The

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<sup>77</sup> Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

changes in religious beliefs and practices in Sabo converged with the political reorganization within and without, in the relations between the Hausa and the Yoruba Ibadan polity. This re-organization manifested in the effects of increased national politics, the bureaucratized nature of government supervision, and the threat to Hausa religious prominence by Yoruba Muslims. These forces in turn shaped the nature and content of Hausa identity that was subsequently restructured to face these and related challenges.

The Hausa responded to the challenges to their identity spurred by the social and political forces active in nationalist movements and the Yoruba Muslims, and to the economic challenges posed by maintaining their livelihood despite the difficulties of long-distance trade. In the first instance, the Hausa in Sabo adopted the Tijaniya in reaction to threats to the political authority of the chief in the Quarter, and by extension the cultural distinctiveness of the group. By means of a strong religious belief resulting in effective centralized organization, the Tijaniya articulated the varied interest of Sabo's Hausa for their communal well-being. Religious and political organization thus converged to recreate a myth of distinctiveness.<sup>78</sup>

In response to the economic challenges, the Hausa developed monopoly over long-distance trade in kola and cattle. They overcame technical problems and the pressures of competition by mobilizing others of the same group in other towns and organizing economic concerns along ethnic lines. Thus in the Hausa

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<sup>78</sup> This was evidenced in the puritanical rituals and bonding of the religious brotherhood, distinct from the Yoruba Muslims in the city. Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 185.

case, Cohen presents ethnicity as a type of political resource, instrumental in mobilizing group ties for the attainment of collective and individual goals.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Ijwi of Central Africa**

In Central Africa, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a critical time for the formation of identities and forms of political relations which led to the emergence of a new kingdom among the inhabitants of the Ijwi island between Rwanda and Zaire. Based on the premise that social identities are the essence of political action and that political perceptions are fundamental to social identities, David Newbury's study of this island in the Kivu Rift Valley unveils the fluid and complex relationship between political power and social identity in a pre-colonial context.<sup>80</sup> The integration of kingship norms in a changing Ijwi society, and the relationship of changing clan identities to the process of political centralization are two of the historical problems examined.

New kingship on Ijwi island was forged through certain mechanisms: the royal family's relation to recent arrivals on the island; their alliance, especially in marriage, to groups on the nearby mainland, and the integration of kingship into the social structures of the island. The Basibula, who form the royal family in several kingdoms west of Lake Kivu, are immigrants who arrived in their present settlements only during the nineteenth century. On Ijwi, they did not gain prominence through the weight of numbers or force alone. Instead, they relied on political restructuring to validate their claims to legitimate authority and become the recognized royalty of Ijwi.

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<sup>79</sup> John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Oxford Reader: Ethnicity*, ibid, p.33.

<sup>80</sup> David Newbury, *Kings and Clans - Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780-1840*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

As part of a pattern of two-way mobility between the southern mainland and the islands, Ijwi island was characterized by the demographic effects of immigration. The Basibula, once political exiles from the mainland, capitalized on this general immigration pattern to re-position themselves to attain royalty. A complex process over a period of time, this transformation was achieved through marriage connections with new families on Ijwi. This in turn encouraged wider perceptions of identity and extended the network of political allies and economic resources.

### **The Anlo-Ewe of southeastern Ghana**

Sandra E. Greene's study *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast* is a rare effort at combining issues of gender and ethnic relations in Anlo-Ewe located in present day southeastern Ghana from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Increased land scarcity and the influx of refugees and immigrants beginning in 1679, caused the reconstitution of Anlo ethnic identity as 'insiders' with primary control over the land. The rights of women which prior to 1679 included inheritance of land and the right to pass property to their children was severely curtailed as immigrants and refugees began to integrate themselves through marriage. Thus women were made to marry clansmen, and later in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sister's sons, turning an unheeding ear to young women's objections.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, 'outsiders' struggled to establish themselves, adopting similar methods of marriage during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women who were

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<sup>81</sup> Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe*, (Portsmouth NH: Heinmann; Oxford; James Currey, 1996).

marginalized by the changes in ethnic relations countered their disadvantage by joining religious orders of ethnic outsiders which, as “wives” of particular gods, allowed them greater influence over decisions of who they would marry. The measures undertaken by Anlo women in turn provided ethnic outsiders leverage to align themselves with the center of Anlo political and religious hierarchy. The successful challenge of Anlo women to ethnic and gender constructs expanded the norms that regulated these relations eventually contributing to the formation of a broader Ewe identity by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **ETHNICITY IN ETHIOPIA**

Donald Levine's *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* and *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*, are two influential works which combine historical, sociological and psychological methodologies to illuminate particular issues of Amhara culture. *Wax and Gold* focuses on the relationship between the traditional and the modern in Amhara culture thereby exploring the dynamics of cultural change. Levine's three thematic concerns the nature of Amhara traditional culture, aspects of modern culture attractive to the Amhara, and how these have been incorporated in Amhara lives. These concerns are accessed primarily through an analysis of the Amhara poetic form, *Qene*. This form of classical Amharic poetry typically has two components - the *Sem* (Wax, or apparent meaning) and the *Warq*, (Gold, or

secret meaning).<sup>82</sup> Levine finds the ambiguous expression of *Semena Warq* expression to be characteristic of the spirit of Amhara culture.<sup>83</sup>

In this study, the Amhara are one of two geographic and linguistic groups that comprise the Abyssinians, and are located in the twentieth century areas of Begemidir, Gojjam, Wallo and Shoa. Politically and culturally, Levine strongly asserts that any serious account of contemporary Ethiopia must begin with the fact of Amhara dominance. How and why he associates dominance closely with Amhara identity deserves further discussion.

The years between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ethiopian history are categorized into three groups by Levine: the years of synthesis (1270-1527), of shock (1527-1633) and recovery (1633-1900). The first period, he finds, was characterized by the ascendance of the Shoan Amhara and the Golden Age of Ethiopian literature and art. The second was colored by the disruption of the Ethiopian political and social fabric by the Muslim leader, Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi (also known as Ahmad Gran), and the Oromo migration north. The last phase featured attempts of the Solomonic dynasty to regain balance through building political centers like Gondar, and re-organizing under such leaders as Tewodros II, Yohannes IV and Menilek II of Shoa.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Understanding both the *Sem* and *Warq* will allow one to decipher the intended message. *Semena Warq* is used in music, humor, and socially accepted criticism. Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1965), pp. 8-10.

<sup>83</sup> In relation to the study of the traditional and the modern, Levine maintains that *Semena Warq* plays contradictory roles. On the one hand, he believes that its quality of hidden communication hinders Ethiopia's progress toward modernity. On the other hand, the very ambiguity of this expression and the useful frame of reference it maintains in the culture, allows flexibility for change. Levine sees Qene as an instrumental tool for transitional society moving from the "traditional" to the "modern". Here, the implications of "traditional" and "modern" castings have obvious limitations - namely that traditional societies are presented as static until their abrupt encounter with "modernity".

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-22.

Gondar and Manz were to Levine the two most significant centers of the Amhara in the seventeenth century. The city of Gondar was founded in 1635 by Emperor Fasiladas, and was the center of cultural and religious activities as well as the most important place for instruction in art and music. Levine finds that Gondar was the embodiment of the Amhara's most concentrated attempt to cultivate their religious and aesthetic culture. The increasing importance of Manz in the north-eastern plateau of Shoa is explained by its geographic location. Encircled by mountains, Manz was protected against the Oromo migration north, thus providing a base of Amhara movements south. Also, a line of rulers from which Haile Sellassie descended originated in this region.

Levine presents Gondar and Manz as a homogenous Amhara unit whose differences were minor compared to their shared and heightened sense of ethnic awareness. This thriving sense of Amhara identity was maintained and projected through religious and cultural centers that ultimately set the foundation for Amhara political dominance. As evident in his discussion, though, this awareness, if indeed it was there, did not result in organization along ethnic lines. For instance, despite the repeated efforts of Manz to unite under one leadership, it remained divided into independent districts paying tribute to Gondar until 1775. Only when Menilek II was crowned emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913), was Shoa victorious over Gondar.

Such arguments are supported by assertions that there was no single “Amhara” political agenda or consciousness<sup>85</sup> and political motives were, more often than not, shaped by the struggle for immediate power than by ethnic concerns. Levine would explain differences among the Amhara as expressions of “regionalism”. These same sentiments would then be described as taking on “ethno-centric” proportions when directed to groups outside the Amhara. When directly addressing the issue of Amhara identity, Levine argues that differences are defined in terms of their *agar* or “home country”. This notion signifies more than the place of residence and is inclusive of families and friends from the region. What he terms “regionalism” is part of the more general phenomenon of “primordial sentiments”.<sup>86</sup>

As discussed in ethnicity theories above, primordial sentiments are based on two related ideas. Briefly restated, these are that culturally defined groups retain intrinsic knowledge of their own identity and that the loyalties created and vested in this identity provide the source of “ethnic consciousness and affiliation.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, Amhara identity as intrinsic primordial sentiment is as unchanging as “tradition” which in turn means that the agency of time and specific historical forces that create and maintain this identity are obscured. According to critics of ethnicity as primordial sentiment, it is not until group identity is threatened that the full specter of this sentiment is aroused. In

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<sup>85</sup> Christopher Clapham also argues that “terms such as Galla [*sic*] and Amhara so far (until 1974), denote neither a common consciousness nor a focus for political activity.” See Christopher Clapham, “Centralization and Local Responses in Southern Ethiopia,” *African Affairs* 74, (1975), p. 73.

<sup>86</sup> Levine, *ibid.*, p. 77 and p. 50. Despite the fact that these “primordial sentiments” are commonly believed to intensify and become problematic when faced with modernization, Levine maintains that they will allow for a productive transition by building continuity with the past during times of rapid change.

<sup>87</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *ibid.*, pp. 50-51.



Levine's case, this would be Amhara cultural encounter with "modernization" which created the necessary pressure for expressions of group awareness. Presumably, if there had been no such encounter, "primordial sentiments" would remain unformed. Internal processes of political, economic and social change that shape identities are therefore easily overlooked or rendered irrelevant in favor of external stimuli.

In *Greater Ethiopia :The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*, Levine adopts another approach to the question of ethnicity in Ethiopia. Here, his interest is in developing a "holistic conception of the Ethiopian experience"<sup>88</sup> by exploring an ongoing evolutionary societal transformation from which a multi-ethnic, inter-connected and autonomous unit was created. This resulted from a continuous process of interaction between different Ethiopian peoples through trade, warfare, migration and inter-marriage. Groups had access to select resources which forced inter-dependence and convincingly, such interaction over a period of up to 2, 000 years, contributed to the feeling of a shared social fabric. What is unclear in this study is the differentiation between the Amhara region, the Amhara people, and the ruling elite.

The geographical region is defined as bounded in the south by Wanchet river, in the north by Angot and Lasta, in the east by the escarpment to the Afar desert and in the west by the Abbai (Blue Nile). According to Tadesse Tamrat though, people living there in the first millennium A. D. were Agew peoples, who

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<sup>88</sup> Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 23.

developed a distinct South-Ethio-Semitic tongue, Amarinna or Amharic.<sup>89</sup> They converted to Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries. Because it lacks historical depth, it is unclear from Levine's study when and how the term Amhara became attached to this group of people although Tadesse Tamrat notes that the Arabian reference to the "King of the Amhara" was used in connection to Yekunno Amlak, whose reign began in 1270.

Despite statements that present the role of the Amhara in creating a multi-ethnic society, Levine continues to cast them as the supreme group that had both the capacity and the motivation to expand and fulfill the historical project to which they were destined. According to him, this historical project of political expansion was supported by the Amhara Christian culture dictated in the national script of the *Kibra Nagast* (or legend of Solomon and Sheba).<sup>90</sup> What problematizes Levine's construct is that now, as in the past, the majority of Amhara are agricultural peasants who are not represented in this capacity and benefited little from the 'manifest destiny'.

Alternately, Ethiopian history is replete with examples of rulers of mixed Oromo/Amhara or Muslim/Christian identity. Thus, even before the Zamana Masafint period which marked the merging of elite families of Yajju Oromo origins to the center, Oromo nobility were part of the ruling aristocracy during the reigns of Emperor Susenyos (1607-1632) and Emperor Bakaffa (1721-1730). The

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<sup>89</sup> Tadesse Tamrat's study shows how the Agew were integrated into Ethiopian society and culture. He suggests that the Agew were the basis of the Axumite civilization and that their northern-most counterparts were the semiticized Amhara. Tadesse Tamrat, "Processes of Ethnic Interaction in Ethiopian History: The case of the Agew," *Journal of African History* 29, 1 (January), 1988: 5-19.

<sup>90</sup> The *Kibra Nagast* is considered the mythical conception of the Ethiopian nation. It is the legendary account of the Ethiopian Queen Makeda's meeting with the Biblical King Solomon, from whom she bore a son, Menilek I, the first emperor of Ethiopia. He began the "Solomonic" line of kings from which successors to the throne were obliged to trace their origins to be considered legitimate.

argument that the Oromo nobility had been “Amharized” by adopting Christianity and other customs, assumes wrongly that Oromo culture was inferior to that of the Amhara and that it was subsumed into the latter. The common perception that all but one of the emperors of Ethiopia since the thirteenth century was Amhara is balanced with the fact that most of them since the mid-eighteenth century were part Oromo.<sup>91</sup>

The confusion over how the label Amhara becomes attached to a mixed group of people is aptly summarized by Charles W. McClellan:

While we can trace developments in terms of competing cultural forces, our terminology and perceptions are not always clear. We tend to see an Amhara-Tigre culture emerging from an earlier Semitic background without giving sufficient credit or emphasis to other elements that shaped it (immigrants from South Arabia mixed with Falasha, Agaw, and probably a variety of others). Certainly, Ethiopia’s Semitic culture of the first century B. C. was not that of the tenth century A. D., the Amhara-Tigre culture of Shoa was certainly not an exact replica of that found in Gojjam. In the efforts of historians and anthropologists to emphasize trends and make material more understandable, there is a tendency to overgeneralize and obscure rather than clarify complexities. The Shoans who created an empire in the late nineteenth century were historical products, including laterally the influences of Gurage, Oromo, Somali and an array of other undefined or ill defined. To use the simple label Amhara-Tigre is thus misleading.<sup>92</sup>

Gerry Salole’s provocative article “Who are the Shoans?” lends further support to this view arguing that the singular identity of the Habesha or Abyssinian Empire has been wrongly assumed and that the Shoan kingdom was a nominal vassal of the empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He suggests that reconsidering the historical relationship between the Amhara and the Oromo within Shoa will reveal a distinct Shoan rather than Habesha identity.

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<sup>91</sup> Levine, *Wax and Gold*, *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Charles W. McClellan, *State Transformation and National Integration: Gedeo and the Ethiopian Empire, 1895-1935*, (East Lansing: African Studies Center, 1988), p. 148.

Salole suggests that this Habesha identity was in closer proximity to “the heritage of Axum” and was adopted by the Shoans only for reasons of political expediency and advantage.<sup>93</sup>

While differences among the northern Amhara (Habesha) and southern Amhara (Shoan) were noted by scholars such as Levine and Markakis<sup>94</sup>, Salole rightfully points out that they are perceived as signs of “provincialism”. Similar expressions of animosity between Shoans and their southern neighbors, however, are considered “ethnic” differences even while both manifest in similar ways and equal strength. Based also on the fact that the Shoans and Habesha share the Orthodox faith, and in some cases, the Amharic language, Salole argues that this analytic appropriation underplays northern sentiments and amplifies the resentment of southerners towards the Shoans.

The Shoan empire of the nineteenth century, beginning with Nagassie, reflected an identity other than Habesha in origin. The first King of Shoa, Nagassie is identified as a self-made Oromo war leader who carved out his own position and styled it after a Habesha model. Drawing from research done by Getahun Dilebo and Christopher Clapham, Salole further suggests that neither was Menilek’s empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century to be considered solely an Amhara empire. He cites Getahun:

... Where a number of situational identities are available to choose between, communal groups tend to fuse or to expand their territorial (and

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<sup>93</sup> Among these reasons were the identification of Shoans with “Christian, literate and semi-civilized” Habesha’s discouraged the colonial aspirations of Europeans. Also, Shoan leadership was left to expand with little interference from the north. Gerry Salole, “Who are the Shoans?” *Horn of Africa* Vol. 2 No. 3, 1979, p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> Levine, *Wax and Gold*, *ibid.*, p. 47 and J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 48.

conceptual boundaries to include groups and individuals with whom they can identify... The Shoan empire was built through combinations of alliances between Oromo and Amhara communities.<sup>95</sup>

Salole maintains that conceiving the Amhara-Oromo community in Shoa as one resulting from acculturation and not assimilation reveals three things. The first is that the acculturation process that occurred in Shoa is two-way, with both cultures borrowing from each other, while retaining their own identity. The second, that even though Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity are spreading, there are Shoans who neither speak Amharic nor practice Christianity. Third, that the ethnic labels “Amhara” and “Oromo” still apply, leaving the potential to organize in ethnic groups a possibility in Shoa. In addition, urbanization and the influx of new ideas through improved communication resulted in internal changes in Shoa. Both cultures were affected by this. Hence, implying that one culture has forced itself on the other is a misrepresentation.

Salole presents yet another application of the term “Amhara” as used in William Shack’s work. Here the name is used to define a situational “socio-cultural” rather than “ethnic” category. “Amharaization” in Shack’s view, is a term that refers to the social change that occurred in Ethiopia in the twentieth century. This is corroborated by Fecadu Gadamu’s view also cited here, that understands “Amharaization” as the process of acculturation and different from aspirations to “become Amhara”. Thus, as Salole convincingly argues:

... The term Amhara has been effectively robbed of ethnic content. Thus to say that a person is Amhara is tantamount to saying that he is *siltane*

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<sup>95</sup> Salole, *ibid.*, p. 21.

[*sic*] and or *zemenawi* (of the times) and may not imply anything about his ethnic background. A focus on the label “Amhara” therefore may obscure the actual significance of the identity which is being referred to. The mere fact that ethnic labels are operative does not necessarily indicate that ethnicity persists ... the question is not “Who are the Amhara?” but rather “When and how and why the identification Amhara is the preferred one.”

Indeed the lack of eighteenth century sources for Shoan history and the cultural and linguistic similarity of the Shoan Amhara with the northern Amhara contribute to the confusion. In a statistical survey to determine who was involved in expansion activities in northern Sidamo, Charles McLellan discovers that Shoans were dominantly represented. He concedes, however, that the ethnic diversity of Shoa makes it difficult to discern the role played by non-Amhara Shoans. This task is further complicated by the degree of inter-marriage and acculturation among the peoples of Shoa. The importance of Shoan Oromo and Gurage in this expansionism is only hinted at by place names, such as Mecca, Sallale, and Muher, among others.<sup>96</sup>

Salole's research in early twentieth century sources strongly suggest a separate Shoan identity distinguished from the Oromo and the Amhara, and perceived as a culturally heterogeneous ethnic category. His significant conclusion is that the sum effect of this is the historical distortion of the Ethiopian elite being identified as “Amhara” and Ethiopian history being seen as continuous without the acknowledgment of the role and participation of the Oromo in shaping its outcome.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Charles McLellan, *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>97</sup> Salole, *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

In light of these debates, this dissertation will demonstrate that the perceived dominant group subsumed under the label of Amhara (which I will refer to as the power elite), was made up of individuals and families of different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The power elite was not a static unit but one which underwent change while maintaining certain continuities over the two centuries of its existence. Most importantly, the formation of this national elite paralleled the development of the Ethiopian state appropriately reflecting the sharing of values and the unity of purpose among diverse nobility whose interest in sustaining power often superseded most other considerations.

#### **CONTEXTUALIZING STUDY**

The subject of marriage in Ethiopian political history has been partly addressed by three articles and sections of Chris Prouty's book on Empress Taitu and Emperor Menilek. In order of their appearance, they were: Bairu Tafla's "Marriage as a Political Device: An Appraisal of a Socio-Political aspect of the Menilek Period 1889-1916," Aleme Eshete's unpublished paper, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century)," Shiferaw Bekele's "Reflections on the Power elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate," and Richard Pankhurst's "Dynastic Inter-Marriage in Medieval and Post-Medieval Ethiopia."<sup>98</sup> The first two works along with Prouty's, share a focus on Menilek's era with Aleme Eshete expanding the time-line a bit further to note elite

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<sup>98</sup>Bairu Tafla, "Marriage as a Political Device: An Appraisal of a Socio-Political Aspect of the Menilek Period 1889-1916," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January 1972; Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)," Paper read at the Italian Cultural Institute, Addis Ababa, 1984; Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate (1786-1853)," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. 15, 1990; and Richard Pankhurst, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage and Post-Medieval Ethiopia," in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective – Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Kyoto 1997.

marriages during the regency of Ras Tesemma (1909-1911) and the brief reign of Lij Iyasu (1911-1916). Shiferaw and Pankhurst offer a glimpse of the same theme in other time periods of Ethiopian history.

Bairu presents the main preoccupation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial court to produce an heir as the dominant factor behind the intense activities around political marriages of the period.<sup>99</sup> By 1892, Menilek's involvement in arranging marriages had supposedly waned but his wife Empress Taitu would push the art to another level of refinement, creating a network of conjugal and blood affinities throughout the empire.<sup>100</sup> Those related to the empress were awarded posts and titles while like elsewhere in Africa, the tradition of the imperial court raising children of other nobility and commoners and marrying them to important officials also widened the network.<sup>101</sup> Bairu notes the extraordinary liberty enjoyed by the upper class and clergy in contracting and annulling marriages – a practice that openly violated a number of strict prescriptions in law and religion. These were routinely ignored and, in the language of the day, the apt analogy of adding water to milk to whiten and increase its quantity would have been used to justify such arrangements.<sup>102</sup> This indicates the selective overlooking of cultural concerns by the power elite who envisioned larger shared benefits from a strengthened social and political base.

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<sup>99</sup> Bairu Tafla, "Marriage as a Political Device" *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> This type of fostering was common in Dahomey where young people from poorer branches of family members were sent to those better positioned to serve and avail of the opportunities thus setting up a type of client-patron relationship among kinspersons around power. Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*, (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Bairu, *ibid.*, p. 21.



Although its very fragility was attested to by quick marital dissolutions and the rapid unraveling of Taitu's support of well-placed kin with the turning of the political tide, Bahru convincingly demonstrates that marriage was among the most significant methods by which close affinities were created among the important families of Menilek's reign. It served the political center by enlisting the loyalties of prominent personalities and the nobility who strengthened existing positions or acquired and maintained better economic benefits. Meanwhile, as Bairu points out and Aleme concurs, the political marriage patterns of this period confirm the existence of an interwoven system of ruling classes of different ethnicities, thus diminishing ethnocentricity and forming a social unit of its own.

Aleme Eshete's paper contains useful notes on individuals (men and women of the imperial court) and a table that tracks marriage patterns from 1890-1916. Both Aleme and Bairu make good use of published and unpublished Amharic sources like Tekle Yesus' *Chronicle of Gojjam*, *Aleka Kenfe's Journal*, and *Masehafa Tezeta Za-Alaqa Lamma Haylu Walda Tarik*, along with supporting documentation ranging from a variety of archival European sources, travelers accounts, oral interviews and early newspaper publications to relevant secondary sources to verify dates and piece together or enhance biographical and marital details. Aleme traces four distinct shifts of marriage patterns that correspond to the power changes under Menilek, Taitu (1890-March 1910), Ras Tessema Nadew as regent (1909-1911) and Lij Iyasu and his father Ras Mikael (1911-1916). Thus, at a glance one can witness the level of intermarriage among

the elite, as well as the frequency with which certain women are connected to different men.

Based largely on European archival sources, Prouty's book *Empress Taytu and Menilek II* holds the distinction of being the first extended biography of a luminous woman in Ethiopian history.<sup>103</sup> It provides personal and family information on the empress and interesting details on noted personalities of Menilek's court. Although Taitu's power and direct political involvement is demonstrated in Prouty's work, it is difficult to understand what that meant in relation to other elite women – if, for instance, it allowed for other women, who are sporadically glimpsed throughout the text, to exercise similar influence through family networks. Critiques of this work include its external rather than internal focus, the rather uncritical use of sources, the lack of wider context in which to understand Taitu's rise to power (other than her strong personality), and how there is little detail on the reconstruction of the structure and fortunes of the office of Itege which Taitu occupied as empress.<sup>104</sup>

Richard Pankhurst's and Shiferaw Bekele's articles provide looks at marriage histories of different time periods. Relying on travelers accounts, Pankhurst notes that the first mention of dynastic marriages in medieval Ethiopia was in 1520. Among those he documents are marriage alliances across religious and ethnic groups as between the daughter of the governor of the Bahr Negash (north of the Marab river) and Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim (who owed part of his rise to power in Adal to marriage with the daughter of the Imam of Zyala),

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<sup>103</sup> Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia, 1883-1910*, (London: Ravens Educational and Development Services, 1986).

<sup>104</sup> Review by Shiferaw Bekele in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 21, November 1988.

between the Muslim ruling house of the Hadeya and the Christian one of Emperor B'eda Maryam (1433-1468), or the relationship between Emperor Sarsa Dengel (1563-1597) with a newly converted woman of the Beta Israel. Other links as those between the royal family of the central state in Gondar and Hamasen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the dynastic marriages in Harar between the ruling Amir's family and women from Arsi, Oromo, Anaj and Geri occurred between different ethnic and language groups. These marriages strengthened control, expanded political links, and often included mutual economic benefits to families in power. Although most successful when based on already existing relationships, as Pankhurst demonstrates, such marriages were a vital part of Ethiopian statecraft.<sup>105</sup>

Shiferaw's reflections on socio-political aspects of the Wara Seh power elite bring several valuable themes on marriage and political history to the forefront.<sup>106</sup> The period of the Zamana Mesafint considered by Shiferaw is one that has been deemed as near chaotic by most scholars, due to its nature of decentralized power and 'disintegrated state'. Shiferaw argues that there are no clear centripetal vs. centrifugal or monarchy vs. nobility divides for the period as suggested in the historical literature, but some combination thereof, leaning more towards struggle to control state power. He points to equally strong unifying features to the power elite of the time characterized by extensive inter-relationships and continuity over time. His approach of identifying what held the state together in political and social terms greatly influenced the conceptualizing

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<sup>105</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage," *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate (1786-1853)," *ibid.*

of this dissertation and shaped its ambition to examine elite marriage as an integral process of Ethiopian history.

## SOURCES

This dissertation relies on a combination of sources to create a continual narrative for elite marriage and family histories in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia. Of the secondary sources, unpublished senior essays on prominent personalities such as Dejazmach Jote Tulu, Ras Hailu, Ras Imru, Nigus Tekle Haimanot or Bitwoded Makonnen Indalkachew provided biographical information. Other senior papers on regional histories, such as Gojjam, Wellegga, Jimma, and Tigre along with more extensive graduate studies on Wallo and Wag and Lasta, familiarized me with the nature of relations between the imperial center and provincial powers.<sup>107</sup> The standard and quality of most senior papers reflects the level of excellence maintained by the Addis Ababa University History Department and they serve as good source material both in their accuracy and specific focus.

Strong supporting reference help was available for tracing individuals and kinship connections to Sahle Sellassie's extended family in the charts and tables of *Hilkwe Tiwliid*. Published in 1965 E.C. this Amharic document charts a total of 2, 442 descendants of Sahle Sellassie that draw their lineage from his fifteen

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<sup>107</sup> Among these are Aby Demissie, "Lij Iyasu: A Perspective Study of his Short Reign," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1964; Asnake Ali, "Aspects of the Political History of Wallo, 1872-1916." MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1983; Bahru Zawde, "Dejazmach Jote Tulu (1855-1918)," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1970; Ismael Ali. "The Career of Mikael Sihul of Tigre 1692-1780," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1972; Kebede Kejela, "A Biography of Dejazmach Habte Mariam Gebre Egziabher," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1989; Hadera Tesfaye, "Ras Seyoum Mengesha, 1887-1960," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1976; Mekonnen Berhan, "A Political History of Tigre: Shewan Centralization versus Tigrean Regionalism (1889-1910)," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1994; Tsegaye Namarra, "Power Consolidation over Conquered Territories: The case of Wollega," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1973; Tsehaye Haile, "A short biography of Dejazmach B'arya Gabor 1873-1930," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1972; Wudu Tafete. "A Political History of Wag and Lasta c. 1543-1919." MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1995.

children. The alphabetized index at the back and tabular format of the main body allows easy trace family members over several generations while the concentric circular chart attached to the back cover provides similar information in one page. The biggest drawback of *Hilkwe Tiwliid*, for the purposes of this research, is that spouse names are rarely included if they do not descend from Sahle Sellassie, meaning that unless there is prior knowledge of marital relations, it is difficult to track the marriages that occurred and their significance.

Also in Amharic, with a brief introduction in English by historian Bairu Tafle, Mahteme Sellassie Wolde Masqal's other endeavor, "Che Belew – A Study of the Ethiopian Culture of Horse Names," presents a slightly different but related challenge.<sup>108</sup> While it is invaluable as source material for biographical data, and helps on dating difficulties, this document centers around men of political or social repute with almost no coverage of women. Herui Wolde Sellassie's earlier work, *YeHiwot Tarik*, also presents similar reference support with some entries on prominent women of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>109</sup> I found additional biographical information on nobility and officials of Haile Sellassie's government in the more recent publication, *Gedle Sema'etate Ityopia*, that accompanied the opening of a commemorative statue and small archive documenting the photographs, lives and works of the sixty civil and army officials murdered by the Derg regime on 24 November 1974.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Blattengeta Mahteme Sellassie Wolde Masqal, "Che Belew," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. VII No. 2, July 1969.

<sup>109</sup> Herui Wolde Sellassie. *YeHiwot Tarik*, Addis Ababa, 1915 E.C.

<sup>110</sup> *Gedle Sema 'etate Ityopia*, Addis Ababa, 1972.

Interviewing elders and gathering oral histories was an experience unto itself – one from which I gained unique insights both in historical research on the ground, and the specific cultural difficulties of realizing it. I conducted formal fieldwork in Ethiopia from 1997-98 with funding from the Social Science Research Council International Doctoral Research Fellowship Program, although I began preliminary conversations to ascertain the feasibility of the topic as early as 1995. Access to the elders was not always guaranteed as it depended on the good standing of my contacts and their own willingness to address my specific questions. It was important to have contacts that would vouch for who I was and verify my intentions and I galvanized my own family members and older family friends for the cause of identifying informants and presenting me with the necessary protocol.

The interviews were not structured although I knew what issues I wanted addressed – and some informants requested written questionnaires ahead of time which often led to a stiff and guarded discussion. Out of a possible 35, I interviewed a total of 31 people - 26 in Ethiopia and 4 in the U.S. Of these, 14 were women and 17 men. I spent the summer of 2000 on a Summer Acceleration Fellowship to attempt to interview members of Haile Sellassie's imperial family – immediate grandchildren who had relocated to Washington D.C. after their release from Derg's prisons. Only one younger grandson was willing to speak to me although dialogues of possibilities took place between myself and several contacts over six weeks with no granting of interviews. I could take none of this personally, but learned to understand it as the toll taken by the traumas

suffered at the hands of the Derg from which many carried emotional and psychological scars that had only selectively healed. The topic of my dissertation was perceived as political by some, leading to defensive reactions which no amount of explanation on my part could overcome.

Most of my informants were in their seventies and eighties and were either active participants in official capacities, were relatives of the royal family or were close descendants of regional nobility. Women informants tended to shy away from direct questions and it was difficult to persuade them of the validity of their experiences as important to historical understanding. More often than not, they would defer to those they perceived to know the history better, presumably those who could recount the “official story”. In the rare situations where both men and women were interviewed together, the women would provide the most enriching details and anecdotes but falter on the chronological organization of events – less from not knowing, it seemed, but from an elusive cultural deference. Paradoxically, once they warmed up to the subject matter (which sometimes took several months to a year), women elders listened very closely and provided unique glimpses of court politics from a different perspective.

Three issues presented particular challenges in conceptualizing and compiling this research. The first was gathering enough information on regional families outside of the imperial center to make the case for extensive inter-marriage among the elite. This I tackled by diversifying my informant group to reflect the broad approach and the story of interconnection over generations that I was trying to recount. Also, when informants were willing, I was able to copy

family genealogies and documents that charted relations. The second challenge was organizing the material in coherent chronology with as much cross-checking accuracy as possible. Dating was difficult for most of the oral information for which there were meager secondary sources for reference, which meant that I had to rely on historical markers and eras to place marriages or family histories. The third challenge was in locating elite Ethiopian women in political history, both in the oral and written accounts – to understand their role behind the scenes, and portray their activities as could be glimpsed or inferred from the sources.

Newspapers, such as the early editions of *Berhanenna Selam*, were invaluable in aiding with dating and providing rich details on a few wedding ceremonies. I made full use of descriptions, creating comparative depth where possible, to better trace subtle changes in rituals. Some actual wedding invitations were also available in the *Scrapbook of Wedding Announcements* at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies which further aided with precise dating, as did death announcements and gravestone inscriptions which contained biographical notes. A few letters of correspondence between the Foreign Office and the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa are available at the U.S. National Archives and Records, offering peripherally interesting perceptions of foreigners on marriage among Ethiopian royalty and elite of the 1940s-60s.

From these sources, I fashioned an inquiry that would consider the juncture of three inter-related themes – elite marriages, state formation and issues of identity. The original contribution of this inquiry is first in its documentation of elite marriage history, especially during Haile Sellassie's reign,



second, in its attempt to reconstruct this in a continual narrative with historical time depth and third, in its gendered texture that seeks to incorporate elite women in Ethiopian political history. This dissertation would have achieved its purpose if it is considered among the initial steps that would open new lines of research in this densely interwoven area of family histories and political power.

## CHAPTER II

### REGIONAL HISTORIES & MARRIAGE PATTERNS UNTIL THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This chapter will serve as background to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century focus of the study by surveying scholarly works, secondary materials and some primary sources to reconstruct a history of marriage alliances in different areas of the country at various time periods. Although this section focuses on southern and northern regions, Richard Pankhurst notes that dynastic alliances occurred in most parts of Ethiopia. For instance, the early career of Islamic leader Ahmad ibn Ibrahim of Adal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century consolidation of power was aided with marriage links to powerful families in Zayla, Somalia and Hadeya. Pankhurst cites Italian scholar Cerulli who records that in the eastern Muslim emirate of Harar, the wives of Amir Abdullah ibn Ali ibn Da'ud (1671-1700) had wives from different ethnic backgrounds – two Oromo, one Arsi and one each from Anaj and Geri groups.<sup>111</sup>

Unfortunately, not enough is available by way of sources, to reconstruct the history of marriage relations for all areas of Ethiopia. Its widespread political use is suggested here with select regional histories that identify marriage alliances as an essential part of power consolidation in both the southern and northern regions of Ethiopia. For the south, marriages provided the link of influence intended to neutralize potential rivalry, and when successful, strengthen

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<sup>111</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage in Medieval and Post-Medieval Ethiopia," *ibid.*, p. 210.

the scope of power. Southern kingdoms relied on these connections to create viable political structures.

The same held largely true for the north. As the center strengthened its control and moved its location, so the marriage patterns adjusted accordingly to reflect these political shifts. The complex relationship of family connections to the power center in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be explored in more detail further on. This general background will serve to broaden the context and allow us to develop historical depth for certain patterns and continuities. Though the scale may have differed according to time and place, the guiding principle of marriage alliances remained consistent for both regions: to forge political, social and economic links across different families, and often across ethnic and linguistic lines, with the intent of maintaining stability, ensuring protection and where possible, unifying purpose.

### **MARRIAGE & POLITICS IN SOUTHERN KINGDOMS**

The peoples of southern Ethiopia, often known under the linguistic name of Omotic, were organized into several kingdoms and principalities with varied social and political structures. The historical character of the region was shaped by two important factors before its incorporation into the northern empire: migration and marriage relations. A closer look at the history of Walaita, Enarea and Kafa illustrates the extent of migration and the significant role marriage alliances played in nudging the process of consolidation.

## **Walaita**

The kingdom of Walaita to the east of the Omo river, is said to have medieval beginnings associated with Motolomi, who founded the Walaita Malla dynasty. The hierarchical power structure of the dynasty included the king, or *kawa*, a class of warriors, and after the nineteenth century, an advisory council and assemblies of regional representatives.<sup>112</sup> The extent of migration is suggested by the fact that the ruling group that followed were northerners named the 'Tigrean dynasty' or *Kawona Tigre* and reputed to have come to the area from Tigre in the north.

Local history confirms that a man named Shumgeb went to Walaita accompanied by a priest, artisans and traders. They traded cotton for iron bars, hide, bracelets and embroidery for seven generations until a man of Shumgeb's lineage by the name of Kote finally married the Walaita king's daughter. This dynasty had a long line of successors, the last one being Kawa Tona, who was defeated in one of the bloodiest battles against the expansive forces of Emperor Menilek in 1894.<sup>113</sup>

The south had largely escaped the ravages wrought by the Great Famine which lasted from 1888-1892 affecting most of the country and resulting in the death of about one-third of the population. In light of this, expansion into the

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<sup>112</sup> According to tradition, Motolomi was converted to Christianity by the Shoan saint Abuna Takla Haimanot. Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974*, (London: James Currey Ltd., 1991), pp. 16-18.

<sup>113</sup> An informant details the kings as follows: Girma, Shum Agame, Mikael, Azena, Liben, Tube, Adayo, Sana, Agoto, Damote, Gobe, Gaga, and Tona. (FINISH BIB). Another source lists the nine "Tigre kings" as Kote, Libena, Tube, Sana, Agato, Amado, Damote, Gobe and Tona. For details on the lives of the kings and their reign see Jacques Bureau's translation of Afework Gebre-Sellassie, a local historian's text. Jacques Bureau, "The "Tigre" Chronicle of Walaita: A Pattern of Kingship," *Proceedings of the First National Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1990, pp. 49-75.

south may have seemed particularly appealing to Menilek. Kawa Tona had further garnered widespread support both locally and among neighboring Kullo and Konta peoples against Menilek, heightening the level of conflict. The campaign in 1897 was led personally by Menilek and involved a number of his generals as well as his cousin and nominal ruler of Kafa, Ras Walda Giyorgis and Abba Jiffar II of Jimma.<sup>114</sup> The veritable massacre that followed the campaign ended with the final capture of Kawa Tona, who was wounded in battle and brought to Addis Ababa.

Very little is available on the family histories of the local ruling elite, and only preliminary remarks can be made here based on oral accounts which suggest marriage alliances between Walaita royalty and surrounding areas.<sup>115</sup> Walaita rulers reputedly married women from prominent families of Arusi, Jimma and Kullo. One informant recounts that Kawa Tona's grandmother, Digits, was the daughter of Abba Jiffar I of Jimma. Their son and ruler, Gaga, was married to an Arusi woman of nobility and they gave birth to Tona. Tona himself was married to a daughter of Hadiya nobility.<sup>116</sup>

## **Enarea**

Indeed, creating family links with surrounding regions through marriage played a vital role in the patterns of political consolidation and the emergence of

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<sup>114</sup> Ras Walda Giyorgis was made ruler of Kafa before his actual presence there. His tenure there lasted from 1897-1910.

<sup>115</sup> Most of this relies on a recent conversation with a woman who was married to the grandson of Kawa Tona for 32 years and spent a number of those living in Walaita, raising a family.

<sup>116</sup> My informant mentions that Emperor Menilek later gave his relative, a woman named Wzo. Shewangiziw, in marriage to Tona. She may be the daughter of Wzo. Birkinesh Sahle Sellassie, Menilek's paternal aunt. Tona had a son named Lij Feseha, who died young at the age of 34. He had fathered a child Desta, which means happiness or joy, so named by Tona who, according to her, was pleased with the arrival of his grandson. My informant was married to Desta Feseha, also called Desta Tona perhaps due to the fact that his grand-father raised him. Informant 1, Washington D.C.

monarchies elsewhere in southern Ethiopia. Mordechai Abir notes that before the sixteenth century and the advent of the Oromo into the region, southern Ethiopia was divided into various kingdoms among which Enarea and Kafa ranked richest and strongest with sources of gold, ivory, musk incense and slaves.<sup>117</sup>

It was not until after two centuries of warfare that the people of the region west of the Omo river, known as Sidama, were subsumed under the Oromo. In so doing, the Oromo changed their largely nomadic life gradually adopting many Sidama customs and forms of political and social organization.<sup>118</sup> The oral tradition and travelers accounts agree that the ancient kingdom of Enarea was founded by the Limu Oromo.<sup>119</sup>

This absolute monarchy of Limu-Enarea was established in the early decades of the nineteenth century by a man named Bofo, the son of Abba Boku, considered the spiritual leader of the group. Bofo was a great warrior in his own right, and he founded the kingdom after legitimizing his position through marriage to the daughter of the traditional political leader.<sup>120</sup> In contrast to Bofo, who was thought of as a cruel ruler, his son Abba Bagibo, though involved in a few expeditions to secure trade routes to Gojjam in the north, largely preferred power

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<sup>117</sup> Mordechai Abir, "The Emergence and Consolidation of the Monarchies of Enarea and Jimma in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, 6, 2 (1965), pp. 205-219.

<sup>118</sup> Abir notes that this region was inhabited by people of Kushitic origin called the Sidama. Sidama was an Oromo term meaning foreigner, and one of the eight groups of the region still retain the name.

<sup>119</sup> Abir uses the accounts of the d'Abbaddie brothers, Antoine and Arnauld, who traveled in Ethiopia between 1838-1848 and took several volumes of notes of their impressions. Some of these have been published and others are in the Vatican Library of the Bibliotheque National in Paris.

<sup>120</sup> Abir convincingly argues that both the accounts of the French missionary d'Abbaddie in 1843 and oral testimonies would be relatively accurate in their description of the founding of the kingdom, since the proximity in time would make this a recent event at the time the accounts were recorded. Abir, *ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

consolidation through the peaceful means of marriage alliances. Abba Bagibo's emphasis on political marriages meant that he himself was married to many of the daughters and sisters of the various neighboring rulers. In return, he gave a large number of his daughters from many wives and concubines in marriage to rulers and important chiefs.<sup>121</sup>

Among the events that helped to transform Enarea to the trading metropolis of southwestern Ethiopia in the initial years of Abba Bagibo's reign, was the stability of the area between Enarea, Kafa, and later, Jimma. This soon changed with the unification of different principalities in Jimma by Abba Jiffar Sanna and the strengthening of opposing trade interests that were further threatened by the rise of the Shoan kingdom under Sahle Sellassie. The inevitable clashes that followed between Jimma and Enarea continued until about 1840, when the daughter of Abba Jiffar was given in marriage to Abba Dula, son and heir to Abba Bagibo. The marriage was to mark a peaceful turn in relations which proved temporary as Abba Jiffar continued pressuring surrounding peoples to further Jimma's trade interests and collect revenue. Ultimately, Jimma emerged triumphant in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, though conflict continued until the annexation of the area by Menilek in the 1880's.

### **Kafa**

Amnon Orent's research on the Kafa kingdom in southwest Ethiopia also provides examples of migration and patterns of marriage alliances in connection to power consolidation. The Kafa inhabit the territory bounded by the Gojeb river

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<sup>121</sup> Abir, *ibid.*, p. 215.

in the east and the Omo river in the south. Before 1897 and their annexation to the northern empire, the Kafa had a formidable kingdom that reached its height in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century.<sup>122</sup> Significant to this discussion is Orent's strong assertion that historically, Kafa was not a homogeneous cultural system but was formed rather by the continual migration and incorporation of many peoples. Evidence of this abounds in the history of different clans who refer to distant lands as their point of origin. Thus, the Gimero clan is from Gimira, the Tigero clan from Tigre, the Damo clan from Damot and the Wollo clan from Wallamo.

These clan names with the name of places incorporated in them, easily point to northern, eastern and western origins of the people in Kafa. Orent also finds that certain customs, such as the symbols of kingship and the veneer of Christianity, are evidence of cultural synthesis that took place over time. Linguistic evidence further corroborates early ties with northern highland Ethiopians.<sup>123</sup> While it is difficult to conclude if migration resulted in inter-marriage between different clans, this movement of people suggests a layering of identities framed by a relatively flexible political and social structure. New groups composed of political refugees or trading entrepreneurs provided the king with opportunities of forging new links with the outside world, and incorporating new support.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Orent divides the history into four periods with estimated time frames: The pre-centralized period ( - 1389?); the formation of the kingdom of Kafa (1390?-1674?); the Kafa period of expansion (1675?-1896) and the Amhara-Kafa period. See Amnon Orent, "Refocusing on the History of Kafa prior to 1897: A Discussion of Political Processes," *African Historical Studies*, 3, 2 (1970), pp. 263-293.

<sup>123</sup> See Amnon Orent, "Lineage Structure and the Supernatural: The Kafa of Southwest Ethiopia," Unpublished Dissertation, Boston University, 1969.

<sup>124</sup> Orent, "Refocusing on the History of Kafa," *ibid.*, p. 293.



According to Orent, aside from politics on the domestic front, the kingdom of Kafa was continually attempting to expand its borders at the expense of smaller kingdoms while keeping larger kingdoms at bay through treaties and royal marriages.<sup>125</sup> His reconstruction of the royal lineage of Kafa (1675-1897) provides specific evidence of marriage alliances in proximity to power. From 1775 onwards, marriages with neighboring royalty occurred as Kafa royalty created links with women from Enarea or arranged the marriage of their daughters to kings from Enarea and Dauro.<sup>126</sup> This was a period of political and military consolidation following the absorption of the people of Konta, Dauro and Koischa on Kafa's southern borders. Commercial exchange with Muslim merchants thrived as did the slave trade aided by the fact that victims of these wars were sold into bondage.

After 1854, the daughters of Kafa monarchs married into Gera and Goma royalty, thus strengthening relations to the north of the Gojeb river.<sup>127</sup> An important trade route to Gondar was opened up in King Gawi Nechocho's reign (1845-1854), following his daughter's marriage to the king of Gera.<sup>128</sup> The king of Kafa traditionally married women from other kingdoms, and his sisters and daughters were also married to neighboring monarchs. Brother-sister ties in

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<sup>125</sup> Orent, *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Conflict with Enarea during the reign of King Gaha Nechocho (1821-1845) was resolved when the king of Kafa gave his daughter as a wife to one of the kings of Enarea. In addition, Gaha Nechocho married an Enarea princess. Orent, *ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>127</sup> Goma itself was one of the Oromo kingdoms transposed from its earlier Sidama character by intermarriage and adaptation of custom with the Oromo settlers of the 17th century. See Chris Prouty and Eugene Rosenfeld, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia*, (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981), p. 81. See also Orent, *ibid.*, pp. 274-275.

<sup>128</sup> Orent, *ibid.*, p. 279.

Kafa were strong and further institutionalized by the *nacho* relationship which required reciprocal assistance from the affinal relatives of one's sister.<sup>129</sup>

Widowed wives of monarchs ruled the kingdom as regents, sometimes making the necessary structural changes to consolidate their political position and ensure their son's success. The status of women in proximity to the monarch was one of extreme significance. When choosing a new monarch, the seven councilors, or *mikrecho*, paid particular attention to how much influence they could exert over him, and the women surrounding him helped them decide. Council members themselves, or their children, could be married to the king's daughters or sisters, thus ensuring effective political channels of influence.<sup>130</sup>

In summary, it is clear even in this cursory inquiry of southern history that creating and maintaining marriage connections was a vital part of political well-being for the rulers of Walaita, Enarea and Kafa. With these connections came the potential of co-operation in matters of mutual interest, and at a minimum, assurance of tacit support and peaceful relations. As will be discussed elsewhere in this essay, marriage alliances did not guarantee success and were disregarded when deemed limiting to political aspirations of ambitious figures. Marriage did, however, take equal precedence in political arrangements, marking either the initial direction or the particular state of affairs in alliance ventures. Elite families were created and continued to achieve political and social livelihood on the basis of marriage connections throughout Ethiopia

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<sup>129</sup> Orent, *ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>130</sup> Orent, *ibid.*, p. 85.

## **MARRIAGE & POLITICS IN THE NORTH**

The Shoan based monarchy, established under Yekunno Amlak in 1270 marked the restoration of so-called 'Solomonic' power. Shoan imperial control grew with the diversion of trade from routes through Lasta. Hadeya, a tributary in the southwest of the empire was important for strategic reasons of trade as well as a source for slaves and gold. Pankhurst notes that along with military control, marriage was used to link the ruling houses of Hadeya and Shoa. Emperor Ba'eda Maryam (1433-1468) thus married Ite Jan Zela, later known as Eleni, the daughter of the local Hadeya ruler. This marked the significant end of Hadeya's prior connection to the Muslim imamate of Ifat in the East. Eleni converted to Christianity and was renowned as a capable ruler and skilled politician. According to Pankhurst, Eleni's activities to strengthen Hadeya's connection with the central state were undertaken with devotion. A prospective wife was even sent from a ruler of Hadeya as potential bride for Eleni's son, Emperor Lebna Dengel and some time later, the queen of Hadeya appealed to the emperor, her kinsman, for support against an insurrection in her kingdom.<sup>131</sup>

Following the Oromo migrations that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial court transferred in 1571 from Shoa to the northwest of the country near Lake Tana during the reign of Emperor Sarsa Dengel. What was left of Shoan ruling families took refuge in the mountains of Manz from where the process of reconquest of the former imperial province of Shoa would ensue. R. H. Kofi Darkwah traces the history of the Shoan dynasty from its first ruler Nagassi Kristos Warada Qal, commonly known as Nagassi, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. His

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<sup>131</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage," *ibid.*, p. 211.

descendants would expand the kingdom of Shoa in territorial terms and eventually place it at the center of imperial politics.

According to Darkwah, marriage was an important weapon in the rise of Nagassie's family to power. With his marriage to Tagunstyan, Nagassie brought one of the three governors of the Mamameder district of Manz linking the political fate of the two families. Another woman of an important Manz family, Wzo. Attemoch Houno, was married to Nagassie's descendant Asfa Wossen. With successive Shoan rulers, increase in wealth and power resulted from campaigns of conquest of outlying Oromo districts. The position of the ruler was accordingly exalted culminating with the thirty-four year reign of Sahle Sellassie which he began as Ras around 1813 and ended as Nigus or King. Sahle Sellassie's policy was of using marriage to extend diplomatic ties through relations with several Oromo women whom he took as royal concubines. The daughters from these women would be married in great honor to the favored man of Sahle Sellassie's choice.<sup>132</sup>

Marriage continued to provide connections between centers of power such as Shoa, Lasta, and Wag, Gondar and Tigre. Around 1636, a permanent capital was established in Gondar. The need for the Gondarine state to strengthen links with the northern coastal highlands of Marab Melash (which included Hamasen and Saraye) was expressed in marriage arrangements between the imperial

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<sup>132</sup> R. H. Darkwah, *Shewa, Menilek and the Ethiopian Empire 1813-1889*, (London: Heinemann Press, 1975), p. 17. The genealogical study of Sahlé Sellassie's descendants lists eight different women as mothers of his children. Of these, Abeto Kassegn Sahle Sellassie is listed as a son from a daughter of a prominent family from Arba Gugu, Arsi, Wzo. Itenesh is listed as a woman from Wallo and Wzo. Bizat from Aliyu Amba. See Blatengeta Mahteme Sellassie Wolde Masqal, *Hilkwe Tiwliid*, (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1965 E.C.).

family and Hamasen nobility. Thus, Emperor Fasiladas (1632-1667) gave his daughter in marriage to a certain Hab Sellus, a loyal Hamasen noble and in 1683, an historic marriage took place between Emperor Iyasu I and Walata Seyon from an important strategic district in Hamasen.<sup>133</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, imperial interest in gold from the southwestern territories of Enarea encouraged the close and mutually beneficial, albeit short-lived, relationship between the Enarea chief Benaro's family and that of Emperor Susenyos. Benaro was killed by the people of who found him cruel and unjust and he was replaced by his son who was Susenyos's nephew by marriage. He paid intermittent tribute in gold to the emperor was soon after deposed when suspected of Roman Catholic leanings.

## **WAG & LASTA**

A mountainous area in the north of Ethiopia, Lasta with its northern-most point of Wag, was a Christian region ruled by the Zagwe dynasty from 1150-1270. In 1270, Lasta came under the influence of Yekunno Amlak and the Shoan based monarchy. This was accomplished partly through marriage alliances between the ruling families of Shoa and Lasta, a connection that continued to bear considerable weight in the twentieth century personage of Ras Kasa Hailu<sup>134</sup>. Indeed, medieval 'Solomonic' kings, including Yekunno-Amlak (r.1270-85), Amda Seyon (r.1314-1344) and Lebna Dengel (r.1508-40) are either said to

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<sup>133</sup> See Pankhurst, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage," *ibid.*, pp. 207-209.

<sup>134</sup> Leul-Ras Kasa Hailu (1881-1956) was the son of Hailu Wold Kiros (half-brother of Emperor Tekle Giorgis) and Wzo. Tesseme Darge, the daughter of Darge Sahle Sellassie. He was a crown councillor with senior influence during Haile Sellassie's regime, and participated in the Italian-Ethiopian war as the commander of northern armies.

have married Lasta women themselves or given away their daughters to prominent local personalities there.<sup>135</sup>

Attempts to fully integrate Lasta into the Gondarine state began in the 16th century. Lebna Dengel was defeated by the Muslim leader Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim in 1533, who ruled the region for the next ten years. Here also, Imam Ahmad was said to have had relations with the sister of Lebna Dengel, a woman he had taken prisoner in the war. She bore him a son, Wagshum Askarajan I, who later married Lebna Dengel's daughter. Wagshum Askarajan died in the conflict around Imam Ahmad.<sup>136</sup>

With Gondar as administrative capital of the empire, the strategic position of Lasta was a source of concern to Gondarine rulers as was the relative isolation and spirit of independence of the region. Problems arose when Emperor Susenyos (r.1607-1632) attempted to introduce Catholicism and undermine the basis of local chiefs by appointing overlords. This resulted in strong resistance based in the Agaw population of Lasta and headed by Malke'a Krestos.<sup>137</sup> Armed conflict and unrest continued throughout the early 17th century until the reign of Emperor Fasiladas, who succeeded his father Susenyos on the Gondarine throne in 1632. Fasiladas killed Malke'a Krestos but the latter's son, Lake, took up the cause. A peaceful arrangement to the thirty-five year insurrection would not occur until 1657-58. Traditional sources record that Lake

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<sup>135</sup> Wudu Tafete's study of the regional history mentions the tradition of a marriage relation between the fifth generation descendant of Yekunno Amlak and the grand-daughter of a Wasum Jer Wassan, which may have strengthened the political position of the Wagshum family as a result. See Wudu Tafete, "A Political History of Wag and Lasta c. 1543-1919," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1995, p. 19.

<sup>136</sup> See Wudu, *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>137</sup> There were dynastic rivalries between Malke'a Krestos and Susenyos that continued with the latter's son, Fasiladas. Malke'a Krestos was the second generation descendant of Emperor Dawit (r. 1380-1412) whose royal line had been dispossessed and humiliated. See Wudu Tafete, *ibid.*, p. 27.

submitted of his own will and that Fasiladas promptly pardoned him and recognized him as ruler of Lasta.

To further strengthen the political arrangement, Fasiladas gave Lake the hand of his daughter Tawkelya for marriage. Even though this union was childless and lasted ten years until the death of Tawkelya Makan, it marked a lull in the tensions of the region. Lasta was recognized as part of the Ethiopian realm that in turn acknowledged the sovereignty of the emperor and paid tribute. Pankhurst notes that two nineteenth century travellers, James Bruce and A. B. Wyle, recount the period of peace and prosperity that ensued.<sup>138</sup>

In an insightful study of political history of the region, Wudu Tafete writes that Emperor Fasiladas continued to pursue resolving the problem of Lasta's integration through a series of intermarriages. Accordingly, he gave his daughters to notable personalities of the surrounding areas of Maqet, Sadaho and Wadla. Men who supported the emperor's military campaigns were awarded with marriage to imperial daughters.

An indication of the importance of these marriages is illustrated when a certain Dahna Sum ZaSellassie of western Bugna married a daughter of Fasiladas. ZaSellassie continued a romantic affair with Eskendera, the daughter of a powerful local chieftain Wagshum Gedewon even after the marriage. The princess discovered the illicit affair and returned to Gondar to the refuge of her father's house. Fasiladas ultimately sentenced ZaSellassie to death, although his office continued to pass to his descendants for many generations. Despite

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<sup>138</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "Wag and Lasta: An Essay in the Regional History of Ethiopia from the 14th Century to 1800," *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, University of Lund, 26-29 April 1982, p. 219.

such incidents, the policy of marriage alliances instituted by Fasiladas achieved the primary objective it sought: the stabilization of relations between Wag and Lasta and the royal court of Gondar.<sup>139</sup>

From around the last quarter of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries, the royal center continued its attempts to fully integrate Lasta into the Gondarine state. The power of the monarchy waned as religious controversy and internal struggles among the Gondarine rulers weakened the kingdom. In 1721, Bakaffa took to the throne and attempted to re-establish royal hegemony in Lasta. His main challenger was Gubala, the son and successor of Mahdara Krestos, who had challenged Bakaffa's grandfather, Yohannes I.<sup>140</sup>

Among the main reasons Bakaffa was especially threatened by Gubala's challenge was the fact that the latter was attempting to widen his network of political alliances through marriage alliances with members of Bakaffa's royal court in Gondar. Amha-lyassus, Bakaffa's governor of Bagemder, had given a daughter's hand in marriage to Gubala. The chronicler cited by Wudu even went as far as to accuse the governor of having his own designs on the Gondarine throne, an intention that would be bolstered by the marriage connection to Gubala. When Gubala asked for pardon in 1726, he returned the daughter of Amha-lyassus to her father, and gave his son Lebbe as hostage. Bakaffa sent father and son back to Lasta with the honor that reflected their influence in the region.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Wudu, *ibid.*, pp. 54-57.

<sup>140</sup> Wudu, *ibid.*, pp. 76-81.

<sup>141</sup> See Wudu, *ibid.*



It was not until the reign of Bakaffa's son, towards the middle of the eighteenth century, that full integration of Lasta into the Gondarine state was finally achieved. Marriage had played a key role in this process, sometimes tipping the political balance at critical historical junctures and other times strengthening alliances for several generations. Iyassu II led military expeditions into the Wagshum capital of Saqota with triumphant results. The local autonomy of the Wagshums was lost and undermined by appointees of the royal court in Gondar. The full incorporation of Lasta was also evident by the incorporation of Lastan soldiers as part of the Emperor's army at Gondar.

It is important to note that throughout the history of this region, marriage alliances provided critical leverage in politically volatile situations. Even when the union did not necessarily last, the above illustration indicates that marriage arrangements were an essential part of the process of political bargaining. At best, these attempts signalled the beginning of a mutually supportive potential. At worst, they were efforts to curb the ambitions of a possible enemy or foe.

Towards the middle of the 18th century, the emergence of Tigre in the north and Yajju in the southeast once again changed the nature of politics in the region. The Zamana Masafent, or Era of Princes (1766-1868) witnessed a different relationship of Wag and Lasta to the power center in Gondar. Between 1769 and 1868, the long-standing tensions between the monarchy and the nobility were resolved with the latter gaining an upper-hand in Gondarine politics.

This period is viewed by many traditional and Western scholars as one of general chaos and disruption of government order that was fueled by the

centrifugal forces of nobility against the power center. In contrast, Shiferaw Bekele presents, a compelling argument to suggest that the struggle of the nobility stemmed from wanting to overtake Gondarine politics rather than break away from it.<sup>142</sup> The most significant support to this argument is the rate and extent of marriage alliances that were created between the royal house in Gondar and the nobility who sought control.

The beginning of the Zamana Masafent was marked by the emergence of Ras Mikael Sihul of Tigre as a forceful personality who would appoint and demote puppet kings at will in the courts of Gondar in 1769. A brief consideration of his life and political involvement would serve to illustrate the complementary role of marriage alliances with attempts to heighten influence with the political center and alternately, the need of the center to create these networks for survival.

## **GONDAR & TIGRE**

Born in 1692, Mikael Sihul spent his early years in the service of the Sa'azagans family in Hamassen, who had themselves established important marriage links with Gondar royalty.<sup>143</sup> By around 1754, Mikael had gained dominance in the region with control over Indarta, Tamben, Adwa and Aksum. He expressed his loyalty and attained the recognition of Gondar as a potential ally against discontented chiefs. As a reward, Queen Mentewab gave her

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<sup>142</sup> Shiferaw Bekele's article re-examines the work of previous scholars in depicting the Zamana Masafent as a period of separatist tendencies by the nobility. He convincingly argues that the nobility were instead working within the same power framework to gain control of the political center in Gondar. Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate (1786-1853)" *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. 15, 1990.

<sup>143</sup> This brief biography relies on the work of Ismael Ali, "The Career of Mikael Sihul of Tigre (1692-1780)," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1972.

youngest daughter Alitash to Mikael's son, Wolde Hawariat in marriage. Mikael himself had asked for the hand of Walata Israel, another daughter of the Queen, but this was not seen appropriate due to the advanced age of Mikael. Mikael's intention of positioning himself in proximity to the royal court by marriage was nonetheless bearing fruit.<sup>144</sup>

Empress Mentewab who was Bakaffa's wife and later the regent-empress (1730-1769), was actively trying to strengthen the weakening power center by establishing marriage links with notable nobility. The daughter of a prominent family from the Qwaran district, Mentewab was faced with the difficult task of managing the hostile attitudes of chiefs from Gojjam, Lasta and Amhara against herself and her relatives. Linking her family to others of potential power was the only viable alternative to ceding political ground, and this was accomplished through a series of marriage arrangements between Minitwab's descendants and surrounding important families.

Under his mother's directions, the heir and son Iyasu II banished his former wife of royal Amhara background, and took on an Oromo wife by the name of Wabi. A daughter, Walata Israel was given to Yosedeq, thus creating links with Gojjam, although Yosedeq was also said to be Oromo in origin.<sup>145</sup> Another daughter, Aster, was married to Chariqin Nacho, the governor of surrounding peripheral districts. The Tuloma Oromo especially became a central

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<sup>144</sup> See Ismael Ali, *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>145</sup> She would later marry Dejazmach Goshu of Amhara, an important regional noble who was earlier married to Mikael's daughter, thus creating a political front with the latter.

feature of the royal family with descendants who could claim legitimate right to the throne.<sup>146</sup>

Mikael arrived in Gondar in 1755, soon after the death of Iyasu II who was succeeded by Iyoas (1755-1769). Cautiously watching the internal struggle over the question of succession in Gondar, Mikael emerged as the strong man in Tigre who would ultimately assist in containing political troubles in Gondar. He was promoted Ras by Emperor Iyoas and, as the only person who commanded an organized sizeable army at the time, proved to be an indispensable military ally against the rebelling chiefs.<sup>147</sup>

Iyoas was deposed with the skillful political maneuvering of Ras Mikael whose own choice of emperor, Yohannes II, was placed on the throne. This signaled the beginning of the era of king-makers in 1769 and the onset of the Zamana Masafent which was characterized by the authority of the king-maker to place his own puppet figure in position while remaining in the background. Yohannes II, a pious man who had led a religious life while imprisoned by his brother Emperor Bakaffa, was deemed unfit by conservative members of the Gondarine courts, due to the fact that he had lost one of his hands at his brother's orders when he tried to escape from prison.

With a constant eye to strengthening relations with family alliances to the royal center, Ras Mikael was undeterred and forced the marriage of Yohannes

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<sup>146</sup> See Ismael Ali, *ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>147</sup> Ismael Ali's study recounts that Ras Mikael harbored obvious contempt for the Oromo and was involved in a long clash with an Oromo chief, Maryam Barya. The latter was eventually killed by an uncle of the king, and his widow was left in the protection of Ras Mikael, whom she eventually married. This was an alliance that was disapproved by Emperor Iyoas, who understood that the destruction of an enemy had invited an opening that was filled by a potential competitor in Ras Mikael. Creating such links were obviously advantageous for the latter in his quest for influence in the Gondarine court. See *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

with his own grand-daughter, Walata Sellassie. Eventually, Yohannes did not prove as useful to Mikael as he had hoped so he poisoned him and prepared the 15 year-old son and successor, Takla Haimanot II (1769-1777) for the throne. Ras Mikael continued to build on his power base by marrying his descendants to surrounding nobility of influence. Hence, Dejach Wand Wassen, who had impressed the Ras with his military prowess, was appointed the Governor of Begemidir and was to be married to the grand-daughter of Ras Mikael, the daughter of Walda Hawaryat and princess Alitash. Dejach Goshu of Amhara was also married to a daughter of Ras Mikael.

It was these two chiefs that were called upon to campaign against a rebel, Fasil Warana, on behalf of Ras Mikael. Both chiefs ultimately decided to revolt against Mikael while the rebel decided to ask Mikael for reconciliation. This truce was marked by the marriage of Fasil to the grand-daughter of Mikael, Walata Sellassie. Ras Mikael agreed to this arrangement, and appointed his new son-in-law as governor of Macha, Agaw, Damot and Gojjam.

Mikael's power waned some time later and he lost his position of influence in clashes with the Gondarine king, Susenyos. Goshu was proclaimed Ras of Gondar and the last period of Mikael's life slipped into obscurity. He is said to have died in Adwa in 1780, and buried in a church in Dagna. Although Ras Mikael Sihul's dominance of central politics was short-lived, it was the most dramatic example of nobility exercising their power and ambitions in monarchical courts.

Particular to this study, it is significant to note the extent of marriage alliances that were initiated to create the necessary social and political context for the sharing of power. Thus despite the relative position of strength of Ras Mikael to Gondarine powers, he continued to create familial links with the royal center. Besides adding legitimacy to his actions, this would ensure that his descendants remained an integral part of the political framework. The larger implication was also that this elite group of actors, much like the consequent power elite, could claim descent from Gondar, Oromo, Tigre, Gojjam and Amhara.

#### **GONDAR & YAJJU**

The period between 1786 to the beginning of the 19th century has barely been studied by modern scholars, so only preliminary remarks can be made here based on an insightful article by Shiferaw Bekele on the social history in relation to elite families of the era.<sup>148</sup> In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a man by the name of Ali Gwangul, himself a king-maker and influential personality, took power in Gondar, initiating what came to be known as the Yajju dynasty.<sup>149</sup> Oromo and Muslim in origin, the Yajju ruled from Dabra Tabor in Gondar for the next eighty years. According to Shiferaw, the power elite that emerged from this period had two notable, if perhaps universal characteristics: first, the high level

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<sup>148</sup> Shiferaw Bekele, *ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Wudu's study indicates that before the Yajju rulers established themselves in Gondar, there was a period of Lastans emulating the actions of Mikael Sehul as decisive actors of imperial power. Dejach Wand Bawassan was one such figure, and his own descent from medieval emperors provided an added impetus to gain central place in the royal court of his ancestors. See Wudu *ibid.*, pp. 106-108.

of inter-relationship and second, continuity.<sup>150</sup> In practical terms, this meant that members of the provincial ruling houses of the Mamadoch family of Wara Himano and Wallo were intermarried with those of Semen, Yajju and Lasta.

One unique characteristic of the national elite of this period was the high level of intermarriage between Christian and Muslim families, consistent with the political arrangement. The religious homogeneity maintained to a large degree among the elite in the preceding or subsequent eras was here reconfigured to accommodate the hybrid reality. This strengthens the observation that the driving force behind the union of elite families may well be the converging of interests and values in relation to power.<sup>151</sup>

These marriage alliances also extended to Tigre and Shoa, thus creating a sizeable coalescence of northern families who shared certain aspirations, common value systems, self-interests and perceptions.<sup>152</sup> For instance, Ali I, his siblings and their descendants, could claim belonging and loyalty for Wallo, Yajju, Lasta, Gojjam, Semen and Tigre. These marriages occurred across regional, ethnic and sometimes linguistic boundaries no doubt expanding the parameters of identity.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> As indicated earlier, the term power elite is adopted here in the same vein as it is used by Shiferaw to mean princes, provincial governors, high court officials and high ecclesiastical dignitaries as well as the women in these families. See *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>151</sup> Despite the fact that the Christian Orthodox religion was the one most closely identified with the ruling elite, it is difficult to assume that this history of inter-married Muslim elite did not contribute and shape the larger group's legacy in some way that would require further investigation.

<sup>152</sup> The movement of professional soldiers, matchlockmen, and priests among these regions suggests that other groups besides the elite formed nationally integrated social units as well.

<sup>153</sup> As Wudu points out, the people of the borderlands between Wag and Tigre were bilingual, speaking both Agawenna and Tegrenna. The people of Lasta enjoyed greater linguistic, cultural and trade links with the Amharic speaking people of Bagemder and Wadla Dalanta, *ibid.*, p. 115.

## **Tewodros**

Although not studied as an important factor to his rise in power, the political career of Kasa, later Emperor Tewodros (r. 1855-1868) also involved marriage alliances. His early marriage was to Tewabech, variously described as the daughter or sister of Ras Ali, whose authority in Gondar was constantly challenged by his vassals.<sup>154</sup> By this act, Kasa was invited to “come in” to the fold thus declaring his loyalty and being forgiven for his past deeds as well as being offered appointment as governor of Qwara, his birthplace and land over which he had some inherited claim. This marriage did not stop Kasa from rebelling against the Ras and his mother, Empress Menen, and he emerged victorious from the struggle eventually being crowned under his throne name Tewodros in 1855.

In September of the previous year, Kasa confirmed his marriage with Tewabech by partaking of the Holy Communion with her.<sup>155</sup> European accounts paint a romantic albeit unconfirmed story of the meeting between Tewodros and Tewabech. She was captured by the enemy army of Egyptian Mohamed Ali who was fighting against her grandmother, Itege Menen, and rather than submit, had stabbed herself with a poison dagger. Tewodros rushed to her rescue, sucked the poison from her wound by his own lips, and fell in love with her. His request for her hand was turned down by Itege Menen, and it was not until the defeat of both Ras Ali and the Itege that Tewodros was able to bargain their release for the

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<sup>154</sup>As Sven Rubenson conveys, Tewabech is identified in oral traditions of Dembiya and the anonymous chronicle of Tewodros as both sister and daughter of Ali. Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University, 1966), p. 37.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.



hand of the princess.<sup>156</sup> Tewodros' love for and complete devotion to Tewabech is recounted by other contemporary travelers, and her calming effect on his fiery temperament lauded. His grief at her death in 1858 apparently left him inconsolable, driving him to drink and other women.<sup>157</sup>

From his survey of several European sources, Haile Gabriel Dagne cites that Tewodros was linked to several women: the daughter of Gobeze of Gojjam; Tewabech, the daughter of Ras Ali; Tiruwork (also referred to as Tirunesh), the daughter of Ras Wube and Yetemegnu, a Yajju Oromo widow. His marriage to Tewabech and Tiruwork are the ones most often mentioned, although other wives and concubines were said to have been present in his court. Despite the difficulty of exploring the nature of these marriages, one can easily observe the political significance of at least two of these connections. Both Tewabech and Tirunesh were from important Yajju and Semen families respectively, whose fathers were engaged in the power struggle of the 1840s and 50s and had allied against the then Kasa Hailu. Wube's own ambitions to the imperial throne were crushed by his defeat at the battle of Deresge in Semen in February 1855. Wube and his sons were imprisoned at Maqdala and freed briefly when Tewodros married Tirunesh in 1860.<sup>158</sup>

Wube was also the uncle of Taitu Betul who would become empress at Menilek's side in 1889. The importance of Semen and Yajju as regional powers

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<sup>156</sup> See Major Polson Newman's account in Haile Gabriel Dagne, "The Letters (1) of Emperor Teodros to Itege Yetemegnu," *Ethiopia Observer*, 7-8, 1963-64, p. 117.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Tirunesh/Tiruwork was the mother of Alemayehu, Tewodros's ill-fated son and heir, who was taken to England by the British army after the dramatic death of his father at Maqdala. His mother died near Chelicut, while accompanying her son, and Alemayehu himself died a few years later in England.

was apparent in both Tewodros' and Menilek's choice of wives. Also relevant to note is that while a prisoner at Maqdala, Menilek had been married to Alitash, the daughter of Tewodros. Tekle Tsadiq Mekuria writes that when Tewodros learned of Menilek's escape, he asked why he had not taken Alitash with him. This was taken to indicate Menilek's future as emperor and Tewodros's hope to continue imperial legacy through his progeny.

As late nineteenth and twentieth century family histories indicate, many Yajju and Semen descendants married Shoa nobles and royalty, directly reflecting the rise of Shoa as the center of the empire after the fall of Tewodros. Married to the consequent generations of this mixed group of elite families were political personalities who were instrumental in Menilek's rise to power. Among them were Dejazmach Girmame, Ras Makonnen, Ras Demissew and Dejazmach Wolde Hanna, who played important supportive roles at different stages of Menelik's reign.

Menelik's own marriage to Taitu marked a significant union between Shoa and the power elite of the preceding era. As has been discussed by various scholars, Empress Taitu, herself a seasoned designer of political marriages, was situated in the center of a potent network of regional elite families and support, owing to the fact that there was practically no ruling house to whom she was not related in some way. The combined effect of these marriage alliances was the creation and continuity of a power elite that provided the basis and peopled the frame of the political structure over several centuries.

## CHAPTER III

### EMPIRE BUILDING & MARRIAGE ALLIANCES UNDER MENILEK

The latter half of the nineteenth century continued to reflect the struggle for unification begun by Emperor Tewodros. The brief rule of Emperor Takla Giyorgis that followed, his overthrow by the man crowned Emperor Yohannes, and the growing influence of Menilek in Shoa, are all well documented in the historical narrative. Marriage alliances between and amongst the nobility of northern regions were built or broken in accordance with these political shifts.

#### **LASTA, GOJJAM, SHOA AND TIGRE: POWER STRUGGLES AND MARRIAGE HISTORY**

The tenuous reign of Wagshum Gobaze of Lasta who, upon the death of Tewodros at Maqdala, crowned himself Emperor Takla Giyorgis (1868-71), is illustrative of the importance of family alliances in power negotiations.<sup>159</sup> Takla Giorgis was faced with the same difficulties of regional unrest and religious divisions encountered by his predecessors. Soon after his crowning, three contenders to the throne emerged: Ras Adal Tassama, later Nigus Takla Haimanot from the central region of Gojjam; Kassa Mercha, later Emperor Yohannes IV, from Temben; and Nigus Menilek, who had escaped in 1865 from imprisonment by Emperor Tewodros in Maqdala and was expanding north into

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<sup>159</sup> Born around 1836, Wagshum Gobaze was the son of Wagshum Gebre Medhin whose mother was the daughter of Wagshum Kinfu. On his mother's side, Woizero Aitchesh was the descendant of Imete Yeworq Weha of Gaza and so able to claim Solomonic lineage, claims well supported in Europe. Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 21.

Wallo from his base in Shoa. Marriage alliances between the families of these three contenders and Emperor Takla Giyorgis's family were sought, most probably to mediate the potential threat of displacement for the emperor.

Early in his reign, the marriage of Menilek's cousin Tissime Darge to Wagshum Hailu in November 1868, provided a diplomatic front between Shoa and Lasta. Even before he became emperor, Takla Giyorgis appreciated the political potential of marriage alliances. To garner support in Gojjam, he arranged marriage between his maternal sister Beletech and Desta, the youngest son of Tedla Gualu, an early supporter of Takla Giyorgis and the rebel ruler of the region from 1855-67. Though initially submissive to the emperor, Desta soon after rebelled against Takla Giyorgis at the battle of Santera Meda, leaving the latter with little choice but to pursue and consolidate relations with the alternative, Adal. Adal Tassama, was appointed Ras by Emperor Takla Giyorgis in 1869 and given Gojjam, Damot and Agew Midir to govern. The emperor also gave him the hand of his sister, Wzo. Laqech Gebremedhin, in marriage.<sup>160</sup>

Where Takla Giyorgis's gamble with Adal appeared successful, he was soon faced with a more serious threat from Kassa Mercha. Takla Giyorgis's marriage to Kassa's only sister did not deter the latter's rebellion against the emperor. A decisive battle in 1871 found Kassa victorious and, the following year, he was crowned Emperor Yohannes IV. Born in 1831, Kassa Abba Bezbez

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<sup>160</sup> A brief look into the regional history of Gojjam preceding the rise of Ras Adal reveals the importance of marriage connections among local nobility. Until the middle of the 18th century, the rulers of Gojjam were imperial appointees of the Gondarine court. Under Emperor Iyasu (1730-55), Dejazmatch Yosedeq and Dejazmatch Worena governed Gojjam and Damot respectively. Yosedeq grew in strength and influence and soon declared himself independent of imperial authority. Because he would not submit, a marriage alliance forged the solution. Emperor Iyasu's sister, Walata Israel, duly married Yosedeq and their descendants continued to rule Gojjam and Damot well into the twentieth century.

was the son of Shum Temben Mercha and Wzo. Silas. His family ancestry could be traced to the prominent nobility of the region including Ras Mikael Sehul, Djz. Sibagadis and Ras Wolde Sellassie. Yohannes's authority was immediately challenged by some chieftains, and the loyalty of others was not readily forthcoming, leaving the emperor in an initially precarious position. Despite this, his political character as one satisfied with complete loyalty but indirect rule has been commented upon by scholars, and is indicated in his dealings with his vassals, Adal and Menilek.

Ras Adal Tassama, who had wagered his support on the side of Takla Giyorgis against Kassa, fled the scene in view of these political developments and was replaced by Desta who was biding his time and had allied himself with Kassa. It was not until June 1874 that Ras Adal came out of hiding to defeat and kill Desta and submit to Emperor Yohannes through the intervention of the clergy. Ras Adal was reinstated as the ruler of Gojjam and Damot, and continued to be a loyal vassal until the political dynamics shifted with the reckoning presence of Menilek of Shoa.

Menilek's success in Wallo signalled the strength of a potentially powerful rival to the throne. Emperor Yohannes's preoccupation with the impending Egyptian menace increasingly allowed both for internal ambitions to crystallize and lucrative political connections to be nurtured with external forces. Menilek advanced from Wore Illu, the garrison base he had founded in Wallo, through Begemidir en route to Gondar. Once again, the clergy intervened to divert a confrontation, this time between Yohannes and Menilek.

In March 1878, Menilek carrying the traditional stone of penitence, asked for forgiveness and swore his allegiance to Emperor Yohannes IV. Among the terms of what came to be known as the Leche Agreement were that Menilek was to use the title “King of Shoa” and not the previously purported “King of Kings” and would pay annual tribute and support the imperial army when in Shoa. In return, the Emperor willingly confirmed Menilek as the hereditary ruler of Shoa and agreed to protect him in the event of an incursion, as he would his other vassals.

Yohannes’s efforts to maintain a balance of military and political power between Menilek and Adal interfered with Menilek’s thinly veiled imperial design. The emperor increasingly favored Adal, drawing him into the family with the marriage of Yohannes’s nephew to Adal’s daughter in 1879, and Adal’s appointment soon after as Nigus of Gojjam and Kafa with the name Takla Haimanot in January, 1881. Menilek continued to challenge Takla Haimanot’s territorial holdings, until matters came to a head with the latter’s defeat at the Battle of Embabo the following year.

Yohannes, angered by the unrest caused by these rivalries, summoned Menilek and Takla Haimanot to Boru Meda to chide them for their actions and redefine their spheres of influence. To this end, Yohannes took Agew Midir from Gojjam and Wallo from Shoa. Menilek was further instructed to give up all the arms he had secured from the Battle of Embabo to Ras Alula, the trusted general of the emperor. Takla Haimanot was pardoned and the emperor returned all his confiscated arms. Both in military and political terms, this dealt a severe blow to

Menilek. The administration of Wallo was divided into two and given to Mohammed Ali (later Nigus Mikael) and to the emperor's young son, Ras Araya Sellassie. At this critical juncture, Yohannes proposed the marriage of this same son to Wzo. Zawditu, Menilek's daughter by his former wife.

Most accounts agree that the proposal was initiated by the emperor, adding to the plausibility of existing reasons. The first was that Yohannes wanted to soften the impact of his decisions at Boru Meda on Menilek's pride. A marriage alliance between the two families would indicate that they were potential partners in power. Other speculations include that Yohannes had hoped to create family links with Menilek<sup>161</sup>, quite possibly due to reasons of succession since Menilek did not have a male heir. Menilek's official chronicler, Tsehafi Tazaz Gebre Sellassie writes that the emperor was displeased with Menilek's actions in Wallo implying that this arrangement would help keep Menilek in proximity.<sup>162</sup> Each interpretation holds some truth and, taken in combination, confirm Menilek's significance as the impending successor to imperial authority.

Historians hint that the young age of Zawditu and Araya Sellassie, six and thirteen respectively, and the death of Araya five years later, made the marriage an event of symbolic union rather than a practical one. Despite his youth, Emperor Yohannes had entrusted Ras Araya Sellassie with the command of Wallo in 1882. His rule was termed "repressive" and fueled the revolt of local

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<sup>161</sup> Zawde Gebre-Sellassie, *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>162</sup> Tsehafi Tazaz Gebre Sellassie, *Tarike Zemen ZeDagmawi Menilek Niguse Negest ZeItyopia*, (Addis Ababa: Berhanenna Selam Printing Press, 1909 E.C.), p. 109.

rulers.<sup>163</sup> After his marriage to Zawditu, Ras Araya was transferred to Begemidir and Dambea in 1886 and remained as administrator there for two years.

Tsehafi Tazaz Gebre Sellassie writes that Menilek responded with some appreciation to Yohannes's proposal with: "It is only that the girl is too young for marriage, or this would not have displeased me." Yohannes rejoined that the children of kings should indeed be transported "... *bankelba bemadego*..." (in leather slings and carriers) to their destinies, and that the wedding should proceed.

Gebre Sellassie details an imaginative account of the preparations that followed. The heavens, it seemed, had blessed the union by sending a streaking star in the sky. A large canvassed area was leveled and carpeted with a curtained section prepared for the throne and attendants trained to be waiting on the guests. Adorned in gifts of beautifully fashioned and embroidered clothes, the royal entourage completed the stage set for the ceremony to take place. On Sunday Tir 13 (Feb 1883), festivities commenced with full *gibir* or royal feast for the armies. Ras Araya received gifts of different armaments, clothes, soldiers, tents and gold.

The next morning, the celebration continued until noon, when the bride prepared to leave for her new home. A twelve gun salute and the rumbling sound of drums signaled the occasion, as Zawditu emerged accompanied by beautiful attendants adorned in gold and silver. A basket covered with an intricately embroidered skirt was carried in front of this group that followed singing, and showering religious blessings for the union.

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<sup>163</sup> Bahru Zawde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974*, (London: James Currey Ltd., 1991), p. 49.



The marriage between Araya Sellassie and Zawditu was important in the indirect way it recompensed Menilek for losing Wallo, the same region to be governed by his new son-in-law. His letter to Emperor Yohannes details his sentiments:

“... soon again, when you said; ‘I have taken Wollo and wish to be its Apostle,’ I said I would be sorry if you were to give it to Ras Mikael, while I would be pleased to hand it to your Majesty.

When later it was given to Ras Araya, I told myself that it had gone into the family, as the saying goes, ‘When the calf milks the cow, it only returns to the stomach,’ and was therefore pleased.”<sup>164</sup>

The young couple’s marriage ended in 1888 when Emperor Yohannes returned from a campaign against encroaching Italians at Saati, and Ras Araya died from his affliction with smallpox on 12th June. Zawditu stayed a few more months and returned in November to her father’s court in Shoa. That same year, Menilek and Takla Haimanot secretly joined forces against Yohannes. The emperor’s sense of betrayal at his two vassals was apparent in the vengeance his troops unleashed on Gojjam. His anger was further fueled by the failure of his more lenient policies towards Takla Haimanot, who had counted on Menilek’s support in this venture, and when it was not forthcoming, had eventually submitted to Yohannes.

In the meantime, Menilek continued to cause unrest in Yohannes’s territory by involving Italians and appearing to mobilize his army to defend Shoa

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<sup>164</sup> Letter from King Menilek to Emperor Yohannes cited in Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *ibid*, Appendix C. The letter is dated 10 Tir 1881 E.C. (January 1889) and is quoted from a manuscript by Herui Wolde Sellassie’s “History of Ethiopia.”

against the emperor. One written source evokes the reaction of a traumatized eleven-year old Zawditu to this politically volatile situation. In grief-stricken words, she implored her father not to confront Emperor Yohannes for had her husband, Ras Araya Sellassie, been alive, this impending war would never have been provoked. According to the story, when word of her grief reached the ears of Yohannes, he himself cried fresh tears for his son.<sup>165</sup>

In February 1889, Emperor Yohannes died in a military expedition against the Mahdists at Matamma. Menilek promptly pronounced himself emperor and successor to Yohannes and was crowned in November. His former rival and sometime ally, Nigus Takla Haimanot, though weakened by the armed ventures he undertook in Kafa, pledged allegiance to Menilek.

#### **SHOA & TIGRE: MARRIAGE RELATIONS AND POLITICAL HISTORY AFTER YOHANNES**

In the years between 1889 and 1894, Mengesha Yohannes, the emperor's heir, often under the mentorship of Ras Alula, continued to struggle for local control and autonomy from Menilek who made little effort to bestow the coveted title of Nigus on the Tigrean prince. Menilek's attempt to send his own appointee, Dejazmach Seyoum Gabre Kidan, a nephew of Emperor Yohannes, as overlord of Tigre failed in its aim of establishing Shoan authority.<sup>166</sup> All parties involved - rival Tigrean chiefs, Mengesha and Menilek - actively sought Italian support for political and military leverage. From their base in Eritrea, Italian

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<sup>165</sup> Merse Hazan Wolde Kirqos, *Ye Zemen tarik Tezitaye be Negeste Negest Zawditu Zemena Mengist*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1938 E. C., Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, p. 523.

<sup>166</sup> Dejazmach Seyoum Abba Gobeze was the son of Emperor Yohannes's sister Dinqinesh who was previously married to Emperor Takla Giyorgis, followed by Ras Bitwoded Gabre Kidan.

officials deployed their divide and rule tactics alternately drawing Tigre and Shoa to their side as they explored options of expansion from the north.

Marriage continued to play an important role both in attempts to bridge internal rivalries, and after 1894, in drawing the ruling house of Tigre closer to that of Shoa. In 1892, with intent of guiding local politics towards Tigrean unity under Ras Mengesha's and Alula's cause, the latter wed his niece Wzo. Shoanesh to Dejazmach Sebhat Aregawi and his daughter Wzo. Demekech to Sebhat's brother, Dejazmach Abbay. Within Tigre, in the spirit of forgiveness and future co-operation, Mengesha's daughter Attenesh was wed to Abreha Hagos in 1897 to pardon Ras Hagos for his collaboration with Italy. This created a critical temporary rapprochement for Mengesha and secured Tamben for Abreha.<sup>167</sup>

Because of his political and military leadership and perhaps as a mark of their friendship, Emperor Yohannes had previously ordered the marriage of Ras Alula to his 19 year-old niece Amsalu, the daughter of the emperor's uncle Ras Araya Dimtsu in 1878.<sup>168</sup> Ras Alula had begun his service as a follower in the courts of Ras Araya in the late 1860s. The marriage occurred when Alula's indispensable command and loyalty was demonstrated in the north at a time when Yohannes was pre-occupied by religious and political problems in Shoa, Gojjam and Wallo. Despite its potential, according to Ras Alula's political biography, the marriage and the Ras' affection for his new wife did not afford him

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<sup>167</sup> Mekonnen Berhane, "A Political History of Tigre: Shawa Centralization versus Tigrean Regionalism (1889-1910)," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1994, p. 75.

<sup>168</sup> It is worth noting here that Menilek's foremost general, Ras Gobena Daci, was also linked by marriage to the imperial family. This was Ras Alula's second marriage, the first being to Bitwata, a farmer's daughter from Tamben and the mother of his 3 daughters. Haggai Erlich, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa*, (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996), p. 22.

acceptance by the Tigrean hereditary elite, nor was Yohannes able to provide him with gult or territorial fief lands to expand his power.<sup>169</sup> Alula's humble background as a son of a farmer kept him, in many ways, an outsider.

In June 1894, frustrated by Italian reticence, Ras Mengesha and his entourage arrived in Addis Ababa to submit to Menilek. The emperor granted his pardon at the traditional ceremony of penitence by the Tigrean nobles who returned after pledging allegiance and accepting Menilek's demands, among which were the renewal of Zawditu's crown grant over Enderta bestowed to her by Emperor Yohannes at the time of her marriage to his son. Although property rights granted during elite marriages has not been studied in detail, no doubt it was an important aspect of political and economic negotiations.<sup>170</sup> Contrary to his expectation, the crown of Tigre was not granted to Ras Mengesha partly because Empress Taitu had taken an active interest in northern politics, and had an eye on the crown for her brother Ras Wole. Upon his return to Tigre, Ras Mengesha fought against Italians in June 1895, playing an important political and military role preceding the Battle of Adwa.

The attempt to secure Ras Mengesha's allegiance not surprisingly led to a marriage between him and Taitu's niece, Wzo. Kefei Wele, an arrangement whereby the empress' initial impulse to appoint her brother to Tigre were cleverly resolved. In June 1896, Mengesha was ordered to divorce his wife to whom he

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<sup>169</sup> The Tigrean ruling class derived its power from hereditary land rights in combination with imperial office. Erlich, *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>170</sup> In his work on land and property in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, Donald Crummey makes such references to land endowed upon the occasion of elite or royal marriages. See Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia – from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

was attached, and marry Kefei, who was also quickly divorced from her husband Nadew Tassama for this occasion.<sup>171</sup> Menilek's chronicler Gebre Sellassie devotes a short paragraph to Ras Mangasha's appointment to Tigre after Adwa which according to him, was followed by the Ras' request to be granted a wife from the imperial court. Menilek complied and oversaw the marriage before he returned to Shoa having seemingly settled matters in the north.<sup>172</sup>

Quite obviously, the marriage of Mengesha and Kefei was an effort to draw the northern region closer to the center by strengthening control. At first interpretation, this would seem an alliance between the Shoan and Tigrean royal families. Although regional power and identity were strongly pronounced on particular occasions, relations among the elite continued to weave the matrix of an increasingly shared identity in proximity to power. Thus, though Kefei Wele would have claimed Yajju, Semen and Lasta as the land of her ancestors, she represented the Shoan court in this alliance and remained a devoted wife and mother of their three daughters even during his imprisonment. This arrangement may not have yielded the desired political outcome of Ras Mengesha's acceptance of imperial rule and he was soon after imprisoned in Ankober where he died in 1906. What lay beyond the success or failure of such marriage alliances was the increasingly widening network of elite families and the often accompanying complexity of layered identities.

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<sup>171</sup> Mengesha's first wife, Tewabech Wolde-Gabriel, is said to have had links to the royal house of Fasil in Gondar and is also described as the daughter of the hereditary chief of Agewmidir. She was the mother of Seyoum Mengesha (1887-1960). Prouty, *Empress Taytu*, *ibid.*, p.114 and Hadera Tesfaye, "Ras Seyoum Mengesha, 1887-1960," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1994.

<sup>172</sup> Gebre Sellassie, *ibid.*, p. 269.

Nineteen months of rule of Tigre by Ras Makonnen, the emperor's cousin, followed while rebellions against Ras Mengesha's imprisonment continued, led by his son Seyoum and his nephew, Gugsa Araya Sellassie. Ras Makonnen then appointed Dejazmach Gebre Sellassie governor of Adwa in northern Tigre shortly before he himself was replaced as overlord by Ras Wele, who was Ras Mengesha's father-in-law and who shared a dislike of Ras Makonnen with his sister, empress Taitu.

In 1902, Tigre was divided into three governorships ruled by Gebre Sellassie, Abraha Araya and Shum Agame Desta Sibhat. Of these, Gebre Sellassie would emerge a key figure in central and regional politics. He traced his ancestry from an important family in Tigre, that of Shum Agame Woldu who was also an ancestor of Emperor Yohannes. His father, B'arya Gabir, enjoyed a close friendship with Emperor Tewodros who had allegedly proposed B'arya Gabir's marriage to his daughter, and is also said to have aided Menilek in his escape from Maqdala.<sup>173</sup>

Gebre Sellassie's early political life included service to the Italian cause from which he constantly defected, and intermittent disaccord with Ras Mengesha whom he eventually challenged. With his appointment as governor of the richest northern area by Makonnen, Gebre Sellassie was launched into his role as indispensable member of the central government. He was active both in managing the internal affairs of Tigre and facilitating diplomatic efforts between

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<sup>173</sup> B'arya Gabir joined the court of Emperor Yohannes after the death of Tewodros and was given sizeable territory to rule. He died at the Battle of Matamma fighting besides Yohannes. Tshaye Haile, "A short biography of Dejazmach B'arya Gabir, 1873-1930," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1972.

Eritrean and Ethiopian authorities, a position to which he was ideally suited due to his previous experience as *basha* or native officer under Italian command.

In 1903, following a year of unprecedented peace in Tigre, Gebre Sellassie strengthened his ties to the imperial court further by complying to Menilek's wishes that he marry a beautiful grand niece, Wzo. Amarech Walelu.<sup>174</sup> Carlo Annaratone, an Italian traveler reports Menilek's words to Amarech who was already married at the time:

"You will abandon your husband and daughter and go as a bride to Dejazmach Gebre Sellassie, my governor of Tigre. I give you this as a sign of my great imperial attention and benevolence, putting you at the side of a great, rich and potent region."<sup>175</sup>

Gebre Sellassie was given wedding gifts of 150 slaves, 20 horses, 1, 500 guns and 20, 000 talers. Sebastiano Martini, the Italian governor of Eritrea observed how Gebre Sellassie referred to Ammarech with deference as "my lady" and not "my wife". Upon inquiry, he was told by Ras Abreha Araya nephew of Emperor Yohannes to whom Gebre Sellassie was also related, that this was because Wzo. Ammarech outranked Dejazmach Gebre Sellassie.<sup>176</sup>

Secure with the support and affection of Menilek, Gebre Sellassie was able to garner the peaceful submission of Dejazmachs Seyoum and Gugsu, long-time dissenters of central authority, in 1903. Seyoum was appointed to a sizeable area to govern in exchange for his loyalty thereafter. Gugsu was sent to

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<sup>174</sup> Wzo. Ammarech was the daughter of Wzo. Semaetwa, grand-daughter of Nigus Sahle Sellassie, therefore a niece to Ras Wolde Giorgis and cousin to Ras Makonnen and Menelik.

<sup>175</sup> See Mekonnen Berhane, "A political history of Tigre: Shoan centralization versus Tigrean regionalism, 1889-1910," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, June 1994, and Tsehaye Haile, *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>176</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 264.

Wellegga under Ras Demissew, where he remained until 1916 and his eventful return to the political scene. As political concerns flared and Abatad in the north, the internal mechanisms of strengthening alliances through marriage continued to cast networks amongst the subsequent generation. Tigrean presence at the imperial court remained a feature of politics into the twentieth century. Through the marriages of Ras Mengesha, Dejach Gebre Sellassie and other marital arrangements engineered by Empress Taitu, the nobility of Tigre, Gondar, Lasta and Shoa mixed to form a recognizable elite unit.

## **THE RULING FAMILIES OF WELLEGGGA**

### **Background**

Nineteenth century power in the western province of Wellegga was situated in two main centers that created hereditary monarchical structures over surrounding small independent kingdoms. The rule of the Bakare family was established in Leqa Neqamte by Moroda Bakare while to the south west of Neqamte, Dejazmatch Jote Tullu governed Leqa Qellem and its neighboring lowlands bordering Illubabor and Sudan.<sup>177</sup> Consistent with similar regional patterns in the mid 1800's, the traditional Gada system was beginning to weaken and give way to influential war figures and men of authority.<sup>178</sup>

Although it may have been founded by ancestors that preceded him, a man named Amo is credited for founding the ruling house of Naqamte in the first

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<sup>177</sup> Present day Wellegga was divided during the reign of Emperor Menilek into more than three territories. Wellegga proper was governed by Dejazmatch later Ras Demessiew Nasibu; the Bakare family ruled the two halves of Leqa, split by the Didesa river; Qellam was governed by Dejazmach Jote. See Bairu Tafla, "Four Ethiopian Biographies," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 2, July 1969, pp. 11-13.

<sup>178</sup> The Gada system was the prevalent social framework based on generation-grading which produced a warrior class among the Oromo. Bakare is said to have been elected as the "physically perfect" man to bless Gada convocation. He was invited to ask for anything he desired in exchange for the blessing, and requested a forest from which he made money from hunting, charging people for grazing their animals and from producing honey. Bairu Tafla, *ibid.*



half of the nineteenth century. Amo had two sons, Bararti and Godana who in turn had two sons, Jijo and Bakare, respectively. Bakare rose in rank, extending the family's sphere of rule and unifying the area.<sup>179</sup> Moroda succeeded Bakare upon his death in 1868 and was reputedly welcoming to outsiders who came to his region for trade and work. When Ras Daraso arrived from Gojjam in the late 1870's on behalf of Nigus Takla Haimanot, Moroda decided to avoid bloodshed and to submit peacefully. Impressed by his action, Ras Daraso asked to become Moroda's godfather following the latter's baptism.<sup>180</sup>

Moroda further negotiated rule of his own territory in exchange for remaining neutral in the struggle between Nigus Takla Haimanot and Menilek, both of whom contested Oromo territories seeking to extend their influence and partake in the wealth of the region. The earlier claims of Gojjam soon gave way to Shoan primacy. Menilek promoted Moroda to Dejazmach and a complex relationship developed between them largely predicated upon the government's desire to control the region's economic riches in the form of tributary payments.<sup>181</sup>

Even though there was implicit imbalance, Wellegga had a measure of local autonomy which allowed Moroda, and later his son, to follow their own

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<sup>179</sup> He had around thirteen children among whom Amante and Moroda were important actors in subsequent occurrences. Amante was the father of Blat. Deressa, the progressive intellectual of Haile Sellassie's era. Blat. Deressa had also enjoyed close relations with Lij Iyasu.

<sup>180</sup> The details of Moroda's and Darasso's interaction can be found in Terefe Woldetsadik, "The Unification of Ethiopia (1880-1935): Wellegga," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6 (68), pp. 73-86.

<sup>181</sup> For more on the relationship between Moroda and Menilek, see Alessandro Triulzi, "Nekemte and Addis Abeba: Dilemmas of Provincial Rule," in Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

expansive pursuits so long as they did not threaten imperial interests.<sup>182</sup> Moroda died around 1889 and was succeeded by his eighteen year-old son Kumsa who, following ecclesiastical education, was baptized Gebre Egziabher with Menilek as his godfather in 1888. Dejach Gebre Egziabher took active interest in the development of his region, was liberal in thought and humanitarian in action.<sup>183</sup> Until his death from diabetes in 1923, relations with Menelik were stable with Gebre Egziabher remaining loyal if somewhat aloof from central politics and drawing from his rich governate to pay the annual tribute in gold and ivory.

Born in June 1910 in Neqemte, Habte Mariam inherited his father's governorship soon after. From the age of seven, Habte Mariam had church education supervised by Gojjame priests who had migrated to Wellegga. Along with other children of nobility and their servants, Habte Mariam also had early instruction in French and English which no doubt influenced his cosmopolitan taste in clothes and food. In 1924, Dejazmach Habte Mariam and his entourage traveled to the capital to have his hereditary rule sanctioned by imperial decree. This was planned to pre-empt regent Ras Tafari's intention to appoint his son-in-law, Ras Desta Damtew as administrator of Wellegga and direct its rich resources towards the capital. Meanwhile, Habte Mariam, with his background in French and court procedures, was to remain in Addis Ababa as a salaried functionary of the imperial court. Tafari's plans were countered by Empress

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<sup>182</sup> Based upon the exchange of correspondence between Moroda and the central government from the mid-1890's and the early 1920's, Alessandro Triulzi reconstructs the complexity of this center-periphery relationship. He convincingly illustrates that such a relationship could only be understood within the particular matrix of time, space and political convenience. See Alessandro Triulzi, *ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Gebre-Egziabher abolished forced labor and was against the slave trade. He planted coffee trees and ordered the building of the bridge over Didesa, the largest river of Wellegga. See Bairu Tafla, *ibid.*, p. 13.

Zawditu who successfully supported imperial sanction based on her own affinity to the family through the god-parent relationship of Menilek to Dejach Gebre-Egziabher, Habte Mariam's father.

### **Family Histories and Marriages**

What is available on the histories of the ruling family of Wellegga suggest a measure of inter-marriage with neighboring nobility. Of Bakare's grandchildren, Gebre Egziabher married a woman named Wzo. Qenatu (christened Wzo. Walata Giyorgis), who was the daughter of an important family residing northwest of Nekemte, between Najo and Gimbi. She would later become the mother of Dejazmach Habte Mariam. Bakare's grand-daughter, Do'ee, married Dejazmach Jote Tulu. This connection was critical in consolidating a political front between the two centers of power in Wellegga.

More detailed information is available on the twentieth-century marriage history of Dejazmach Habte Mariam.<sup>184</sup> He married his first wife who was from the Aria clan of the Oromo, and soon divorced her as she could not bear children. In quick succession, he then married Wzo. Taitu, a woman from Anfillo, a neighboring kingdom with distinct linguistic and religious roots.<sup>185</sup> Six months later, Habte Mariam divorced and married a third wife from Najo where he had been to visit the region of the new bride's father. One week later, she was replaced by a certain divorcee, Wzo. Atsede Tegegn.

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<sup>184</sup> The first part of this description relies on Kebede Kejela, "A Biography of Dejazmach Habte Mariam Gebre-Egziabher," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1989: 18-25. The description of Habte Mariam's wedding to Wzo. Yeshimebet is taken from an interview of a principal historical actor in this narrative. (Informant 2, 1997).

<sup>185</sup> See Dejazmach Jote Tulu's section below.

Because Wzo. Atsede was divorced, the relationship was deemed inappropriate by custom and the courtship remained secret until their eventual marriage. Wzo. Atsede was from Gojjam, and was the sister of the wife of Habte Mariam's official, Fitawrari Qan'a Abbalikassa, with whom Habte Mariam had disagreements. This marriage was a conciliatory arrangement designed to bring about a truce. Although she was the mother of his first son, Habte Mariam was persuaded by his advisors to send his wife away for fear that she might poison him to favor her brother-in-law. About a year after his marriage to another woman named Shashitu Dinq of Haru, Dejazmach Habte Mariam prepared to welcome his new bride, Wzo. Yeshimebet Guma, with more pomp and ceremony than previously seen.<sup>186</sup> This marriage marked a monogamous change in Dejazmach Habte Mariam and carried significant political weight in the region due to the importance of Wzo. Yeshimebet's family.

Wzo. Yeshimebet's grandfather was Dejazmach Jote Tullu, the head of the ruling family in Qellam, the other power center of Wellegga.<sup>187</sup> His ambition to become the primary leader of the region was evident in his expansion over neighboring territories of Gidami, Horro, Saye, Dare, Lale and Aira.<sup>188</sup> Around 1886, Jote submitted peacefully to Nigus Menilek and became his autonomous

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<sup>186</sup> None of the marriages thus far seem to have been formal or traditionally arranged. Instead, the father of the potential bride was sent for, and since marrying with the ruling family was desired, consent was assumed in most cases. The women were often sent away with provisions and slaves. Kebede Kejela, *ibid.*, pp. 19-24.

<sup>187</sup> The origins of Dejazmach Jote's family is said to be Gojjam, seven generations removed. Although not conclusively proven, there are repeated claims both in written and oral traditions to make this noteworthy. See Bahru Zewde, "Biography of Dejazmach Jote Tulu (1855-1918)," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1970. This claim is refuted by Tsegaye Namarra in his work on regional history. See Tsegaye Namarra, "Power Consolidation over Conquered Territories: The case of Wollega," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1973.

<sup>188</sup> Bahru Zewde notes that it is unclear if this expansion took the form of military incorporation or peaceful submission. See *ibid.*, p. 11.

vassal with the rank of Dejazmach. In this mutually beneficial relationship, Jote relied on Menilek for firearms, and Menilek on Jote for local power. Jote also converted to Christianity although he did not change his name as did his counterpart, Kumsa, in Neqemte.<sup>189</sup> His family members were involved in the administration of Qellem and they served as war council, political advisors, and rulers over newly conquered areas as necessary.

As was occurring in regions further north and east, Jote created links with families of importance in the immediate vicinity. Of particular strategic significance was his marriage to Do'ee, Gebre-Egziabher's sister and the daughter of Moroda from Leqa Neqemte.<sup>190</sup> Securing such family relations strengthened the political ties of the two governorships and gave unified frame to their affiliation.<sup>191</sup> Marriage relations also extended to neighboring Anfillo where Jote's expansion was met with strong resistance. Anfillo was a monarchical kingdom that retained linguistic and religious connections with the Sidama and was ruled by the Busasi aristocracy headed by Kajela Abba Ghimbi.<sup>192</sup> Notwithstanding the resistance, Jote continued military expeditions while trying to draw Anfillo closer into his realm by marrying the daughter of the ruling family, Wzo. Menkele Akayu.

The desired result of peace and submission remained elusive, and despite attempts to temper the growing animosity, the situation worsened. In a renewed

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<sup>189</sup> The younger members of the royal family did take on names reflecting Christian Amhara influence. Their Oromo names of Adaba, Gemechu, Oda and Chala were changed to Solomon, Yosef, Yohannes and Belete. See Bahru Zewde, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>190</sup> According to Informant 2., they had three or four children.

<sup>191</sup> Bahru Zewde notes that Jote had four wives in 1881 and the numbers may have increased later. They were named Ghifare, Tife, Unke and Chenete with Ghifare being senior. It is unclear if these were serial or simultaneous arrangements. See *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>192</sup> Bahru notes that this was a hereditary monarchy with its own symbol of succession. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

effort to suppress the revolt, Dejazmach Jote killed seven members of the ruling family, all of whom were brothers of his wife. One can only imagine the traumatic toll this took on Wzo. Menkele, and her refusal to ever discuss it even with her grandchildren indicated the price political marriages exacted in human terms.<sup>193</sup>

Heeding complaints from Anfillo and charges of insubordination, Menilek imprisoned Jote in Addis Ababa for about five years until 1913, when he was freed upon the accession of Lij Iyasu. As noted by Iyasu's chronicler Aleqa Gebre Egziabher, the heir apparent had married Jote's daughter, Askale, by common-law ceremony, thus marking a brief reversal of Jote's fate and an early marriage link to the power center. According to this same chronicler, Lij Iyasu's proposal to marry Wzo. Dasshe, the daughter of Dejach Kumsa (Gebre Egziabher), was not approved on grounds of the god-parent relationship of Menilek to Gebre Egziabher.<sup>194</sup>

Wzo. Yeshimebet, the new bride of Dejazmach Habte Mariam, was raised by her grandmother this same Wzo. Menkele, who arranged for the ceremony. This marriage would mark a third generation connection between Qellem and Leqa Neqemte, and an indirect link between Leqa Neqemte and Anfillo with obvious political merits. As a first hand account of such a marriage ceremony, it is worth considering the following description in full.

Wzo. Yeshimebet was twelve years of age when she was selected to be Dejazmach Habte Mariam's wife, the one with whom he vowed to turn a new

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with Informant 2, 1997. Wzo. Menkele died in the 1950's E.C. and had become a nun by then.

<sup>194</sup> Askale Jote is listed as one of Lij Iyasu's ten wives in the chronicle. Aleka Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas, *Prowess, Piety and Politics - The Chronicle of Abeto Iyasu and Empress Zewditu of Ethiopia (1909-1930)*, ed. and transl. by Reidulf K. Molvaer, (Germany: Rudiger Koppe Verlag Koln, 1994), p. 336 and p. 359.

leaf. He sent a letter through his trusted confidante, Kegnazmach Ferenji to Dejazmach Jote, asking for the hand of any available relative for marriage. The young Wzo. Yeshimebet was overlooked by her grandfather who sent Ferenji to other households for his quest. Meanwhile, both Ferenji and Dejach Habte Mariam had decided that no matter how long negotiations took, Yeshimebet was the chosen bride. In a creative effort to persuade Dejach Jote of his compatibility, Dejach Habte Mariam sent another group from Neqemte with a photograph of himself a few years younger and an accompanying letter that read: "You say that your daughter is too young for marriage, I also am a young boy and we will grow up together."

Wzo. Menkele would not be rushed in deciding her grand-daughter's future, weighing out her youthful vulnerability and possible isolation once she left home. In the meantime, the new emissary group dressed in their finest clothes, asked to meet Yeshimebet who appeared in her cloak from behind drawn curtains. They rose to greet her, which indicated that despite her young age she was destined to an important future. Though aware of the proposal, Yeshimebet was understandably afraid, taking refuge in the deliberately loud consolation she overheard from a relative: "Unless she's thinking of taking off with them, we certainly are not giving her away."

Dejazmach Habte Mariam's messengers continued their courtship with more visits and negotiations until Wzo. Menkele relented and the date was set for Yeshimebet's ceremony for departure. Yeshimebet then began the eleven day mule-back journey to her new home and husband in Leqa Neqemte. Restricted

from drinking water from the Didesa river for fear of malaria and limited to traveling at night for perhaps the same reason, the likely exhausted Yeshimebet was met and escorted by Fitawrari Istifanos Beshah, who came with a beautifully decorated mule, her wedding attire, and fresh provisions, for the last stretch of her journey.

She arrived in Neqemte in February 1920 (Ethiopian Calendar) to the celebrations already in progress and received her blessings with her nineteen-year old groom. True to his word, Dejazmach Habte Mariam wasted no time in hiring a woman to instruct Yeshimebet, who already knew how to read, in church education.<sup>195</sup> Thus began her new life which lasted until 1937 and the death of Dejazmach Habte Mariam. Wzo. Yeshimebet and the descendants Wellegga nobility remained a part of the power elite by inter-marrying with the imperial family and contributing in various capacities as active and distinguished members of Haile Sellassie's government.

#### **ELITE FAMILIES OF GOJJAM**

In Gojjam, north of Shoa, Nigus Takla Haimanot's death in 1902 marked the end of the reign of one of the last provincial kings of Ethiopia. Menilek divided the kingdom of Gojjam into three administrative units thereby effectively consolidating his power over the entire region. These units were to be governed by three men directly responsible to him. They were Dejach Seyoum for Gojjam, Ras Mengesha Atikem for Damot, and Dejach Demissie for Agew Midir.

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<sup>195</sup> Her instructor's name was Adi Aster and she was a student of Onesimus Nesibu, the man who had translated the Bible to Oromo. According to Informant 2, there was a conscious effort to ensure that women in both Dejazmach Jote's and Dejazmach Habte Mariam's household learned rudimentary reading and Bible recitation. Wzo. Yeshimebet had first learned to read in her native Oromo, then in Amharic.



Although Gojjam as a regional power was permanently weakened thereafter, its importance at the center continued as illustrated by the family histories and marriage patterns of elite families. Based on the most complete primary documentation, one case worth examining in detail is provided in Ras Mengesha Atikem's family history. He grew in prominence during Menilek's reign, and his descendants entered elite circles largely through intermarriage and without prior claims of blood links to the traditional royal house of Gojjam (descendants of Nigus Takla Haimanot).

Ras Mengesha was linked to three different women in his lifetime, two of Shoan background, one from Wallo. His first marriage was to Wzo. Tenagne Walata Rufael, a descendant to Sahle Sellassie, his second to Wzo. Sifrashbizu Yifru, and his third to Wzo. Debitu Ali from Wallo.<sup>196</sup> While these marriages were not particularly noticeable for their political intent, each of his children widened the network and produced descendants of key prominence. Thus Ras Kebede Mengesha was married to Empress Taitu's niece Mentewab Wele, then to Emperor Menilek's grand-niece, Astede Asfaw.<sup>197</sup> Askalemariam Mengesha married the last scion of the ruling house of Gojjam, Ras Seyoum Takla Haimanot (later named Ras Hailu), and gave birth to Seblewongel who went on to marry Lij Iyasu.

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<sup>196</sup> Wzo. Sifrashbizu Yifru was the mother of Ras Mulugeta Yigezu (one of Menilek's generals) from an earlier marriage. Ras Mulugeta's daughter Yeshiworq married Dejach Gebre Egziabher, the son of Empress Menen's brother. They had Li'ilt Zuryashqorq who became the wife of Leul Ras Asrate Kassa.

<sup>197</sup> Astede Asfaw was later married to Ras Seyoum Mengesha. Mentewab Wele's first marriage was to Ras Makonnen. Her daughter with Ras Kebede, Wzo. Tsigemariam went on to marry Dejach Desta Gabru, Ras Makonnen's nephew.

Ras Mengesha's two daughters from his second union branched out to further extend links. Wzo. Laketch Mengesha married Gebre Rufael the son of Ras Gobena, her father's colleague in Menilek's court. Their daughter, Wzo. Tsigemariam, was the wife of Ras Imru, the progressive intellectual, close confidant and cousin of Emperor Haile Sellassie. The young and shy looking Wzo. Wesenyelesh Mengesha married General Abebe Damtew and had three daughters, one of whom married the Crown Prince Asfa Wossen Haile Sellassie. Wzo. Zawditu the daughter from Ras Mengesha's third marriage was the first wife of Ras Makonnen Indalkachew, a prominent member of Haile Sellassie's court. Descendants of this extended family thus had links from Gojjam to Yajju, Wallo , Shoa and Shoa Oromo and continued to be active participants in the social and political events of the following century.

### **ELITE FAMILIES OF SHOA**

Shoan elite families of this period were a mixed group who traced their ancestry from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Shoan king Sahle Sellassie, or individuals who had distinguished themselves through service to Emperor Menilek. Conforming to Empress Taitu's design, most of Sahle Sellassie's descendants were married to her relatives, considerably widening the social base of the political center. Thus Ras Makonnen Wolde Mikael, father of the future Emperor Haile Sellassie, was married though in name only, to Mentewab Wele, Taitu's niece.<sup>196</sup> His nephew, Dejach Biru Haile Mariam was one time husband to Sehin Mikael, daughter of the Wallo Nigus. Ras Makonnen's son Yilma, who was favored over

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<sup>196</sup> Ras Mekonnen allegedly spurned the marriage suspecting Taitu's hand in the death of his beloved wife, Yeshimebet. Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 16.

Tafari by the empress, married Asselefech Wolde Hanna, Taitu's niece, and together they had Yeshashwork before his untimely death.

Ras Wolde Giorgis, who had distinguished himself in the 1897 conquest of Kafa, was a grandson of Sahle Sellassie and therefore Menilek's cousin. He was among the most powerful nobles both because of his royal descent and his marriage to Wzo. Yeshimebet, Taitu's cousin. Bulatovich, a medical officer of the Russian Red Cross Mission described her as such:

"Yeshimabet was light skinned like her cousin Empress Taytu but older and dressed far more richly. She absolutely glittered with gold and silver jewelry even wearing a little diadem on her head. The ras, her third husband, adores her and they have been united by the rite of religious marriage after many years of a civil arrangement."<sup>199</sup>

Ras Darge, who was married to a woman from Gurage, had three daughters, only one of whom married outside of the Shoan elite.<sup>200</sup>

Other Shoan nobles who held positions of importance in Menilek's government also married Taitu's relatives. Ras Demissew Nesibu was probably the most notoriously adept at changing his wives as quickly as the political dynamics demanded. Between 1890 and the end of Lij Iyasu's reign around 1916, Ras Demissew had three wives: Wzo. Asselefech Wolde Hanna, Wzo. Abonesh Tekle Mariam, and Wzo. Mentewab Mikael. His first wife, who in 1900 was unceremoniously taken from him probably under Taitu's order to marry Dejach Yilma Mekonnen, was returned soon after, but not before her brief liaison with Menilek's foremost generals, Ras Leulseged. Not surprisingly, Ras

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<sup>199</sup> Prouty, *Empress Taytu*, *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>200</sup> This was Wzo. Tissime Darge who married the heir to the Wag and Lasta dynasty, Wagshum Hailu Wolde Kiros.

Demissew was a strong element in the anti-Taitu movement. During the consequent regency of Ras Tassama (1909-1911), Ras Demissew then the governor of the rich southern province of Wellegga, was married to the regent's half-sister, Wzo. Abonesh. Upon Ras Tassama's death, Ras Demissew found it prudent to be associated with Iyasu and Nigus Mikael and after some effort was able to marry Wzo. Mentewab Mikael. Despite his stand against Iyasu, this marriage connection later rendered Ras Demissew suspect in the eyes of Ras Tafari and the anti-Iyasu opposition.<sup>201</sup>

As his father had done for Menilek at the request of Haile Melekot, Ras Tassama was selected as the traditional advisor-guardian entrusted with safe-keeping of the throne until Iyasu was deemed ready. Ras Tassama himself was at the center of a cluster of marriage relations designed to align others with this regency (1909-11). His two half-sisters were married to Ras Abata Boiyalew and Ras Demissew and were later pitted against Taitu. Ras Tassama's daughter Laqech was the second wife of Negadras Haile Giorgis, Menilek's Minister of Commerce who was previously married to Taitu's niece Wzo. Yetemegnū Alula. Ras Leulseged, a cousin of Ras Tassama, was married to Taitu's niece until the politics of Lij Iyasu's reign indicated a need to align with the ruling family of Wallo's Nigus Mikael, at which time he married Wzo. Menen, the future empress and wife of Ras Tafari.

Ras Tassama's own wife was Wzo. Beletshachew Abba Jobir, the daughter of an Oromo king of Guma. She had been baptized before her marriage

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<sup>201</sup> Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)," Paper read at the Italian Cultural Institute, Addis Ababa, 14 April 1984, p. 12.

and Empress Taitu was her godmother, which may have added to Ras Tassama's obligatory deference not to take a stand against the empress in the power struggle.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, throughout this period, the institution of god-parenting, by which individuals chose to assume the responsibilities of the birth parent before the church, served to tie important regional families to the royal center.

Part of this ritual was conversion to Christianity, an assumed feature of the power elite after the nineteenth century.<sup>203</sup> Among the newly converted were Dejach Kumsa Moroda and Dejach Jote from the ruling families of Wellegga, and Ali Mohammed who became Nigus Mikael of Wallo. Ras Daraso, Emperor Menilek and Emperor Yohannes were their respective god-parents. Empress Taitu was god-mother to Wzo. Altayeworq Germame, wife of Menilek's Oromo-Gurage general, Fitawrari Habte Giorgis, who later became his powerful Minister of Defense. As in the case of Fitawrari Habte Giorgis, who remained with his one wife and aloof from the marriage chess game of Taitu's, Ras Nadew's, and Lij lyasu's rule, god-parenting provided a useful mechanism of connection. The seriousness by which such relationships were measured is suggested in instances such as Menilek's initial hesitation to allow his "son" Ras Mikael to marry his birth daughter Shoaregga, or when Nigist Zawditu appealed Dejach Habtemariam's case in imperial court based on his being god-son to Menilek, and therefore extended kin.

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<sup>202</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 219 and p. 323.

<sup>203</sup> It is worth underscoring here that the nature of earlier elite had been one of mixed Christian and Muslim background. See Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate 1786-1853," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. 15, 1990.

Menilek drew valued officials who were outsiders to nobility lineages closer to the imperial court through marriages that reflected his favor and were designed to encourage loyalty. Ras Gobena Daci, another general and close confidant, was of Shoan Oromo descent and was married to the notable Wzo. Ayelech Abrasa, reputedly related to Menilek's mother.<sup>204</sup> Their son, Wedajo Gobena, had the distinction of being a dwarf and was married briefly to Menilek's daughter, Shoaregga. Menilek is said to have claimed her as daughter after persuasion by Wzo. Ayelech.<sup>205</sup> Wedajo and Shoaregga had a son, Wasan Sagad, around 1884. Twenty-four year old Dejach Wassan Sagad was a possible perspective successor to Menilek's throne, were it not for his physical deformity and poor health which led to his early death in 1908.<sup>206</sup> Ras Gobena's son Gebre Rufael married Lakech, the daughter of Gojjam's Ras Mengesha Atikem. His descendants continued to be a part of twentieth century elite with the likes of Wzo. Tsigemariam Gebre Rufael, wife of Ras Imru and Wzo. Ketsela Tulu, Ras Gobena's niece and wife of Azaj Workineh Eshete (also known as Hakim Workineh), the earliest formally educated medical doctors and Menilek's attendant.

Other outsiders, such as Dejach Germame, were well situated in the political structure further augmenting their influence through marriage ties between their descendants and those of Sahle Sellassie's. Dejasmach Germame's biography as documented in a short manuscript written by one of his

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<sup>204</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>205</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>206</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *Life and Times of Menilek II: Ethiopia, 1844-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 230.

grandsons, provides some glimpses into the life of an influential courtier of nineteenth century Ethiopia.<sup>207</sup> Though an active presence in Nigus Haile Meleket's Shoa, Germame is best known as a governor and military leader who oversaw the incorporation of neighboring Oromo communities to Shoa and served as a councilor of senior standing in Menilek's court.

Dejach Germame is also popular for his role in planning and executing the escape of young Menilek's from Tewodros at Maqdala. As was mentioned earlier, Tewodros gave his daughter Alitash's hand in marriage to Menilek, perhaps to enhance his own legitimacy and with an eye to keeping a descendant represented at imperial court. Around the same time, Germame was wed to Wzo. Qetero Merso, the daughter of Dejach Merso of Semen, and uncle to the future Empress Taitu. Both marriages were intended to keep Menilek and Germame under close supervision. As Germame continued to concoct the plan of escape, he feigned sickness and advised his wife to stay away from what could be a contagious disease, thus getting transferred to another house from which he turned his plan into action in July 1865.

In 1877, Menilek's consort Wzo. Bafena, and his cousin Meshesha Seifu, plotted a rebellion against the emperor. Much to his embarrassment and possibly at the cost of some of his influence, Dejach Germame's son Semu Nigus was alleged to have participated in the plot. This incidence provides an interesting

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<sup>207</sup> This unpublished manuscript entitled "Ye Dejazmach Germame Tarik" is dated 1936 E.C. and is about 60 pages long. It has a foreward by Merse Hazen Wolde Kirqos and is written by Qangazmach Hayle Zeleka. Bairu Tafla has made use of another version of this same document in his article, "Fourth Ethiopian Biographies: Dajjazmac Garmame Abba- Mala (c. 1810- c. 1889); Dajjazmac Gabra-Egzi'abeher Moroda (c. 1871-1923); Dajjazmac Balca, Abba-Nafso (c. 1863 -1936) and Kantiba Gabru Dasta (c. 1855-1950)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 2, July 1969.

insight into the nature of families and politics.<sup>208</sup> Proximity to power and marriage connections could not assure indefinite loyalty. In other words, the men and women that made up such elite families had distinct responses to political events that could not be assumed under the connection of one family member to the center.

By way of admiring Germame's confidence and outspoken nature, the author of the manuscript relates another story that provides an impression of the concerns of court politics. Germame had an unfriendly relationship with Taitu whom he felt that Menilek should not have married since she was unable to have children. The empress herself was looking for a way of ridiculing Germame in the eyes of Menilek, and that occasion presented itself at a certain *gibir*. One of the two people that joined Taitu in this plan was Wzo. Banchi Abba Wallo, the mother-in-law of Germame's grandson, Habte Sellassie Habte Mikael.

Wzo. Banchi was apparently insulted by Germame when she approached him for the divorce of her daughter from Germame's grandson. He called her "*Zelzala zelzeltu*," the equivalent of loose woman, and inquired, "Where is your husband anyway?" She expressed her anger but Germame was unrepentant claiming that all women who did not have husbands were always labeled loose and that the time-worn term would not change to suit her pleasure. Menilek suppressed a laugh at this response, but Wzo. Banchi did not back down. She retaliated that she may indeed be young in certain ways, but it was more

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<sup>208</sup> The other person was Dejach Worqe who questioned Germame on the issue of his loaning grain and overcharging interest. During the famine of 1889-92, Germame's interest in the possession of land and the accumulation of grain had earned him a respectable reputation as a provider of food for the army. This was an attempted slight of that reputation.



shameful that Germame at his advanced age continued to have relations with concubines and made mistresses of important men's daughters. Empress Tatiu and Dejach Meshesha closely monitored the interaction, acting appropriately dismayed by Wzo. Banchi's account. After some thought, Germame responded, "I may have learned my ways from my historical ancestors, King David and Solomon, but what references of the past validate your actions?" No answer was forthcoming from Wzo. Banchi and Taitu and Meshesha were also silent on the subject.

Though the appearance of this anecdote in the manuscript seems incidental, the occurrence must have been one of notable scandal to have been recorded. That male/female relations could be discussed in such gatherings suggests its integral nature to politics. With what seemed the sanction of historical reference and his quick wit, Germame had the last word in this instance and, as is apparent in the following brief consideration of his family history, had other sources of influence upon which he could rely.

Dejach Germame was married three times. His first marriage is not mentioned in written or oral sources, but his second and third marriages were to Wzo. Walata Giorgis, the daughter of an important balabat, and Wzo. Qetero Merso in Tewodros' captivity. Although his descendants numbered too many to detail here, by the third generation, they were inter-married with children of nobility from Gojjam, Wellegga and Lasta.<sup>209</sup> Others married descendants of

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<sup>209</sup> By most oral accounts, Wzo. Walata Giorgis was not beautiful but the marriage was considered opportune as she was the sister of Ayelework who had married the daughter of Sahle Sellassie. The first-born child of Germame and Wzo. Walata Giorgis was Wzo. Zeleqaworq who married Fitawrari Habte Sellassie who had accompanied Germame to and from Maqdala and had been promised her hand before

Sahle Sellassie and Empress Menen.<sup>210</sup> They comprised of reputable judges, an Ethiopian consular in Eritrea and women who were married to prominent ministers such as Indalkachew Mekonnen and Yilma Deressa in Haile Sellassie's government.<sup>211</sup> Dejach Germame's descendant and namesake along with his brother Mengistu, were distinguished for instigating the 1960's coup that was the watershed moment of Ethiopian imperial history.

### **NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN, POLITICS AND MARRIAGE ALLIANCES**

Wzo. Bafena and Empress Taitu, the two women who were at the center of power by Menilek's side, were actively engaged in the politics of the period. Taitu's predecessor and Menilek's companion, Wzo. Bafena shared her sense of purpose in politics and dramatically maneuvered events in an attempt to place herself and her children in control. In 1877, the beautiful, shrewd and ambitious Bafena plotted to thwart the Shoan crown from Menilek's cousin and potential heir apparent Meshesha Seifu and give it to her sons. Bafena had married several times before and though she had no children with Menilek, her sons were awarded titles and positions while her daughters were married or promised to prominent men in Menilek's service.

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their departure. They had eleven children together. Their grandchildren were married to the family of Ras Mesfin and his wife, Wzo. Yeshimebet Guma of Wellegan nobility. Others like Zeleka Habte-Mikael was married to Bitwoded Negash of Gojjam, a descendant of Nigus Takla Haimanot, and Wzo. Yeshi Tafesse was married to Wagshum Wessen.

<sup>210</sup> Among them, Fitawrari Manyahlial Germame married Askale Darge, daughter of Ras Darge. Their granddaughter married Indalkachew Mekonnen, Haile Sellassie's Prime Minister. A great grandson of Sahle Sellassie, Dejach Andargachew married a great-granddaughter of Germame, Wzo. Medemdemya. Fitawrari Membere Yayehrad, grandson of Germame married Ayne Tsehai Mengesha, a granddaughter of Empress Menen.

<sup>211</sup> Dejach Yemaneh Hasan was known as a fair judge and was called upon as witness to the 1960's coup in which his relatives were implicated. Kegnazmach Haile Zeleka, remembered by most for having taken his mother's maiden name as his last name, served as the Ethiopian Consulate in Eritrea under Haile Sellassie. Wzo. Kidist Tesemma, Dejach Germame's great grand-daughter three times removed was the first wife of Haile Sellassie's Finance Minister, Yilma Deressa, himself a Wellegga noble.

Bafena's first plan to distance Meshesha from Menilek included marrying her daughter, Meshesha's would be bride, to another, and having him forfeit his land to Bafena on account of having allegedly insulted her. Despite the lack of widespread support for Bafena's actions, Menilek continued to acquiesce to her demands. Bafena then cast her nets wider, approaching Emperor Yohannes with her scheme to overthrow Menilek, temporarily place Meridazmach Haile, Menilek's aging but ambitious uncle on the throne, then replace him with one of her sons who would pledge his loyalty to the imperial crown.

Yohannes was receptive and Bafena proceeded to convince Menilek to attack the emperor. He took his reluctant and fatigued army as far as Gojjam where they halted and were joined by Bafena, possibly to spy on activities for Yohannes. Meanwhile, Meridazmach Haile entered Ankober and was locally declared king of Shoa. The Shoan government, entrusted to Azzaj Wolde Tsadeq and Dejach Germame, responded and eventually coordinated their attack to capture and imprison Haile.

Not suspecting Bafena's involvement, Menilek agreed to send her to investigate the situation in Shoa, where she arrived with his written edict naming her regent until his return. Although Wolde Tsadeq and Germame preferred not to recognize Bafena's authority, they were persuaded by her presentation of Menilek's seal. She promptly freed Meshesha, who seemed more likely to carry on her plan, gave him the daughter originally intended for him, and proceeded to send munitions and supplies to Tamo, a highly secure *amba* or fort in Shoa.

Meshsesha along with troops who shifted allegiance, took over the fort displacing Bafena.

Despite reports of Bafena's cunning, Menilek's return to Shoa was forced more by his military predicament in Gojjam than his suspicions of Bafena's plot. As outward appearances suggested, Meshesha seemed to be the culprit while Bafena remained innocent in Menilek's eyes. A potential battle at Tamo between royal troops and Meshesha's supporters was averted and a general council recommended Meshesha's command of his soldiers and the administration of a government with a corresponding title. The council further recommended Bafena's exile to a remote region.

Menilek initially opposed these proposals and was distracted by a campaign against Mohammad Ali in Wollo who was then allied against the Shoan king. At the time, Mohammad was also married to Wzo. Manalebish, Bafena's daughter, and his actions could well be interpreted in support of his mother-in-law's ambitions as well as a political gamble to remain connected to the leader with assumed imperial longevity, Yohannes.<sup>212</sup> Although Mohammad Ali would later emerge at the center of the political stage, his gamble was unsuccessful at this juncture and victory was won by Menilek. Upon his triumphant return, Menilek acquiesced to the two recommendations of the council but remained concerned about the well-being of Bafena who died a few years later and was buried in Debre Libanos.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Prouty, *Empress Taytu*, *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>213</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 23.

Clearly, Bafena was a woman of considerable means, guided by her intelligence and ambition while drawing power from several sources. The first source derived from her sway over Menilek's political and military decisions which, as detailed above, she persuaded to fit her design. Another source of power was the inter-marriage and placement of her children and relatives who probably served as eyes and ears within central government. They also gained valuable experience thus preparing important foundation on which to structure an alternative government, had the coup succeeded.

Bafena's approach of using legitimate descendants of Sahle Sellassie as decoy for her own ends indicates her political awareness and sophistication. She was not limited to Shoa in her planning and must have felt enough confidence to approach Emperor Yohannes who, in turn, informally endorsed her efforts. Lost in all accounts of Bafana's actions, is the possible love story of a thirty-year old Menilek who refused to believe the worst of his companion, unusually nearly twice his age. Menilek's eventual agreement to Bafana's exile illustrates an instance when matters of the government took precedence over matters of the heart, even where kings and emperors were concerned.

Empress Taitu was similar to Bafana in terms of her assertive character and involvement in the affairs of government. Discussed in numerous scholarly studies, creative writings and accounts of travelers, are details of Taitu's independent mind, her influence over Menilek, her military participation at Adwa, her strong suspicion of foreigners and pioneering interest in the progress of her country. Considering this in its entirety would be repetitive, although important

points should be noted here. Taitu Betul who was the descendant of several northern royal families, was an adult woman in 1883 when she married Menilek, the king of the southern province of Shoa and her fifth husband.<sup>214</sup> She appeared in definite charge of her own destiny regarding marriage, bestowing her own hand and marrying opportunistically.

Taitu's comportment and connections outside of Shoa no doubt appealed to Menilek. Her marriage marked among the earliest trends of the pattern following the locus of power and shifting south, even while Shoa maintained family ties with Tigre with the betrothal of Zawditu Menilek to Araya Sellassie Yohannes a few months earlier in October 1882. Her role in politics was strongly supplemented and underscored by her artful management of marriage relations around the imperial court. Her success at creating links with considerable political bearing that further extended the reaches of her influence was remarkable.

Governor Martini of Eritrea shared his perception of Taitu's power base in 1900:

Ras Wele (her brother) controlled Tigre and Yajju; Ras Gugsa Wele (her nephew) governed Begemder; Dejazmach Gessesse (her nephew) ruled Kafa; and Ras Mekonnen was presumed to have fallen into her orbit by his marriage to her niece Mentewab Wele.<sup>215</sup>

Early in 1908, Menilek's health showed signs of deterioration from advanced syphilis. The year before the emperor had taken measures to safeguard the empire beyond his death and had formed a cabinet to which nine

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<sup>214</sup> Taitu's possible husbands were an officer in Tewodros' army (known variously as Welde Gabriel, Welde Maryam, Welde Giyorgis and Maru), Janterar Udie, governor of Yeju, Kegnazmach Zikargachew (the brother of Bafena, Menilek's consort) and a fourth man not described by name. Prouty, p. 34-41.

<sup>215</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 216.

ministers were appointed.<sup>216</sup> A Crown Council of great chiefs and ministers was also created in which Ras Tassama was appointed as advisor-guardian of the young Lij Iyasu who was perceived, but had yet to be publicly proclaimed, heir to the throne. Menilek's presence, although considerably weakened physically, afforded Taitu the protection she needed to concentrate power into her own hands. To further ensure her political position, she could rely on the support of her well placed relatives including the very powerful Ras Wele and Dejach Seyoum (later Ras Hailu) of Gojjam, who was married to her cousin, Wzo. Asselefech Wolde Hanna. Tigre's support seemed attainable.<sup>217</sup> She planned on the neutrality of other powerful men such as Ras Wolde Giorgis who was married to her niece Yeshimebet and Ras Tassama, whose stand against the empress may have been initially tempered by his marriage to Wzo. Beletshachew Abba Jobir, Taitu's god-daughter.

Taitu hoped for the ascendancy of Zawditu, Menilek's daughter, instead of Lij Iyasu. Zawditu was married to Taitu's nephew Ras Gugsa Wele, who would supposedly act as regent of the throne and administrator of the government. Although she maintained some support among such people as Ras Wolde Giorgis, Taitu stirred strong opposition particularly among Menilek's Shoan officials and followers whose privileged positions were threatened. As a potential compromise that would guarantee Tigrean presence at court, maintain Taitu's

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<sup>216</sup> They were Afenigus Nasibu Minister of Justice, Fitawrari Habta Giyorgis Minister of War, Liqa Makwas Katama Minister of Interior, Nagadras Haile Giyorgis Minister of Finance, Kantiba Wolda Tsadeq Minister of Agriculture, Ato Gebre Sellassie 'Minister of the Pen', Qagnazmach Makonnen Minister of Public Works and Azzaj Matafariya Minister of Court. See Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilek*, *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>217</sup> Taitu may have courted Tigre's loyalty in exchange for the release of Dejach Gugsa Araya, the grandson of Emperor Yohannes under house arrest in the capital. Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times*, *ibid.*, p. 236.

involvement in the political loop and keep Lij Iyasu on as the emperor's desired successor, his marriage to Aster/Romanworq Mengesha, granddaughter of Emperor Yohannes and daughter of Taitu's niece Kefei Wele and Ras Mengesha, was arranged in May 1908. Both were very young but not too young to effect the political and symbolic implication of such a union.

Immediately after, Ras Abata, Ras Tassama's brother-in-law, was named Wagshum and governor of Tigre perhaps to create a wedge between Ras Wele's powerful presence and other northern politicians including the descendants of Emperor Yohannes to whom Wele was linked by marriage.<sup>218</sup> Abata's appointment was resented by the hereditary rulers and led to a revolt by the new generation of Tigreans, Dejach Abraha Araya Sellassie, Dejach Seyoum Mengesha and Dejach Desta Gwangul, which was eventually quelled by Abata.

Taitu's involvement in the affairs of the state continued as she appointed her favored supporters and demoted opposing individuals. In 1908, Lij Iyasu was publicly mentioned as heir but Taitu persisted in undermining the authority of successor and Ras regent. As the eminent and anticipated return of Dejach Abata to Addis Ababa drew near, Taitu faced a crisis of confrontation with his supporters which she tried to manage by enlisting the help of the imperial army. Had tensions conspired to a military confrontation, Taitu could summon troops estimated close to 60,000 men.<sup>219</sup> In the end, Abata's march was halted and anti-Taitu forces backed down to bid their time until a unified force plotted to rid themselves of the empress once and for all.

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<sup>218</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p.238.

<sup>219</sup> The Italian Office estimated 120,000 men though Harold G. Marcus adjusts this to 60,000. Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 242.



Informed in advance of their conspiracy, Taitu had taken measures to protect the palace and surround Ras Tassama's residence. Ras Tassama and Fitawrari Habte Giorgis were persuaded to join the insurgents. In the final public confrontation, Taitu was accused of allegations which included her unilateral decisions of appointment. The empress was refused her request to return to her ancestral land and was given the choice of joining a convent of caring for the ill emperor with no political involvement. She chose the latter until Menilek's death in December 1913. As Taitu's political network framed by marriage alliances was duly dismantled, the empress lived the last of her days attending church service and maintaining her garden until her death on 11 February 1918.<sup>220</sup>

Both Taitu's and Bafena's force of personality and position make them obvious studies of exceptional Ethiopian women in proximity to power. Tracing the exercise of power by other women of elite families beyond institutions is more challenging since they are invisible in the narrative. Still, there is enough to suggest that even while they did not take matters into their hands as Bafena, Taitu and later Wzo. Tsehaiworq Darge did, women were active on several fronts. As messengers of mercy, elite women were involved political negotiations presenting cases of those out of favor with the court. Wzo. Kefei Wele was one such example of devotion, pleading for the pardon of her husband, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, for three years after his imprisonment in 1899.<sup>221</sup>

A whole chapter in a manuscript on Ras Gugsa Wele's life describes Wzo. Kefei's visit to her brother, detailing the preparation undertaken to welcome a

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<sup>220</sup> Prouty, *Empress Taytu*, *ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>221</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 215.

woman of her stature.<sup>222</sup> Ras Gugsa's home was thoroughly cleaned and pleasingly arranged with carpet lining and curtains while an entourage was sent ahead with horn players and drummers to accompany Wzo. Kefei to the residence.

Their meeting was infused with the etiquette of the day with Wzo. Kefei insisting on disembarking from her mule before she reached her brother, who just as adamantly wanted her carried in, and him later relinquishing his private sleeping quarters for her comfort. The moment was made all the more poignant by the fact that the siblings had not seen each other since the death of their father Ras Wele, and their brother, Dejach Amede Wele, for whom they grieved together. Wzo. Kefei's prestige is suggested by the size of her entourage provided by her previous husband Ras Nadew, to whom she had returned after Ras Mengesha. She received gifts of glittering clothes and jewelry from her brother as did members of her retinue according to their rank and standing.

Wzo. Kefei's involvement with the central court is hinted both with the fact that much time had elapsed before her visit to her brother, and his suggestion that she request permission to stay a while longer from Empress Zawditu who would then inform her husband. Ras Nadew was soon after appointed governor of Illubabor and Wzo. Kefei rather unceremoniously divorced him and stayed in Addis Ababa where she bestowed her brother an unforgettable favor by requesting that he be granted ammunition which Ras Gugsa later put to practical use at the Battle of Anchem against Ras Mulugeta.

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<sup>222</sup> Grazmach Asfaw Tassama Worqe, *Ye Ras Gugsa Wele Tariq*, (MS IES 998).

That elite women used their informal and formal good offices for political bargaining is apparent though barely documented. Taitu's position as empress and advisor of Menilek meant that she had the emperor's ear and could influence the outcome of appointments or demotions. Even after Menilek's death, Taitu's family connections were considered important leverage to intervene between Nigus Mikael and Ras Wele. Women of elite families also served as informants by spying on political occurrences to which they were privy. Thus when Wzo. Qetero was made to marry Dejach Germame, it was with the intent of observing and reporting on his plan of escape with young Menilek from Maqdala.

Being of elite birth did not always protect women from the perils of politics. According to oral history, Mentewab Takla Haimanot's lament when captured by Mahdists from whom neither her father, the provincial king of Gojjam, nor her other relatives could protect her, starkly records her wretched fate:

My father the Nigus, my brother, the Ras, went to Gogora  
where my husband fired cartridges in vain. O men ... who did not stay with  
me, tell them she died of eating cats.

And again from her prison at Maqdala: "Those who return to our country, tell them, 'She died from eating garbage.'"<sup>223</sup> Similarly, Wzo. Menkele Akayu's marriage to Dejach Jote did not result in the protection of her brothers from the wrath of her husband, who killed her seven siblings in Anfillo. Such elite women faced very difficult circumstances whereby their marriage partner was pitted against their blood relatives but the outcome was geared toward the stability of rule and the real and symbolic personal kinship and political affinity forged by the union.

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<sup>223</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

The rate at which marriages were arranged and dissolved and the number of men elite women were married to over their lifetimes seems to place them as vulnerable victims of their political machinery. Wzo. Bafena and Empress Taitu certainly did not shy from participating in the system and marrying their nieces and cousins to men of power. Although marriages consecrated by Holy Communion before the church were duly noted, it is not always clear what the legal standing of such alliances were, or what occurred in terms of property rights and acquisition. Almost all marriages were, however, recognized as socially binding and politically significant. Thus Wzo. Asselefech Wolde Hanna was married four times, while Wzo. Kefei Wele was taken off her husband Ras Nadew to marry Tigre's Ras Mengesha, then returned.<sup>224</sup>

The fact and frequency of these marriages belie the uncharted power elite women wielded by virtue of their birthright and position.<sup>225</sup> Men who sought to strengthen their political standing and widen their networks could do so by linking themselves to the right woman. It was not unusual for men to be promoted to Ras or dejazmach to match the standing of a woman of nobility. Even men who were already enjoying the favor of the emperor, such as Dejach Gebre Sellassie, stood to enhance their ranking. This is recorded by the keen observation of Martini who noticed that Gebre Sellassie referred to Amarech as "my lady" and

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<sup>224</sup> Wzo. Asselefech was said to been very beautiful and not unlike Taitu in temperament. She married Ras Demissew Nassibu, Dejach Yilma Mekonnen (from whom she had Yeshashworq), Ras Leulseged and finally Ras Hailu Takla Haimanot. See Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage Patterns in Ethiopia 1890-1916," *ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> There is at least one recorded instance of a woman named Desta who was of humble birth, greatly favored by Menilek and bestowed with the honorific title of Weyzero. She was one of very few allowed into the palace through the back door, a privilege not extended to her husband Afenigus Nessibu Masqale. Aleme Eshete, *ibid.*

not “my wife” and was told by Ras Abreha Araya that this was because she outranked him.<sup>226</sup>

The movement of these women in marriage also indicates a certain fluidity and layering of identity which arguably provided a measure of connectedness and a matrix of stability. Elite women sometimes represented the center, as Wzo. Kefei Wele in her marriage to Ras Mengesha, or could be a part of consolidating power regionally, as Wzo. Menkele’s marriage to Dejach Jote in Wellegga, or were critical personifications of bridging differences on both local and national levels, such as Wzo. Walata Israel’s marriage to Dejach Gebre Sellassie in 1922, and later to Crown Prince Asfa Wossen Haile Sellassie.

As suggested by their marriage patterns, the response of women of elite families to political developments was as varied as their male counterparts. For instance, two of three daughters of Ras Darge married within somewhat predictable parameters with Askale Darge marrying Manyahlehal Germame and Tissime branching out to marry the Wag and Lastan Dejach Hailu Wolde-Kiros. As will be seen later, Tsehaiworq Darge was the more radical of the three, asserting her preference by remaining single then linking herself to Tassama Eshete, Lij Iyasu’s guardian, duly participating in efforts to re-instate the young heir in the 1920s. Like the men of the empire, the response of elite women was not bound exclusively by blood ties, but were rather shaped by particular loyalties and grievances of their time.

In conclusion, several observations can be made regarding marriage alliances of this era. First, marriage was not a device used exclusively by the

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<sup>226</sup> Prouty, *ibid.*, p. 264.

expanding Shoan empire. It served the political ends of families of regional powers in their own struggles for supremacy, as can be gleaned from the previous chapter. The notable distinction was that at this time, centralization focused the direction of marriage activities – the pattern of marriage alliances followed the locus of power in its movement from Gondar to Tigre to Wallo then Shoa, laterally including Gojjam and Wellegga. Within these parameters, a critical playing field of power would be defined. Second, and in relation to this, elite marriages carried considerable weight both for the political center and regional powers. They provided the much needed lateral support of a widening political base to the center, and the guarantee of representation or survival through assimilation for regional nobility.

Third, the building of empire in the territorial and political sense was in its early stages. The Battle of Adwa in 1896 was probably the earliest instance provoking the response of a unified empire newly forged. This was apparent in the marriage alliances that reflected the internal state of affairs and the highs and lows of political accord. At the end of Menilek's era, the ethnic composition of the elite included nobility from Tigre, Wellegga, Shoa, Yajju, Lasta, Gojjam and Gondar. Marriage arrangements were obvious, designed to serve as bridges across inter-regional rivalries and categories of class and ethnic identity. By the early years of the twentieth century, an increasingly Ethiopianized elite of remarkable continuity had been launched.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **IYASU, ZAWDITU & TAFARI: POWER STRUGGLES, FAMILY ALLIANCES AND WOMEN IN ELITE FAMILIES**

The short reign of Lij Iyasu (1911-1916) has been termed enigmatic by some contemporary scholars – both because of his colorful personality traits and his progressive policies. The years between his fall and Ras Tafari's rise to power portray the weighty bearing of family connections and marriage alliances on political outcomes. This chapter will highlight some of those examples and also attempt to locate elite women, their presence and activities in relation to the history of the period.

#### **LIJ IYASU AND RAS TAFARI: EARLY YEARS & ACCESSION TO POWER**

Tafari Makonnen was born in Harar on 23 July 1892 to Ras Makonnen Wolde Mikael and Wzo. Yeshimebet Ali. Surprisingly little is known of his mother who died at his young age. Ras Makonnen was a descendant of Sahle Sellassie and cousin to Emperor Menilek whom he served as governor of the economically important eastern region of Harar, and as a distinguished diplomat in dealings with European powers towards the end of the nineteenth century. As a young boy, Tafari was taught Ge'ez and Amharic by clerical tutors and French by foreign missionaries, which meant early and continual exposure to Western education.

In 1905, Tafari began his political career when he was appointed as dejazmach and titular governor of a small region in southwest Harar. Ras Makonnen celebrated this occasion with formal acknowledgment of Tafari as his

heir. At his father's side, Tafari learned the mechanics of provincial governing and the skills of leadership and personality. Unfortunately, Ras Makonnen fell fatally ill with typhoid only one year later leaving his young son, who had already lost his mother at the age of two, under the care and protection of Emperor Menilek. At the emperor's court, Tafari joined other sons of nobility and attended Menilek II School in Addis Ababa. His elder half-brother, Yilma who had been chosen over the relatively inexperienced Tafari to administer Harar, died of pneumonia in 1907. While at the capital city, Tafari met personalities of importance in Menilek's government, no doubt observing and absorbing experiences in politics and statecraft administration.<sup>227</sup>

In January 1909, Menilek suffered a stroke and despite increasing opposition, Empress Taitu assumed power and acted in his stead. The struggle for control over government that ensued between the empress, the designated heir and his supporters, including the regent Ras Tassama Nadew, and other enemies of Taitu, intensified. Tafari wisely refused to join both the conspiracy against the empress or attempts to identify the plotters. This placed him in a politically acceptable position to all parties involved, and resulted in his appointment to Harar in 1910.

Events in Addis Ababa unfolded quickly. Ras Tassama's death in April 1911 preceded that of the incapacitated Emperor Menilek's in December 1913. Sixteen-year old Lij Iyasu refused the supervision of another regent, and the ministers reassembled to form a regency council with the heir at its helm. His de

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<sup>227</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellassie - The Formative Years 1892-1936*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.7.



facto reign, which lasted from 1913-16, was ambitious in its attempt to redress past injustices and create a ruling elite with no religious and ethnic rivalries. By appointing his own officials, Iyasu further added fuel to the growing discontent of Menilek's "old guard" administrators. He enacted policies that alienated the church even while drawing Muslim clerics and followers closer. His personal behavior, including numerous sexual escapades, some with the daughters of Muslim rulers, confirmed the fears of the Shoan elite of eminent demise. In turn threatened, humiliated and chagrined, they planned Lij Iyasu's removal from government.

Although he admitted little by way of direct involvement, most scholars agree that Ras Tafari's hand in maneuvering events was more than likely. The Shoan coup led to the deposition of Lij Iyasu. This was announced in his absence in 1916 and was read by Menilek's War Minister, Fit. Habte Giorgis, to which the church's chief executive officer, Etchege Wolde Giorgis, added excommunication. At this same occasion, Menilek's daughter Zawditu was crowned Empress and Ras Tafari appointed Regent and heir to the throne. By bidding his time and tempering his responses, Ras Tafari was finally firmly placed at the center of successive political events.

## **POWER STRUGGLES AND FAMILY HISTORIES**

The time between Lij Iyasu's denouncement in 1916 and his final arrest around 1921 provides a good illustration of politics and family connections. Lij Iyasu and Ras Tafari were second and third cousins by virtue of their having descended from Sahle Sellassie. Both had, at one time, been raised in the court

of Menilek and although very different in character, had enjoyed reasonably amicable relations. Furthermore, in an early attempt to strengthen ties with the regency regime and lessen the possibility of being seen a threat to Iyasu, Tafari had married Wzo. Menen, Iyasu's niece, in 1911.

The formal dismissal of Lij Iyasu from government was an occasion for articulating the concerns of the Shoan elite families who feared their own displacement from power by Wallo nobility. Their anxieties heightened by one of Lij Iyasu's first acts upon ascending the throne. In May 1914, with the explanation that he wanted his father to receive the honorific title before he could be considered King of Kings or emperor, Iyasu crowned his father, Ras Mikael, king with jurisdiction over Tigre, Begemder, Gojjam and Lasta.<sup>228</sup>

The elaborate ceremony was celebrated in the presence of nobility from Gojjam, Shoa and Tigre, and Menilek's royal imperial garments and crown were transported to Wallo for the occasion. Nigus Mikael's coronation symbolically placed him as the most powerful person in the country at the time, and Wallo "instantly transformed from buffer zone to political center."<sup>229</sup> Through his own marriage alliances and those of his children, Mikael further activated networks of power which both widened the scope and strengthened the depth of his influence.

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<sup>228</sup> Nigus Mikael, formerly known as Mohammed Ali, was a military and political presence to contend with in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A capable and well positioned leader, he was a key player in the struggle over Wallo between Emperor Yohannes and Menilek. Iyasu's chronicler notes that being Menilek's grandson and Mikael's son would make him kin to emperor and king thus serving as an innovation for his history and family pride. Gebre-Igziabher Elyas, *Prowess, Piety and Politics: The Chronicle of Iyasu and Empress Zewditu of Ethiopia (1909-1930)*, ed. and transl. by Reidulf K. Molvaer, Germany: Rudiger Koppe Verlag Koln, 1994, p. 346.

<sup>229</sup> Bahru Zawde, *History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, (London: James Currey Ltd., 1991), p. 125

Mikael was linked in formal and informal marital arrangements with at least five women. Although it is difficult to date and sequence these marriages, the names of the women were: Wzo. Manalebish Bafena (Menilek's step-daughter, the child of his consort Wzo. Bafena), Wzo. Fantaye Gebru, Wzo. Zenebech Ali, Wzo. Alitash Wahde, and Wzo. Shoaregga Menilek. At least three of these marriages were politically significant, strengthening links with Shoa (Manalebish and Shoaregga) and Tigre (Alitash being first cousin to Emperor Yohannes).<sup>230</sup> Ras Mikael had five children with Wzo. Fantaye of whom three were possibly daughters who were very deliberately positioned to create networks with Shoan and Tigre nobility and were instrumental in extending his reaches of influence.<sup>231</sup>

Wzo. Sehin Mikael was formally married to three different men. From her first husband, Janterar Asfaw, she had Menen who went on to become the wife of Ras Tafari Makonnen. Around 1911 or 1912, Wzo. Sehin was wed to Dejazmach Biru Haile Mariam, first cousin to Haile Sellassie and a close official of his court. Next, she married Bitwoded Haile Giorgis the naggadras who greatly increased Menilek's treasury and was later appointed 'prime minister' of Iyasu's brief reign.

Her sisters Mentewab and Tewabech<sup>232</sup> were also critical in strengthening political alliances. Mentewab was married to Dejazmach Gebre Egziabher

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<sup>230</sup> Fantaye Gebru's father was from Wadla in Wallo. Wzo. Zenebech Ali may have been Ras Mikael's wife after Shoaregga. See Asnake Ali, "Aspects of the Political History of Wallo, 1872-1916," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1983. Wzo. Shoaregga and Ras Mikael were parents to the heir Lij Iyasu.

<sup>231</sup> Ras Mikael had two sons, Dejazmach Ali and Dejazmach Desta. Dejach Ali was the father of Dejach Amede, Wzo. Amakelech and Dejach Belay.

<sup>232</sup> In her obituary announcement, Tewabech is reported to be the daughter of Manalebish Bafena although Gebre Igziabher Elyas says she was the daughter of Fantaye. Gebre-Igziabher Elyas, *ibid.*, p. 347 fn.

Amede from Wallo. His local roots may have seemed redundant to Ras Mikael who had her divorce him and marry Ras Demissew, governor of the rich province of Wellegga during Menelik. Tewabech married the grandson of Emperor Yohannes, Ras Seyoum Mengesha. This marriage took place in 1914 or 1915 and Dejazmach Seyoum, as he was at the time, was promoted to Ras by Mikael with the right to govern Tigre over other lords.<sup>233</sup>

In 1916, tensions escalating against Lij Iyasu in Addis Ababa led to his deposition and the designation of Zawditu Menilek as empress with Ras Tafari as regent and heir. Lij Iyasu was defeated on his way to the capital from Harar, and became a fugitive for the following five years. In defense of his son's claim to the throne, Nigus Mikael mobilized an army estimated at about 80, 000 men and marched towards Shoa. Informed by reports of the relatively loosely guarded Addis Ababa by his daughter Sehin, Mikael made haste towards the city.<sup>234</sup> The inevitable military showdown took place between Nigus Mikael's soldiers and Shoan forces of about 120, 000.<sup>235</sup> Nigus Mikael was initially victorious and the commander of the Shoan army, Ras Leulseged Atnafsaggad was killed in this Tora Mask encounter.

The final clash, the largest and bloodiest since the battle of Adwa, took place in October 1916 at Sagale. Ras Tafari and the War Minister, Fitawrary Habte Giorgis, worked out a battle plan that led to the defeat of Nigus Mikael's

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<sup>233</sup> This actually marked a second link between the two families, as Lij Iyasu had been married very briefly to Aster Mengesha in one of Empress Taitu's early attempts to shift the political tide in 1906.

<sup>234</sup> According to Richard Greenfield, Taitu may have been pressured by Shoan nobility to tell Mikael that Iyasu was captured in Addis Ababa and for him to come to his rescue. The idea being that he would not be prepared for a full scale war if he came alone. Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia: A New Political History*, (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 142.

<sup>235</sup> Bahru Zawde, *ibid.*, p. 128.

forces and his capture and imprisonment. Iyasu and his small group of followers roamed from the Afar desert to Dessie, temporarily resting at the mountain fortress of Maqdala from where he won a few victories under siege. Iyasu continued to elude government troops until December 1920, when an all out campaign was mobilized against him even while the seventh year anniversary of Menilek's death was conducted with great ceremony in the capital. He was eventually caught in Tigre by Ras Gugsa Araya and placed in custody.

Meanwhile, Ras Seyoum of Tigre was suspected of having given brief refuge to Iyasu and facilitating his escape to the desert before his arrest. Although he claimed innocence, Ras Tafari was enraged by the possibility and prepared to march against the northern prince to ensure loyalty. A plausible reason why Ras Seyoum's aid to Iyasu was suspected was, of course, the marriage relations between the two families. Seyoum was Iyasu's brother-in-law as his wife Tewabech was Iyasu's sister, and Iyasu himself had briefly married Seyoum's sister Aster Mengesha in 1906. Ras Seyoum decided to avoid confrontation, and arrived in Desse to renew his allegiance to the central government. Ras Tafari remained unsatisfied, and removed him from his hereditary rule of Tigre ordering him to join their march back to Addis Ababa.

Despite this situation and earlier disagreements with Menilek, Ras Seyoum was often rendered by circumstances as the favored ruler of Tigre and took certain measures to mark his loyalty. To outbid other men such as Ras Gugsa Araya, who had equal hereditary claim, Ras Seyoum had sought an early marriage alliance between regent Tafari's daughter Tenagneworq and his own

son, Kassa.<sup>236</sup> After the death of his first wife, Tewabech Mikael, Ras Seyoum had himself wed Wzo. (later Li'ilt) Astede Asfaw, the grand-daughter of Ras Darge Sahle Sellassie, hence Tafari's second cousin.<sup>237</sup>

Kassa, who rejected the authority of Tafari and Zawditu and was a personal friend and admirer of Iyasu, would not accept the marriage proposal and openly rebelled against the government with some success.<sup>238</sup> Ras Seyoum was ordered to march against his son, and did so reluctantly when negotiations failed. Kassa was eventually persuaded to turn himself in with promise of clemency, but was met with punishment of a whipping ordered supposedly by his father. Soon after, he was sent to Addis Ababa and confined to Ras Biru's house and then to his brother-in-law's, Ras Getachew's, compound.<sup>239</sup> Kassa's fellow Tigreans tried to facilitate his escape, and he did manage to crawl his way through a window opening, only to be apprehended by guards and killed in the ensuing exchange of fire.<sup>240</sup>

Emperor Haile Sellassie was soon preoccupied with the running of affairs in the capital. Lij Iyasu would make a final attempt to escape his incarceration and his accomplice this time was Ras Hailu, the vociferous hereditary ruler of

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<sup>236</sup> Hadera Tesfaye, "Ras Seyoum Mengesha 1887-1960," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1976, p. 12.

<sup>237</sup> She remained his legal wife until his death in 1960. Ras Seyoum had eight children from other women. Five were daughters: Assegdech, Beyenech, Kebedech, Li'ilt Walata Israel and Wzo. Askalemariam. Three were sons: Dejazmach Kassa Abba Yilak, Lij Fassil and Leul Ras Mengesha, the latter being his successor and only surviving son. Hadera Tesfaye, *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>238</sup> As a descendant of Emperor Yohannes, he may also have envisioned a return to former power when his great-grandfather had ruled.

<sup>239</sup> Ras Getachew's father, Ras Abata Bwayalaw, was among the earliest challengers to Iyasu's succession. Rumors that he had his own ambitions to the throne that he hoped to access with marriage to Empress Zawditu were heightened by Abata's attempt to enter the palace soon after the downfall of Taitu, his arch enemy. Abata was persuaded against a military conflict by religious heads, but was imprisoned in 1911 at Maqdala by Ras Mikael of Wallo, who hoped to minimize the challenges to his son's succession.

<sup>240</sup> Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia*, *ibid.*, p. 145.

Gojjam, who may have wanted to use Iyasu to gain favors from the regent crowned emperor. In May 1932, Iyasu escaped from Fiche where he had been under the watchful eye of Ras Kassa's family who were mostly absent at this opportune moment. He then wrote a letter to Ras Hailu detailing his success of reuniting with a small group of his old followers that were equipped with arms by Ras Hailu. The latter was granted audience with Haile Sellassie with whom he shared the letter.

The emperor consulted with Ras Kassa, who asked for Ras Hailu to produce the messenger that delivered the letter, as he would have no doubt detained him for questioning. Ras Hailu could not bring forth such a messenger, and though the emperor did not immediately charge him with complicity, evidence mounted against the Gojjami ruler when incriminating letters were found in his house. As with Ras Seyoum, Ras Hailu's familial link to Iyasu could only have worsened suspicions against him. His daughter, Wzo. Seblewongel, was listed as Lij Iyasu's second wife, possibly the only official one apart from his short-lived marriage to Aster Mengesha.<sup>241</sup> Soon after, Ras Hailu was imprisoned and later charged with treason. His sentence of death was commuted to the confiscation of all his property and life imprisonment.

Lij Iyasu was captured for the last time and would die around 1935 under mysterious circumstances. His short, albeit enigmatic reign, was riddled by contradictions in his personality and his policies that nonetheless centered on addressing social injustices while remaining fiercely nationalistic. As a study in marriage alliances and political history, Lij Iyasu's reign affords certain insights.

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<sup>241</sup> This union that may have not been consummated due to their young age.

First, Iyasu's vision of creating a united Ethiopia rested on connecting through marriage to important regional families. His scope expanded beyond northern families to include those in the south and Muslim families. Shoan nobility who had enjoyed primacy during Menilek were threatened not only by Iyasu's crowning of Ras Mikael but by his unorthodox habit of marrying so many women. Detailed in their complaints was a list of the women, many of whom were common-law wives. Most of these marriages took place between 1909 and 1916 strengthening ties between the central government and Wallo, Gojjam, Shoa and Adal in the north, as well as Kaffa and Wellegga in the south and southwest. Marriages stretched a bridge of access to power and in exchange offered protection, inclusion and representation at the center. These were not symbolic acts only, as evident by the Adal uprising in 1913 which was allegedly averted due to Iyasu's marriage to the family of Neggadras Abu Beker.<sup>242</sup>

Second, aside from Lij Iyasu's own marital affairs, this period attests to a certain coming of age of the power elite. By then in its second and third generation, the power elite exhibited signs of coalescing interests. Ras Seyoum Mengesha and Ras Hailu were implicated in aiding Lij Iyasu but, in the larger scheme, this indicated that the nobility of Tigre and Gojjam as well as Wallo and Wellegga under Dejazmach Jote, were choosing to support a ruler under whom they perceived their common interests to be protected. Although this could arguably be cast as a struggle ostensibly against Shoan control, elite intermarriage complicated and ultimately clouded such clear parameters by

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<sup>242</sup> Aby Demissie, "Lij Iyasu: A Perspective Study of his Short Reign," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1964, p.8.



placing Iyasu's niece, Menen, besides the contender to the throne, Ras Tafari. Nigus Mikael's legacy would be maintained by her presence as empress and the appointment of the Crown Prince, with direct and legitimate lines of heritage both to Wallo and Shoa, as governor of Wallo with headquarters in Dessie.

Even in the face of conflict and political struggle, such marriage links thus provided the critical thread of continuity. Internal stability depended on the support of regional nobility and their sense of inclusion at the center. However, as can be seen by Kassa Seyoum's reaction to marrying into the imperial family, the responses of individual members were varied. This made elite marriages a mechanism that needed constant attention and adjustment according to the political barometer.

## **WOMEN IN ELITE FAMILIES OF THE TIMES**

The new and noteworthy element to introduce on Lij Iyasu's reign and the ensuing power contest with Tafari, is the opportunity it affords to study elite women and their position in the unfolding events. The sparse nature of sources on Ethiopian women in general and elite women in particular, makes this a challenging but fruitful exercise in examining their role in political history. The three women considered here are: Menen Asfaw, (also known as Menen Mikael), Menen's mother, Sihin Mikael and Tsehaiworq Darge

### **Menen Asfaw**

Wzo. Menen, the wife of Dejazmach Tafari and later empress of Ethiopia, had already been divorced several times at the young age of twenty when she

was married to the regent to be.<sup>243</sup> Menen's third husband before Tafari was Ras Leulseged, one of Menilek's foremost generals. His first wife was the much sought after and beautiful Asselefech Wolde-Hanna, the niece of Taytu and widow of Yilma Makonnen, Tafari's deceased half-brother. Menen and Leulseged's liaison was to last only briefly, as she was then reportedly whisked off by Iyasu to marry Tafari and thus strengthen ties with the newly appointed governor of Harar.

Understandably, Ras Leulseged did not take kindly to this act and according to one source, he took the case to the Abun who sympathized with his story. The Abun then excommunicated Tafari until he returned to the angry Ras the "property that still belonged to him."<sup>244</sup> This warning did not deter Tafari who went on to marry Menen around July or August 1911. In 1916, when Iyasu called Tafari to the capital from Harar, Menen had just had her first born son, Asfa Wossen. Iyasu detained Tafari in Addis and traveled to Harar with Ras Leulseged, leading to speculations that he might return Menen to her former husband.

The struggle between Tafari and Iyasu clearly rendered Menen in a difficult position. Her husband was fighting her uncle for power. When Negus Mikael battled on behalf of Iyasu at Sagale, it meant that her husband went to war against her grandfather. To add further twist to the story, the man who was sent to conduct the initial military campaign on the Shoan side was none other

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<sup>243</sup> Menen was married briefly to Fitawrari Ali Mohammed, whose father was aligned with Abba Watew, Ras Mikael's rival in Wallo. She then married Dejazmach Amede Ali, who was the brother of Zenebech, one time wife of Ras Mikael. See Asnake Ali, *ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>244</sup> Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)," Paper read at the Italian Cultural Institute, Addis Ababa, 14 April 1984, p. 25.

than Ras Leulseged, her former husband, who died in the same battle. The pain and irony caused by these events and suffered by Menen can only be imagined. Indeed, her predecessors, like Tewabech, the wife of Emperor Tewodros, were lauded as heroic for forsaking their families and binding their fate irrevocably with their husband's – even when that was not the most convenient choice to have made.<sup>245</sup>

Menen's decision to remain with Tafari throughout this turbulent struggle had important political implications which came to the forefront when Tafari considered ascending the throne with the grand-daughter of Emperor Yohannes, Wzo. Aster Mengesha, at his side.<sup>246</sup> This occurrence was never publicly announced and continues to be a closely guarded secret among living informants who acknowledge it as the widely-held "rumor" of the day. According to oral lore, popular prophesy predicted Tafari's union with Aster would make for a short-lived but stable reign, whereas if he were to stay with Menen, there would be initial difficulties followed by longer rule.

Wzo. Aster was considered a very "modern" woman, beautiful and cosmopolitan in her ways. She had already been to France with her husband Ras Getachew, then the Ethiopian Minister in Paris. He himself had had to fight for her affections in a near military confrontation with Ras Kebede Mengesha, the son of Mengesha Atikem, then considerably older and married to Astede Asfaw Darge. A tribunal presided by Ras Tafari was assembled for deliberations

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<sup>245</sup> Tekle Tsadik Mekuria, *Atse Tewodros inna ye Ityopia Andinet*, (Addis Ababa: Kuraz Publishing Agency, 1988 E.C.), p. 183.

<sup>246</sup> Wzo. Aster was the daughter of Kefei Wele and Mengesha Seyoum.

on the case ruled in favor of Ras Getachew who was deemed the more compatible partner for Wzo. Aster.

Ras Tafari's alleged proposal was supported by those like Wzo. Yeshashworq Yilma, a woman of some court influence, who was equally related to Ras Tafari and Wzo. Aster.<sup>247</sup> If indeed this was true, it suggests that elite intermarriages of the previous era had reproduced and created individuals who, like Yeshashworq, by virtue of their birth, had more channels to access influence and widening scopes of interests to protect. Objections to the proposed marriage were vociferous. The Patriarch, Abune Petros along with Ras Kassa and Blatta Herouy, all spoke out against the union allegedly citing Menen's position as mother of Tafari's children, granddaughter of Nigus Mikael and niece of Iyasu, would add insult to injury for Wallo. Wallo was already angered by the thwarting of power from Lij Iyasu, and should Ras Tafari marry Wzo. Aster, he would also be "stealing" his wife.<sup>248</sup> Thus advised, Ras Tafari dropped the matter and ascended the throne with Wzo. Menen at his side.

Wzo. Menen's predicament was one of a woman caught in the cross-fire of political power play. As evident by the fact that she remained wife and became empress, Menen's family connections and presence at the imperial court could not easily be dismissed. Menen's sacrifice in personal terms were great, but if some perceptions of Tafari's early and unforgettable love for Aster are credible,

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<sup>247</sup> Yeshashworq was the daughter of Tafari's half-brother Yilma Mekonnen and Asselefech Wolde Hanna. Yeshashworq's grandmother, Wzo. Desta and Kefei's father, Ras Wele were siblings.

<sup>248</sup> As will be recalled, Iyasu and Aster were married in May 1909 in one of Empress Taitu's earliest moves to align political power. It is interesting to note that in light of Ras Abata Bwayalew's staunch opposition to Lij Iyasu's ascension and his rumored ambition to marry Empress Zawditu and rule the country himself, his son's marriage to Wzo. Aster could also be interpreted as an attempt to "steal" what once belonged to Iyasu.

personal sacrifice may have had more to do with demands of state stability than gender. Thus, although tendencies towards personal preference were muted in part by the weight of accountability in a conservative culture, more importantly, they were directed by political considerations. Though women, with few tangible political benefits had more than their share of hardships to contend with, the hand one was dealt in elite marriages seems dependent on whether one was male or female and more critically shaped by the bearing of one's family background on specific power alignments.

### **Sehin Mikael**

Sehin Mikael's importance is suggested first by her own marriages and those of her children. Along with Tsehaiworq Darge, Wzo. Sehin was a favored relative of Lij Iyasu. Her marriages detailed above created alliances with key personalities in Wallo and then with Shoan nobility. Upon her marriage to Nagadras HaileGiorgis, he was promoted to Bitwoded and made Chief Minister of Lij Iyasu whom he served until his persuasion to join the plot to overthrow him. One source confirms that Sehin Mikael's presence in the capital meant that she could relay information about the rising opposition to Iyasu while the latter was in Harar and Ras Mikael in Wallo. Sehin is said to have warned them of political developments in September 1916 and then advised the hasty appearance of Mikael from Dessie in the interest of protecting Iyasu's right to succession.<sup>249</sup> To whatever extent this may be true, Sehin Mikael's inclusion in the list of individuals

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<sup>249</sup> Wzo. Tsehaiworq Darge's husband and Iyasu's long-time trusted confidante, Tassama Eshete is also said to have provided Iyasu with early warning of the coup against him. See Solomon Gashaw, "Power Struggle in Addis Ababa 1906-1916," BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1971, pp. 64-67.

exiled due to their connection to Lij Iyasu, indicate that she was a woman of key political significance.<sup>250</sup>

The announcement of her death in October 1927 lamented the passing of a truly benevolent and generous woman with a religious core. Carefully avoiding her possible involvement in Iyasu's and Tafari's struggle, the government paper, *Berhanenna Selam*, spoke almost reverently of Wzo. Sehin as the daughter of a king and the mother of the future empress and described her passing that was recognized with a state funeral befitting her noble countenance.<sup>251</sup>

The seventh year observance of her death, though couched in similar language, is somewhat more revealing. After a brief description of her children, two of whom had died previously in quick succession causing Wzo. Sehin much grief and consequent ailments, the author alludes that she then fell prey to the seductive nature of worldly power. Thus, when Zawditu and later Haile Sellassie assumed the political reign, Wzo. Sehin fate to partake in the hardships of exile as she had once enjoyed the luxuries of power, was sealed. Her ailments reportedly worsened then. The author continues that it was not until her brother Iyasu's power declined and the regent's accordingly strengthened that she was reinstated to a home matching her stature. Framed amongst other philosophical statements is the curious rhetorical question: "Despite her generosity, had [Sehin Mikael] forgone her own immediate interests and known that her descendants would continue to rule Ethiopia, would she have grieved less for her father's death or her brother's deposition?"

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<sup>250</sup> Gebre Igzaibher, *The Chronicle of Iyasu*, ibid., p. 278.

<sup>251</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 16 Tikimt 1920 E.C. and 27 October 1927 E.C.

The tempered tone of both pieces is most probably due to the fact that Wzo. Sehin's was the mother of Empress Menen, against whom overt statements of disapproval would not have been tolerated. Her political activity is reproached in this context as near-sighted maneuvers for control, but once again attests to the awareness that elite women had of the dynamics of power. The rhetorical query indirectly acknowledges the strength of elite continuity based on multiple networks interwoven in the fabric of power. Thus, if Wzo. Sehin was distanced for her involvement and blood-relations to Iyasu, she was duly reinstated to respectful status for being the mother of the empress.

### **Tsehaiworq Darge**

Sometime in the 1920's, Lij Iyasu's great aunt Wzo. Tsehaiworq Darge staged a dramatic gesture to restore him to the throne, thus marking a rare instance of overt political action taken by a woman of elite background whose influence was based on family rather than institutional positioning.<sup>252</sup> The third daughter of Ras Darge Sahle Sellassie, Wzo. Tsehaiworq was related equally to both Tafari and Iyasu. An unusually independent woman, Tsehaiworq was described as one who shunned the habit of "staying home behind a curtain" as women of noble birth often did. Instead, she was an adept horsewoman and a good shot, even while being accomplished at knitting gloves and making shirts

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<sup>252</sup> There are two conflicting dates for this event. Aleqa Gebre Igziabher places this in 1921/22 G.C. while it was reported four years later in 1924/25 in *Berhanenna Selam* newspaper.

and socks. Held in high esteem by both Menilek and Taitu, she was by birth and choice among the most favored women courtiers of her time.<sup>253</sup>

Wzo. Tsehaiworq may have already been distanced from central court when the death of her sister, Tesseme Darge provided the excuse for her to return to the capital. Her personal attachment to Iyasu soon led her to plot and supposedly pay for an attempt on Tafari's life.<sup>254</sup> Part of the larger scheme included releasing the imprisoned heir and preparing the ground through propaganda for his return to rule.<sup>255</sup> Tsehaiworq's accomplices included unnamed nobility who were probably promised rewards upon Iyasu's release, and a certain Mohammed Abba Shanqo from Wallo, who curiously shared the *nom de guerre* of Nigus Mikael, and was well known for his accurate shooting skills.

The plot came to an abrupt and unexpected end when an Armenian restaurant owner, whose establishment was close to the proposed point of ambush asked the frequenting officers, seemingly innocently, why there was an armed guard watching his vicinity. Mohammed Abba Shanqo, who was laying wait for Tafari ironically by Ras Makonnen Bridge, was apprehended and arrested and the entire plot revealed.<sup>256</sup> The imperial law court met to decide the fate of five suspects, including Mohammed Shanqo, Wzo. Tsehaiworq and her husband, Ato. Tassama Eshete. The initial sentence of death was changed to

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<sup>253</sup> Herui Wolde Sellassie, *Yehiwot Tariq*, Addis Ababa, 1915 E.C., p. 100. Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menilek II: Ethiopia, 1883-1910*, (London: Ravens Educational and Development Services, 1986), p. 222.

<sup>254</sup> According to an informant whose father, also a Darge descendant, was implicated in this plot and consequently imprisoned, this was the third attempt by Wzo. Tsehaiworq. Informant 3, 1997.

<sup>255</sup> Merse Hazan Wolde Kirqos, *YeZemen Tarik tizitaye be Negeste Negest Zawditu zemene Mengist*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1938 E. C., p. 295. Gebre Igziabher, *ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>256</sup> Gebre Igziabher, *ibid.*



imprisonment, due reportedly to Tafari's clemency. Wzo. Tsehaiworq was exiled and lived until her death some years later.

Her husband, a traditional poet of great skill and himself guardian and confidante of Iyasu lamented his wife's fate in two couplets:

ባርያን ነፃ ብለው ሲያወጡ ሁሉን  
አዎረው ገደሉብኝ እንጀራ ጣዬን

እነሱን ደግሰ እነጸሐይወርቅ  
ግግራቸው ብሉ ዐለጥ ይደነቅ

The first roughly translated reads:

While all slaves were emancipated by your call to freedom

My life-line/sun was imprisoned and killed

Play on word Tsehai or Ta'y - my sun and short for Tsehaiworq's name.

The second:

Those like Lemma Demis and Tsehaiworq

Deserve the attention of the word for their beauty

Play on word *mamarachew* - which here can mean both beauty and "by whose compassion?" So the hidden meaning in the second line would read: Let them go free so the world may wonder at your compassion.<sup>257</sup>

Unlike Empress Taitu or others before her who occupied symbolic and political offices within the structure, Tsehaiworq probably relied on her birthright as Ras Darge's daughter and her personal closeness to Iyasu to summon support and draw attention to her plan and its eventual execution. She was described by Bejirond Takla Hawariat as a woman who was financially independent and "used to living in exile," which suggests her early and continual

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<sup>257</sup> Tassama Eshete, *Seminna Worqu*, (Addis Ababa: Bole Publishing Agency, 1985 E.C.), p. 79 and p. 88.

political involvement. His caustic remarks demean her withering beauty which made her look older than a mother to her husband Tassama Eshete. Sexual transgression is implied in her closeness to Iyasu, for whom she allegedly prepared food and cleverly discussed political matters in the flow of other conversations, an approach the author found particularly well-suited for Iyasu's character.<sup>258</sup>

The intent investigation and tenacity of officers that led to Tafari Makonnen's discovery of Wzo. Tsehaiworq's secret scheme is lauded in a short paragraph in *Berhanenna Selam*. With thinly concealed disgust, the unknown author describes Wzo. Tsehaiworq as a woman of important birth but lowly intellect for having challenged the progressive wave of change personified by the future emperor Haile Sellassie.<sup>259</sup> Despite the failure of her plan and its relatively unique documentation, Wzo. Tsehaiworq's actions suggest an alternative influential path to politics, power and protection of particular interests especially available to women who could access and galvanize support through family alliances when positioned outside formal institutional structures.

### **Zawditu**

Wzo. Zawditu Menilek's crowning as empress in 1916 was one which placed a woman ruler on the Ethiopian throne for the first time since the Queen of Sheba announced that there would be no more women rulers after her reign.<sup>260</sup> Her ceremony on 11 February was an impressive affair with one-

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<sup>258</sup> Quoted from Bejirond Takla Hawariat's autobiography, see Aleme Eshete, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>259</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, Nehase 1917 E.C.

<sup>260</sup> Chris Prouty and Eugene Rosenfeld, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia*, (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981), p. 191.

hundred thousand pageantry in attendance and countless people lining the streets to St. George cathedral where the coronation would take place. Zawditu's ladies in waiting, identified as "awalde mengist" to indicate their royal birth in the language of the day, were awarded golden headbands and seated according to their rank.<sup>261</sup> Zawditu took communion before the crown was placed on her head and her coronation address harked back to the days of her father which she hoped to recreate through her diligent protection of the poor and committed exercise of good judgement.

Although Zawditu's speech intimated her direct and active involvement in government affairs, she did little to openly seek, grasp or wield political and military power.<sup>262</sup> Nonetheless, her sense of her own place at the apex of the hierarchical power structure was indicated by her appointment of her nephew, Ras Wolde Giorgis Aboye, as Nigus of the north and governor of Semen, Agewmidir, Ambassel and Sayint.<sup>263</sup> Zawditu's strength lay in her mediation role between the ruling triumvirate of herself, Tafari and Fit. Habte Giorgis. The progressive element was spearheaded by Tafari who pushed towards reform and Ethiopia's involvement in the world economy and politics while the conservative old guard, headed by Fit. Habte Giorgis, resisted change and was suspicious of cultivating foreign relations.

Opposing viewpoints of these competing factions escalated to antagonism on several occasions. Junior officers known as "mahal safari" formed an

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<sup>261</sup> These were listed by Merse Hazen as Wzo. Tiseme Darge, Wzo. Zerfeshiwal Seifu, Wzo. Sematoi Aboye, Wzo. Asselefech Wonde (also known as Asselefech Wolde Hanna), and Wzo. Astede Haile. See Merse Hazen, *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>262</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> He died one year later in 1910. See Merse Hazen, *ibid.*, p. 123.

executive-committee or derg that demanded such reform as the suspension of ministers in 1918, or support for Ethiopia's entry into the League of Nations in 1919. Zawditu's conciliatory intervention avoided mass disturbance and demonstrated her ability as a capable leader. By 1919, it was clear that compared to the conservative reaction of fear and resistance to change, Tafari's vision-seemed better informed and oriented for the future of the country. Zawditu, who herself had strong leanings toward the conventional, was persuaded by the need for foresight offered by Tafari and eventually declared her full support of his reforms by transferring executive power to him.<sup>264</sup>

Judging by the fact that she was married four times, Zawditu's birthright as Menilek's daughter held immense political possibilities. Her first marriage to Araya Sellassie Yohannes in 1883 ended abruptly with his death in 1888. Curiously little is known of her second and third marriages to Gwangul Zegeye and Webe Atnaf Seged, respectively. Wag Shum/Dejazmach Gwangul Zegeye was from Wag, a close and respected member of Menilek's court.<sup>265</sup> Zawditu had one daughter with him who only lived to be two years old.<sup>266</sup> Dejazmach Webe Atnaf Seged; Zawditu's husband for four years, was also a man favored by Menilek and a warrior from Shoa whose father, Liqemeqwas Atnafseged, enjoyed equally good relations with the emperor.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>265</sup> Mahatama Sellase Walda Masqal, "Che Belew," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 2, July 1969, p. 288.

<sup>266</sup> Merse Hazen Wolde Kirqos, *YeZemen tarik Tezitaye be Negeste Negest Zawditu Zemena Mengist*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1938 E.C., Addis Ababa University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, p. 523.

<sup>267</sup> Mahatama Sellase Walda Masqal, *ibid.*, p. 270 and Merse Hazen Wolde Kirqos, *ibid.*

More is available in a manuscript written by Grazmach Asfaw Tassamma on the life of Zawditu's fourth husband, Ras Gugsa Wele, who remained a bane to Tafari until his death in 1930.<sup>268</sup> His 1900 marriage to Zawditu was arranged by his aunt Taitu, and Dejach Gugsa became Ras on the occasion. He was exiled with her in Afkira and Fale during Ras Tassama's regency and Lij Iyasu's reign, presumably because he would pose a threat by staking his own claim in the power struggle. When Zawditu was crowned empress, she officially separated from Ras Gugsa who was not invited to attend the ceremony, and gave him permission to marry a woman of his choice. He married Wzo. Bizunesh from Lasta, who was a beautiful woman according to the author's glimpses of her in her trips to church surrounded by Ras Gugsa's men.

Zawditu and Gugsa continued to have amicable relations which was not welcomed by those who sought his political alienation. His independent spirit, best captured in the author's description of Gugsa's choice of clothes, could have only added aggravation to the situation.<sup>269</sup> As his temporary ally Ras Hailu in Gojjam, Ras Gugsa was displaced by the progressive wave set in motion by Ras Tafari and his supporters. He belittled the Western education and non-aristocratic birth of the Young Ethiopians running the government and was critical of the foreign experts whose methods made those of the traditional nobility appear outdated.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Grazmach Asfaw Tesemma Worqe, *Ye Ras Gugsa Wele Tariq*, 1969, MS IES 998.

<sup>269</sup> Ras Gugsa had preference for finely spun cotton and was particularly averse to the jodhpur-like Tafari trousers which had such tight fit below the knees that they had to be put on by sliding them in over newspapers. No doubt in a subtle political statement of rejecting the regent as well as avoiding discomfiture, he opted for widely cut pantaloons with his signature red, yellow and green drawstrings. See Asfaw Tesemma Worqe, *ibid.*, p. 5 and p. 7.

<sup>270</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 93.

Banned from Addis Ababa, Gugsu was given Sayint and Imbabo to rule, although the importance of keeping his family in the political loop was indicated by the marriage of Gugsu's brother, Dejach Amede Wele, to an unnamed woman previously selected for him by Taitu. The ceremony was arranged by Zawditu on the groom's side and Ras Tafari on behalf of the bride. Dejach Amede was then appointed to rule Begemidir but lived only a week after his marriage.<sup>271</sup> Zawditu later asserted personal politics by restoring Gugsu to his previous role of Begemidir after the death of Nigus Wolde Giorgis in 1917.<sup>272</sup>

According to Grazmach Asfaw, whose manuscript is partly based on Ras Gugsu's own reminiscences, small misunderstandings such as Gugsu's breach of protocol by greeting Tafari indoors while visiting Zawditu, were the cause of friction between Gugsu and the regent. As tensions escalated between them, Zawditu was drawn into actively persuading Gugsu to submit. The phone messages sent from Zawditu to Gugsu reveal the angst of an elite woman of royal birth once again caught in the cross-fire that tore apart her personal commitment from her political responsibility.

In these messages, Zawditu assured Gugsu that she found the rumors about him exaggerated and was waiting for his explanation. In an almost maternal tone which noted the passing of both Empress Taitu and Ras Wele, who would presumably have guarded Gugsu's interests, Zawditu expressed her personal closeness to him and her availability to hear his grievances. In her second message Zawditu warned Gugsu that as empress she was privy to

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<sup>271</sup>His death was hidden from Ras Gugsu for some time. Asfaw Tesemma Worqe, *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>272</sup>Merse Hazen Wolde Kirqos, *ibid.*, pp. 501-502.

rumors that implicated her involvement in tensions between him and Tafari. She urgently pleaded that he considered mending his ways to avoid falling from grace over simple matters and respond to the regent's summons to appear in Were Ilu. She beseeched in the name of Menilek, Taitu and Wele, to trust the guarantee she provided that he would not be harmed in any way. Ras Gugsa's response is recorded as a one line retort that he had not betrayed the empress, implying that he was no traitor to the rightful ruler. Around February of 1929 (30 Yekatit 1922 E. C.) Zawditu sent her last message that registered her impatience at Gugsa's vague replies. Her resignation and final resolve on the matter was succinct, "You are not more important to me than my father's throne."<sup>273</sup>

Between 1928 and 1929, the north was suffering from drought and locusts resulting in widespread unrest as communities struggled over what meager resources were available. The malcontent grew and took on religious, class and ethnic overtones pitting Christians against Muslims, and the Oromo against the Afar and Somali. Central government feared opportune Italian infiltration through Ogaden. Ras Gugsa was ordered to establish order in Oromo Raya country which he did by possibly striking a secret deal that ended the raiding on the Eritrean front. As the unrest continued, an anxious Ras Tafari requested Ras Gugsa's presence at a meeting to discuss strategy at which point Ras Gugsa thought he had been found out.<sup>274</sup>

Ras Gugsa directed his anger at Ras Tafari, accusing him of treason and cooperation with Italy as well as apostasy to Roman Catholicism. He rejected the

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<sup>273</sup> Merse Hazen Wolde Kirqos, *ibid.*, pp. 508-514.

<sup>274</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 94.

changes he felt were imposed on the country, and joined the rebels. Zawditu presided over what would be her last council which ordered immediate war against her husband. Tafari, now in a strengthened position which included the services of the one aircraft introduced in 1929, mobilized a campaign against the defiant Ras Gugsa and the northern rebels.

The campaign lasted about one month within which time the Oromo and Afar resistance was destroyed by Ras Mulugeta and bombing raids were carried out over Gugsa's ten thousand terrified troops. The use of air power displayed the tangible benefits of advanced technology and once again confirmed Tafari's progressive foresight in the face of conservative resistance. Empress Zawditu, ailing from paratyphoid fever further complicated by her diabetic condition, would not be informed of her husband's death. She died one day after the victorious announcement on 2 April with a grief-stricken Tafari tending her bedside. Following the appropriate obsequies for Zawditu, the Council of State unanimously elevated Tafari to emperor the next day.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 96.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **HAILE SELASSIE'S ERA: FAMILY & POWER IN A MODERNIZING STATE**

If unification is considered one of the dominant themes of nineteenth century Ethiopian history, then political consolidation would be among the overriding concerns of the first half of the twentieth century. Consolidation took place both under the person of Emperor Haile Sellassie, and the increasing centralization of state machinery. Scholars have engaged in numerous studies and discussions on aspects such as the personality of the emperor, the socio-economic conditions that allowed for the transformation from a “traditional” to a “modern” autocracy, and the internal and external events that shaped Haile Sellassie's reign of enduring longevity.

Elite families of the period exhibited continuity from Menilek's era, even while marriages adjusted to accommodate the new and more progressive policies. In line with the internal struggles that ensued with the emperor's attempts to strengthen control from the center, elite marriages before the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 had overtly political intent that seemed muted in the post-war years. This chapter will use available secondary and primary sources to trace the history of elite families and, where possible, reconstruct their marriage patterns in the foreground of an increasingly modernizing state. When and where sources allow, the varied position of elite women will also be presented and discussed with an aim to explore their presence and activities behind or beyond the institutional power structure. Despite the difficulty of precise

evaluation, underscoring this feature of contemporary Ethiopian history will serve as a preliminary query on what bearing an intermarried elite with common interests and an increasingly shared identity had in the act of creating nation both in political and social terms.

### **PROGRESS & POWER UNTIL 1935**

In the years leading up to his coronation until 1935, Haile Sellassie actively resumed and expanded the process of modernization began by his predecessors. The introduction of electricity which predated that of automobiles in 1922 were early signs of the comforts of progress of which, not surprisingly, the elite were first beneficiaries. Haile Sellassie's twin concerns of consolidating power and establishing modern institutions and programs to actualize his vision were mutually complimentary. Functional control of the economy, the institutionalizing of government and an initially fledgling then expansive program on education were among the key features characterizing this period which lay the foundation for the forty-four year reign of the monarch.<sup>276</sup>

Contemporary scholars have noted how Menilek's expansion south resulted in increased opportunities for the enlargement of the northern elite as they became a class of landowners due to land alienation and accumulation in conquered provinces.<sup>277</sup> The economic base of the ruling elite in post-Adwa days was further broadened by their developing business instincts that nurtured

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<sup>276</sup> Other important developments included the establishment of a centralized and standing army, the specialized training of the Imperial Body Guard as well as the founding of military academies (Bale in 1933 and Holeta in 1934). This weakened and eventually dismantled the armies of the regional nobility. Ethiopia's increasing involvement in world politics was also a significant effort undertaken by the emperor who hoped for greater protection and economic opportunities for the country.

<sup>277</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia – Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

relationships between its members and expatriate members and concessionaries. Thus Menilek had a thriving business lending money to Indian traders, and Taitu tested her entrepreneurial skills by establishing the first hotel and organizing the most ambitious venture of the time, the Ethiopian bank.<sup>278</sup>

The death of Fit. Habte Giorgis in 1926 removed the overlord of the south and control over appointments there added to Tafari's wealth.<sup>279</sup> The transformations continued with the advent of cash crops and commercial agriculture in the 1920s which created new opportunities for profits that were controlled and mediated by the imperial family and ruling elite. The completion of the railroad from Djibouti to Dire Dawa in 1902 and its extension to the capital in 1917 further facilitated trade.<sup>280</sup>

Taxes from trade in the provinces supplied most of the revenues for the central government and provided the root cause of conflict with some regional rulers. Haile Sellassie's fiscal policy focused on centralizing customs through an elaborate system of customs administration. Rases like Kassa and Seyoum had conceded to central control over taxes while others like Gugsa Wele and Hailu resented and fought against these measures. Officials of the central government were the head of regional merchants and mayors. By accepting such mandates, provincial rulers were implicitly encouraged to place the needs of the capital and the nation before their own. Among other things, revenues from these taxes were

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<sup>278</sup> Bahru Zawde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>279</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellassie*, *ibid.*, pp. 78-79. In addition, Fitawarari Habte Giorgis's personal force of 15 thousand was assumed by Tafari and his function as Minister of War was divided between officials with less influence.

<sup>280</sup> Princess Menen governed Deder in Chercher, an area rich in coffee and collected fees from dealers wishing to conduct business there. Both she and Tafari owned lands that traded produces grown by sharecroppers. Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 80.

funneled into building roads, facilitating commerce and expanding the range of government.<sup>281</sup>

In 1930, parallel reforms in the government reflected Haile Sellassie's selection of largely non-aristocratic and progressive men to run the bureaucracy while remaining sensitive to the position of traditional nobility over hereditary regions. Makonnen Habte Wolde was appointed Director General in the Ministry of Finance which was headed by Ras Getachew Abata, soon replaced by Bejirond Takla Hawariat. Dejazmach Nasibu Zamanuel, distanced by most courtiers because of his Catholic missionary education, was respected for his leadership abilities and commitment to progress. He spoke Italian and French and was indispensable in training a disciplined gendarmerie force for the emperor, who elevated him to the director of the Ministry of War, nominally headed by the weaker Fit. Biru who had replaced Ras Mulugeta.<sup>282</sup> With background in church education and secular training in French, Blatta Herui Wolde Sellassie served as the acting Foreign Minister (1878-1938). Most of these Young Ethiopians shared three things in common: loyalty to the emperor whose favor and patronage determined their status, commitment to progressive idea, and often, exposure to Western education or culture.

The 1931 promulgation of the first Ethiopian constitution provided the framework for modern government and achieved unprecedented national consensus in its endorsement by the ruling elite.<sup>283</sup> By placing Haile Sellassie as the ultimate power over the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies and the army, the

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<sup>281</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>282</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>283</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *ibid.*, p. 117.

constitution confirmed the emperor's supremacy over all legislative, executive and judicial matters. The constitution was drafted by Bajerond Takla Hawariat and modeled after the Japanese Meiji constitution.<sup>284</sup> The decade of the 1920s had seen an increased interest and discussions among Ethiopian intellectuals on the history of Japan, a country that had, like Ethiopia, maintained its independence and had successfully charted and embarked on its own path to progress which some proposed to emulate.<sup>285</sup>

Secular education was the emperor's vehicle of choice to promote progress and sustain the activities of the centralized and increasingly complex state machinery. Funds from the private imperial treasury were used to finance the education of those sent abroad as early as 1920, while the educational work of foreign missionaries were encouraged and schools were built in the capital. Following Menilek's 1908 precedence of establishing Menilek II, the first government school in Addis Ababa, the Prince Regent founded Tafari Makonnen School on palace grounds in 1925.

Local governors, nobility and elite women took active interest by joining the effort of promoting education. Wzo. Sehin Mikael established a French language primary school in Dessie and in 1931 her daughter, Empress Menen,

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<sup>284</sup> An analysis of the concept of Japanization among Ethiopian intellectuals and a sample of similarities and differences between the two documents is available in the annex of Bahru Zewde, "The concept of Japanization in the Intellectual History of Modern Ethiopia," *Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the Department of History*, Addis Ababa University Press, 1990.

<sup>285</sup> For a more recent discussion on why the Japanese approach to modernization was more successful than the Ethiopian one, see Messay Kebede, "Japan and Ethiopia: An Appraisal of similarities and Divergent Courses," in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective – Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 1, Kyoto, 1997.

opened a school specifically geared for the education of women.<sup>286</sup> Middle Eastern and European instructors were hired, as were foreign educated Ethiopians. Western oriented training was not designed to displace indigenous church education but serve the functionary role of providing trained civil servants for the bureaucracy. Amharic language schools were opened in Jima, Adwa, Debre Markos and Jijiga as well as Addis Ababa, Gore, Nekemte and Dire Dawa becoming a tool of indoctrination as well as one of national unity and integration. By 1935, twenty government schools were functioning in different parts of the country though largely concentrated in the capital.

## **ELITE FAMILIES & MARRIAGES UNTIL 1935**

### **The Imperial Family**

Haile Sellassie's act of balancing traditional forces with progressive ones in government was reflected in the marriage patterns before the Italo-Ethiopian war. The marriage of his daughter Zenebework and his son Asfa Wossen in 1931 and 1932 respectively, indicated the importance of maintaining close relations with the Tigrean royal family. Zenebework Haile Sellassie was wed to Haile Sellassie Gugsu on (9 SENE 1924), coinciding closely with an occasion of Lij lyasu's capture. Both bride and groom partook of the Holy Communion, setting the perfect example to others, according to an invited guest who wrote a description of the wedding in *Berhanenna Selam*.

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<sup>286</sup> Academic subjects were studied as well as dressmaking, drawing and household management. Qualifying exams for the French certificate of competency in primary studies could also be taken. See Claire Kobes Jasperdean, "Modernization in Ethiopia 1916-1966: Politics and Education," MA thesis, 1970, p. 28.

In preparation, a house in Akaki owned by Sehin Mikael was appropriately remodeled and outfitted with new roads and bridges for a smoother automobile ride. A certain Kegnazmach Wolde Yohannes Woldeab had accomplished his building task so efficiently, that he was awarded an automobile of his own by the pleased emperor! The astounding beauty of the bride and groom had guests speculating on the kinds of children they would bear, according to the anonymous author. Select students who were studying foreign languages entered the hall where celebrations were taking place and spread rose petals to the delight of the wedding party. Others who were trained to play European instruments performed for the guests, led by their Armenian musical director Nalbandian. The French government representative offered a toast that was translated as champagne was poured to the invited diplomats.

Their departure signaled a noticeable shift in the evening's program which became more Ethiopian in content. The two hundred or so guests of Ras Gugsa Araya were presented with gifts and a certain Grazmach Geraze staged a mock *fukera* or war poem seemingly to protest the meagerness of his share, an oversight quickly amended by more gifts from the emperor. The celebrations continued with enthusiastic crowds cheering the bride and groom on their way to Ras Gugsa's home where feasts were held for two more days.<sup>287</sup>

The Western elements incorporated in this wedding ceremony contrast sharply with the description of an earlier wedding at the imperial palace. On 18 Tir 1922/23, Wzo. Romanworq Haile Sellassie, the daughter of the then Dejazmach Tafari and a woman named Wzo. Weynitu Amde from Wallo , who

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<sup>287</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 16 Sene 1924 E.C.

attended the wedding<sup>288</sup> was married to Fitawrari Beyene, the son of Dejach Merid Habtemariam who was a member of Menilek's court.<sup>289</sup> This was a communion wedding, considered a rarity by Merse Hazan Wolde Kirqos who indulges us in a detailed description of the prayers and rituals that began at 1 a.m. in the morning and lasted until 5 a.m. with only Romanworq allowed to recline on a short bed as directed by sacred laws. Liturgy resumed at 6 a.m. and the bride and groom took communion after which festivities commenced at Prince Regent Tafari's compound. The following day, a platform was prepared for the departure ceremonies of Romanworq. Ras Nadew, Dejach Haile Sellassie Abayneh, Aleqa Gebre Medhin, Blatta Herui and Lij Makonnen Indalkachew accompanied Tafari on the platform. The bride, clad in a gold embroidered dress with a crown on her head, was carried out in traditional style on an attendant's back, to her husband's side.<sup>290</sup>

In contrast, the description of Crown Prince Asfa Wossen's marriage to Walata Israel Seyoum on 8 April 1932 further emphasized the inclusion of foreign features at such occasions. The elevated position of the educated elite, who were implicitly encouraged to attain lessons in nation building from this union were underscored. On behalf of the groom, Bitwoded Wolde Tsadik presented Ras Seyoum Mengesha with finely embroidered clothes, 70 mules and 100 horses all handsomely decorated. Other gifts too numerous to detail by

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<sup>288</sup> Her mother was named Wzo. Lomita and she was from Borena and Legahida while Ato. Amede Aliye who served in Ras Makonnen's household in Harar. Merse Hazen, *Ye Zemen Tarik Tizitaye be Nigiste negest Zawditu Zamana Mengist*, ibid., p. 247.

<sup>289</sup> He was Menilek's Agafari and Ilfign Askelkai "Che Belew," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. VII No. 2, July 1969, p. 215.

<sup>290</sup> Merse Hazen, ibid., pp. 242-247.



Blattengeta Mahateme Sellassie Wolde Meskel, who recorded his observations, were also exchanged and a communion ceremony marked the occasion with church sanctity.

In celebration of this union, *Berhanenna Selam* described the imperial feast to which members and employees of the Ministry of Education as well as teachers and students were invited. The anonymous author notes that guests clothed in Ethiopian traditional attire were shown to one hall while those clad in European clothes, indicating their newly arrived from abroad status, were shown to the newer hall. Dejach Aberra Kassa hosted the event and the guests were treated to the violin of Muse Nalbandian and Muse Albert, two Armenians from a group who were invited to Ethiopia to teach European music. The champagne toast to the newlyweds was offered, among others, by the Minister of Education Melake Hiwot Wolde Hanna, followed by Bitwoded Getachew Abata.

Bitwoded Getachew, who was married to the niece of the bride, stressed the importance of the occasion not just for the couple but for the younger generation of guests and to the nation as a whole. Another stirring toast hailed the greatness of the bride and groom's ancestry, blessed Ethiopia's independence and unity symbolized by this marriage as Wallo , Tigre and Shoa were seen to be tied together with familial love, spiritual brotherhood and kinship that would inspire strength and grace in each citizen to guard the nation's sovereignty. The article further noted the reaches of modernity, as the bride was

seated to the right of the groom in view of the guests, whereas before she would have been covered and hidden.<sup>291</sup>

In view of the presumed future succession of the Crown Prince to the Ethiopian throne, the significance of this dynastic alliance was major. Contemporary oral informants have mixed impressions of this marriage which they perceive as having been forced upon the Crown Prince. A gentler viewpoint is provided by family members of Walata Israel who describe her as having been a very religious woman with an amazing capacity for generosity. She played the *begena*, a string instrument associated with incantations of the Psalm of David and painted religious icons, some of which she donated to churches. Her first marriage to Dejach Gebre Sellassie B'arya Gabir, a man only about three years younger than her grandfather, Ras Mengesha, gave Walata Israel an air of maturity beyond her years. This marriage was considered the classic "blood drying" arrangement that brought an end to the altercations between Ras Seyoum and Dejach Gebre Sellassie.<sup>292</sup>

Her marriage to the Crown Prince was also highly political and, perhaps with the help of hindsight, many consider it Haile Sellassie's effort to placate the Tigrean ruling family who missed the chance of being represented at the palace when the emperor did not marry Wzo. Aster Mengesha. In fact, the Crown Prince was said to have been so traumatized by the earlier possibility of his mother being displaced that he never quite forgave his father and was unwilling to make

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<sup>291</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 19 April 1932.

<sup>292</sup> Informant 4, Summer 1997.

the attempt between himself and Walata Israel work.<sup>293</sup> Whether or not these are mere speculations, the noticeable distance between father and son could not have been aided by such tensions.

Walata Israel had prior connections to Wello through close relations with her step-mother, Wzo. Tewabech, the daughter of Nigus Mikael. There, she had also struck friendship with the future Empress Menen so that when she left as the Crown Prince's bride to his Dessie headquarters, she was essentially returning to family.<sup>294</sup> Her experience was not unique as it was very much in the age-old practice of the imperial palace to take in and raise the sons and daughters of nobility, sometimes referred to collectively as "*yechewa lij*." These young girls and boys were taught the necessary skills and etiquette before they came of age and were married to suitable partners that matched their standing.<sup>295</sup>

Though the specific evaluation of this practice is difficult to assess, its contribution towards elite socialization and cohesion was major. Elite values and practices were reproduced while certain uniformity was maintained between groups of different regional identities and languages. According to the grandchildren of Walata Israel, who were products of Wallo /Shoa, Tigre and Oromo nobility, this hardly avoided the confusion experienced by a young child who was expected to understand the language of heavy protocol and formality at the palace, and the spoken languages of Tigre and Oromo in the homes of parents, grandparent and related kin. Despite the sometimes thinly veiled hostility such imposition caused and the innate fragility of intermarriage, it provided an

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<sup>293</sup> Informants 5, 6 & 7, Summer 1997.

<sup>294</sup> Informant 4, Summer 1997.

<sup>295</sup> Mahteme Sellassie Wolde Meskel, *Zikre Neger*, Addis Ababa, 1962 E.C., p. 581.

enduring framework for diverse families from around the country to coalesce around their shared interests over and above their cultural and linguistic differences.

As it was, both Zenebworq's and Asfa Wossen's marriages did not endure for different reasons. Crown Prince Asfa Wossen and Li'ilt Walata Israel had a daughter, Ijgayehu, and were together until around 1943 when they parted ways after prolonged separation during the Italian invasion and presumable marital enstrangement. Zenebworq Haile Sellassie died very soon after her marriage to Haile Sellassie Gugsu. Not one to let an opportunity on modernizing cultural habits go astray, the emperor used her death as an occasion to issue a proclamation on modifying grieving customs. Though burdened by her loss, Haile Sellassie admonished that grieving indefinitely would liken him to those who had little hope in the world, which would set a bad example to the nation. As the chosen guardian of his people's well-being, he was compelled to issue detailed rules on how many days should be set aside for the dirge and encouraged women to desist from bringing bodily harm to themselves while grieving.<sup>296</sup>

### **Model of Progress & Potential Marriage?**

By far the most ambitious venture in marriage alliances was the one proposed between the emperor's nephew "prince" (actually Lij) Araya Abebe and the Japanese "princess" Kuroda Masako. This event stirred popular excitement in Japan whose economic, political and cultural interest in Ethiopia had heightened in the 1930s. Though not in official capacity, Lij Araya had accompanied Blat. Herui on his grand tour of Japan in 1931 following the signing of a Treaty of

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<sup>296</sup> The proclamation was issued on 19 Megabit 1925 E.C. See Merse Hazen, *Ye Zemen Tarik*, pp. 592-593.

Friendship and Commerce with Tokyo in 1930.<sup>297</sup> The desire to marry a Japanese woman was supposedly initiated by Lij Araya himself to fulfill his "long cherished ambition."<sup>298</sup> The twenty-three year old Kuroda Masako, the descendant of a feudal lord, was selected over almost twenty respondents to Lij Araya's announcement seeking a Japanese bride. Her enthusiastic preparation as candidate included studying the customs and habits of Ethiopia.

Within Ethiopia, intellectuals who approved of "Japanizing" the path to progress found the proposed marriage appealing. This would seal close relations between imperial families and pave the way for mutually beneficial commercial ventures between the two countries. The international dimensions of this alliance were perceptible as Japan sought to undercut European designs on Ethiopia, even evoking racial unity against colonial powers. The alarmed reaction of European countries, especially Italy, attested to the encroachment on interests such a marriage would cause and its potential as a political unifier of two historically independent nations.<sup>299</sup>

As it was, Japanese business enterprises with less than transparent intent raised the suspicion of Ethiopians who reported much less on the proposed marriage than their Japanese counterparts and European critics.<sup>300</sup> Largely due to internal and external pressures, Lij Araya Abebe was eventually instructed not to respond to letters he received from his potential bride.<sup>301</sup> By 1935, the matter

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<sup>297</sup> J. Clavitt Clarke III, "Marriage Alliance: The Union of Two Imperiums, Japan and Ethiopia?" *Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians*, Vol. 6/7, December 1999, pp. 105-116.

<sup>298</sup> J. Clavitt Clarke III, *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>299</sup> Kato Kanju, the president of the National Council of Trade Unions in Japan went so far as to accuse Mussolini of blocking the marriage. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>300</sup> J. Clavitt Clarke III, *ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>301</sup> Interview with his son Amaha Araya in the *Reporter*, Vol. 1 No. 5, Yekatit 1990 E.C.

was dismissed as groundless by the *New York Times* and soon forgotten with the looming threat of the Italian invasion later that same year. Lij Araya was married to Wzo. Mulumebet Abebe and sent to New York to aide Dr. Melaku Bayen's efforts towards raising awareness of Ethiopia's plight among sympathetic black communities in the U.S.<sup>302</sup> Despite the fact that the wedding did not occur, its very attempt underscored the political potential symbolized by such unions even at the international level.

### **Elite of continuity from Menilek's era**

Beyond such dramatic efforts, many families from the previous era maintained their positions close to the power center and continued to inter-marry amongst each other and with the descendants of Sahle Sellassie. Although most of these marriages are difficult to date precisely, the general divide of pre- and post war unions provides a working time-line for organizing purposes. From the ruling families of Tigre, Ras Seyoum had by this time been widowed by the death of his wife Tewabech Mikael and was married to Wzo. Atsedo Asfaw, the granddaughter of Ras Darge and the previous wife of Ras Kebede Mengesha from Gojjam.<sup>303</sup>

Another descendant of Ras Darge, Dejach Aberra Kassa was married to Ras Seyoum Mengesha's daughter, Wzo. Kebbedech. Gugsu Araya, the grandson of Emperor Yohannes and Wzo. Yeshashworq Yilma, the daughter of Haile Sellassie's older half-brother Yilma Makonnen and Wzo. Asselfech Wolde

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<sup>302</sup> His wife is the daughter of Ras Abebe Damtew and Wzo. Wosenyesh Mengesha Atikem of Gojjam. She had previously been married to Fit. Biru, the War Minister.

<sup>303</sup> Tewabech Mikael died on 12 Tir 1917 E.C. Merse Hazen, *YeZemen tarik Tizitaye*, *ibid.*, p. 274.

Hanna, were noted as husband and wife in 1921 E.C., although by 1926 E.C. she was the wife of Ras Makonnen Demissew.

In Gojjam, though Ras Kebede's liason with Wzo. Astede had not lasted, Bitwoded Makonnen Indalkachew had married Wzo. Zawditu, the daughter of Menilek's governor Mengesha Atikem. Mengesha's granddaughter, Wzo. Mulumebet Abebe, the daughter of Ras Abebe Damtew and Wzo. Wesenyelesh, was married to the Minister of War, Fit. Biru Habtemariam (also known as Biru Wolde Gabrie) on Sene 6, 1924 E.C. A brief description of this wedding recalls the blare of loud horns and drums that seemed to reach the sky followed by festivities and gift giving.<sup>304</sup> Wzo. Mulumebet was the same woman who later married Lij Abebe Araya of Japanese proposal fame.

Following his fall from grace, relatives of Gojjam's Ras Hailu were ostensibly distanced from the imperial palace. An article on Ras Hailu's alleged deceit since the time of Menilek appeared in June 1932, detailing his seemingly opportunistic political maneuvers.<sup>305</sup> His sister Nigist Takla Haimanot had already quarreled with him on account of land inheritance, an issue resolved by the emperor's involvement. According to *Berhanenna Selam*, her children Dejach Kassa Mesfin and Fit. Admasu spent time in the capital awaiting audience and word of their fate from the emperor until he capitulated and sent them to Gojjam with gifts and the order that Ras Imru grant them land.<sup>306</sup>

Other descendants of Nigist Takla Haimanot continued to intermarry with important regional families. Wzo. Zenebeworq, a daughter of Nigist Takla

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<sup>304</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 16 Sene 1924 E.C.

<sup>305</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 23 June 1932.

<sup>306</sup> See *Berhanenna Selam*, 23 Ginbot 1926 E.C.

Haimanot and Ras Mesfin of Damot, married the son of Ras Kassa, Dejach Asfa Wossen. In 1928, *Berhanenna Selam* reported the marriage of Dejach Girmay Mengesha, grandson of Emperor Yohannes, with another daughter of Nigist Takla Haimanot's and Ras Mesfin's. Less than half a year from his wedding, the death of this 33 year-old groom was reported in September 1921.<sup>307</sup> His sister, Almaz Mengesha, the daughter of Kefei Wele and Mengesha Yohannes, married Dejach Taye Gulelate, a descendant of Sahle Sellassie from a contending family line.

Nobility from Lasta and Wag were also absorbed into the royal center. The son of Ras Kassa, Dejach Wondwossen was married to a woman named Wzo. Zerfeshiwal Gwangul from Wag. Though it is unclear if they were related in February 1926, Dejach Kebede Gwangul was married to Wzo. Abebech, the daughter of Dejach Mekuria Germame and Wzo. Asselefech Wolde Hanna.<sup>308</sup> Wzo. Asselefech, the niece of Empress Taitu with Yajju Oromo, Semen and Gondar heritage was, as can be recalled, married several times in the previous era and was here paired with the son of Menilek's general Dejach Germame.

Her nephew Dejach Ambachew Gessese, was first married to Wzo. Konjit Abinet, the emperor's cousin then to Wzo. Ayehubirhan Haile Sellassie, the half-sister of Ras Imru in May 1931.<sup>309</sup> Wzo. Ayehubirhan was raised in the palace and the occasion of her marriage made front page news and was reported in two

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<sup>307</sup> She later married Dejach Matebe then Fit. Tasew, then returned to Dejach Matebe with whom she remained until her death in September 1933. See *Berhanenna Selam*, 12 October 1933.

<sup>308</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 4 February 1926.

<sup>309</sup> In Menilek's era, Dejach Ambachew's father Gessesse Welde Hanna had been one of the two competitive suitors of Nigist Tekle Haimanot, the daughter of the Gojjame king (the other being Merid Mengesha Atikem). She asked the emperor's advice but he told her the decision was hers. Her choice of Gessesse almost resulted in a war between the two suitors which was resolved by the threat of troops going from Addis Ababa to support Gessesse. See Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menilek*, *ibid.*, p. 235.



more articles that detailed the festivities. On this occasion, favorable mention was made of the emperor's modernizing ways, such as not allowing the bride and groom to spend the night in the bride's parent's house or ending the tradition of bride decoys set up to confuse the groomsmen of the real identity of the wife who is then carried away – all considered signs of progress.<sup>310</sup> From Wallo, the empress was the symbol of Nigus Mikael's ancestry and her nephew, Dejach Amede Ali, was married to Ras Kassa's daughter Wzo. Tisseme in 1923 E.C.

### **Absorbing the new**

Progressive individuals and the newly selected men of the emperor along with the educated few were also absorbed into the power center. Perhaps as an early sign of his importance to Haile Sellassie, Dejach Nasibu Zamanel who was then in his early 30s and the Ethiopian Consular in Eritrea, was married to the thirteen-year old Wzo. Konjit Abinet. She was the granddaughter of the emperor's aunt, Wzo. Ithemariam Wolde Mikael, but had been raised in the palace as close friends to and age-mate of Tenagneworq.

They were married in the palace, and the curious Wzo. Konjit opted to leave to Asmara with her groom – though both missed catching the train and had to be sent on the emperor's special train instead.<sup>311</sup> Dejach Nasibu and Wzo. Konjit did not stay married for long as his betrothal to Mademoiselle Merusiyan (later identified as Astede) Babichef was announced in 1917 E.C.<sup>312</sup> Wzo. Konjit

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<sup>310</sup> *Berhanenna Selam* 14 May 1931, 26 Ginbot 1923 E.C. and 18 Sene 1923 E.C.

<sup>311</sup> Informant 8, Summer 1997.

<sup>312</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 7 Tikimt 1917. Her father, Ensign Babichev was a Russian who had come to Ethiopia with the Russian Red Cross Mission in 1896. He married an Ethiopian woman and became an administrator in Wellezza. He remained in Ethiopia working for Emperor Menilek and Haile Sellassie until his death in Addis Ababa in 1955 at age 84. Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu*, *ibid.*, p. 197.

married Dejach Ambachew Gessese, followed by the young Abebe Aregay who was soon after promoted to blambaras at the head of the city's security guards.<sup>313</sup> He rose to greater prominence following his heroic role during the Italian invasion.

Another significant marriage occurred when Fitawrari, later Ras, Desta Damtew wed the daughter of the emperor, Wzo. Tenagneworq. No description of the ceremony is available, although the birth of the first child for the couple is announced in the June 1927 edition of *Berhanenna Selam* that notes Empress Zawditu as godmother. Fit. Desta, who was the governor of Kafa and Gera in 1928, was not appointed Ras until 1933 when he was given the governorship of Sidamo and Borena in the agriculturally rich south from which revenues in taxes for the central government were secured.<sup>314</sup>

Among the educated elite, several were the second generation to have been exposed to Western schooling and languages. Kantiba Gabru, Hakim/Azaj Workineh and Blat. Deressa were men whose experiences were useful both to the person and government of emperor Menilek.<sup>315</sup> Their children were sent abroad to Europe in the 1930s and 40s, and a few women like Wzo. Sinidu Gabru distinguished themselves as patriot, educator and public servant. Along with Wzo. Ketsela Belachew, she was one of two women elected to the

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<sup>313</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 31 August 1933.

<sup>314</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 8 March 1928 and 19 June 1933.

<sup>315</sup> For more biographical information on Kantiba Gabru Desta, see Bairu Tafla, "Four Ethiopian Biographies – Dajjazmac Garmame, Abba Mala (c. 1810-c. 1889), Dajjazmac Gabra-Egzi' Abher Moroda (c. 1871-1923), Dajjazmac Balca, Abba Nafso (c. 1863-1936), Kantiba Gabru Dasta (c. 1855-1950)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, July 1969 and Col. Dawit Gabru, *Kantiba Gabru Desta – Yeltyopia Kirs*, (Addis Ababa: Bole Publishing House, 1985 E. C.).

Legislative Council.<sup>316</sup> Others like Blat. Herui and Blat. Tekle Hawariat were brought into the fold as men who shared Haile Sellassie's progressive vision and would contribute to its realization in their respective capacities as director of Foreign Affairs and author of the first Constitution. There were also a group of Eritreans, of whom Blat. Lorenzo Taezas was one, who were educated by the emperor and later placed in important positions in the government.

Examples such as Kantiba Gabru's two descendants pairing up with partners like Kebede Mikael and Lorenzo Taezaz, indicate that members of educated elite families intermarried. Others married with descendants of Sahle Sellassie, in both cases maintaining their own continuity. One such wedding ceremony of Lij Sirak Herui to Wzo. Weynished Beyene (a fifth generation descendant of Sahle Sellassie) was praised in its simplicity while Wzo. Sinidu Gabru's to Blat. Lorenzo Taezaz was considered a fitting match for two people of educated families.<sup>317</sup> Although the sense of wonder and enjoyment of elaborate ceremonies were difficult to contain in many descriptions, newspaper articles on weddings of the educated elite emphasized their progressive style. Extravagance was chidingly reprovved as short-sighted pleasure that, if foregone, would have better served the newlyweds in their future. Comparisons with other societies were lauded as examples of modern ways to follow and the insights of progressive practices were heralded.<sup>318</sup>

The introduction by educated elite of new values particular to marriage is best captured in the following description. On the occasion of his two daughters'

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<sup>316</sup> *Menen*, Special Issue 8 Hidar 1950 E.C.

<sup>317</sup> *Berhanenna Selam* 9 Yekatit 1925 E.C.

<sup>318</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 4 February 1926 and 18 February 1926.

wedding, Azaj Workineh Martin offered a toast reminding the gathering that there were three main occurrences in life: birth, marriage and death. While birth and marriage were inevitable, marriage happened by choice and unenlightened parents who forced their children to marry should accept the responsibility of these marriages failing. Thus, he advised his daughters (Wzo. Aster and Wzo. Elsabet) that they had been allowed to marry men of their choice and whatever the outcome, the parents had thereby fulfilled their duty.<sup>319</sup> Sometime later, Wzo. Elsabet separated from Lij Tedla Haile and married Yilma Deressa, the London School of Economics graduate son of Blat. Deresa and future Finance Minister whom she had met in England.

Wzo. Elsabet was the fourth of eleven children that Hakim/Azaj Workineh had with Wzo. Ketsela Tulu, the niece of Ras Gobena Daci through her father. A granddaughter of Ras Gobena, Wzo. Tsigemariam Gebre Rufael was married to the emperor's cousin, Ras Imru Haile Sellassie. The son of Askale Gobena, thus another grandson of Ras Gobena, Abebe Aregay (later Ras), was married to Wzo. Admasworq Seyoum, the granddaughter of the empress's previous husband, Ras Leulseged.<sup>320</sup> Like Ras Gobena, who had distinguished himself by service to Emperor Menilek, other "outsiders" to noble birth also embodied the same remarkable continuity and intricate inter-connections that characterized the power elite.

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<sup>319</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 14 Hidar 1926 E.C.

<sup>320</sup> Ras Leulseged's son, Dejach Assefa was married to Wzo. Zenebworq Tilahun, a third generation Sahle Selassie descendant. *Hilkwe Tiwliid*, *ibid.*, p.15.

One such example was the family of Afenigus Nasibu Masqele, Menilek's Chief of Justice.<sup>321</sup> He was the father of Ras Demissew, the notorious wife seeker who married Wzo. Asselefech Wolde Hanna, Wzo. Abonesh Tekle Mariam and Wzo. Mentewab Mikael in succession. Ras Demissew's son, Ras Makonnen Demissew had married Wzo. Yeshashworq Yilma, the emperor's older niece who, according to oral sources, is remembered as a woman of considerable influence in court.<sup>322</sup> The complexity of relations is sampled here when we consider that Wzo. Yeshashworq was the daughter of Asselefech Wolde Hanna, and she went on to marry Lij Makonnen Indalkachew, the son of Wzo. Abonesh. Therefore, when Yeshashworq married Makonnen, her father-in-law would have also been her one time step-father, Ras Demissew. When she married the second Makonnen, his step-father would have also been this same Ras Demissew.

Such intricate relations were a common feature of elite families as were continuity over generations and the capacity to absorb select newcomers to the core. Despite certain political differences and resistance to co-option by regional nobility, overall stability was maintained in immeasurable part due to the inter-related nature of the power elite. Emperor Haile Sellassie's modernizing policies were interrupted by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and his subsequent departure in May of the following year, ostensibly to seek international support for the Ethiopian cause at the League of Nations. The imperial family left with him

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<sup>321</sup> He was married to a woman named Wzo. Yetnebersh by whom he had Ras Demissew and Wzo. Gessisu and later, a woman from Gurage named Wzo. Desta. Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage Pattern in Ethiopia 1890s-1916," *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>322</sup> Li'ilt Yeshashworq was married to Ras Gugsa Haile Sellassie, Ras Makonnen Demissew then Bitwoded Makonnen Indalkachew.

and members of other elite families soon followed into exile to Jerusalem and Cairo.<sup>323</sup> Others like Ras Imru remained behind, entrusted with the responsibility of setting up a provisional government as the emperor's Viceroy in Gore, western Wellegga.

## **THE ITALIAN INVASION AND ELITE FAMILIES**

The call to defend Ethiopia's sovereignty against foreign invasion was taken up by countless citizens despite the unthinkable odds faced by small armies that lacked co-ordination confronting a larger enemy equipped with modern artillery. In the early years of the war, many among the nobility took leadership roles on the battlefield with Rases Seyoum, Kassa and Imru, Wagshum Hailu Kebede and Dejach Gabre Hiwot organizing in the north and west, Dejach Nasibu in the east and Ras Desta in the south. Intellectual and strategic resistance was spearheaded by the nobility and young graduates of local and European military academies who formed such groups as the Black Lions and the Patriotic Association (formed by Blat. Takala Wolde Hawariat in 1935). Along with training young patriots to adapt traditional fighting techniques to the more effective guerilla warfare, they organized intelligence operations and raids behind enemy lines to acquire arms and ammunitions.

The Ethiopian resistance effort suffered a major setback with the massacres that followed the attempt on Graziani's life in February 1937. The anger unleashed in the capital targeted educated Ethiopians – an estimated loss of a generation of intellectuals – along with indiscriminate killings, looting and

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<sup>323</sup> A list of those who went into exile can be found in Kebede Tessema, *YeTarik Mastawasha*, Addis Ababa, 1962 E.C., pp. 162-68.

burning. As many as ten thousand people died following this incidence, seriously hampering the morale of the resistance movement.<sup>324</sup> Many among the nobility perished in the struggle, among them two sons-in-law of the emperor, Dejach Beyene Merid and Ras Desta. Wzo. Romanworq, the emperor's daughter and Dejach Beyene's wife, died in Italian prisons some time later. Ras Imru was captured in December 1936 and held in Italy until his release in 1943.

Women of elite families were a part of the resistance activities. Wzo. Kebedech Seyoum was an early participant in the battlefields, later joining the exiles in Jerusalem.<sup>325</sup> Others like Wzo. Sinidu Gabru participated in the Black Lions, helping care for the wounded. Women prepared food and supplies, sharpened swords and cleaned shields in army camps.<sup>326</sup> Even those living as madamismo (mistresses) with Italian officers aided the struggle by passing along highly classified information and intelligence. Among the most heroic Ethiopian women fighters was Shoaregged Gedle who was involved in the attempt to assassinate Grazianni. She later suffered at the hands of Italians who killed her adopted son before her eyes and flogged her publicly.<sup>327</sup>

At least one oral account suggests that even when not directly involved in the patriotic effort, the wives of military leaders were targeted as potential pawns in war negotiations. Wzo. Konjit's vivid story of displacement, two childbirths while in hiding, long journeys on foot with little food, water or shelter, and

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<sup>324</sup> Estimate in Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellassie*, *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>325</sup> Kebede Tesema, *ibid.*, p. 168. Her husband Dejach Aberra Kassa had been instrumental in the attempt to free the capital in 1936 and was soon after murdered by Italians for breach of their safe conduct. Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia*, *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>326</sup> Salome G. Egziabher, "The Ethiopian Patriots 1936-1941," *Ethiopia Observer* Vol. XVII, No. 2, 1983.

<sup>327</sup> Greenfield, *ibid.*, p. 246.

eventual capture by Italians who hoped to force the submission of Ras Abebe Aregay, are unique individual testimonies of survival under harrowing circumstances.<sup>328</sup>

Along with their military strategies, Italian policies courted people with grievances against the central government, emphasizing ethnic and religious differences real and imagined to attain their colonial goals. Italy favored predominantly Oromo and Muslim regions while playing Tigre against Shoa in their “politica Tigringa” and “politica Scioanna”. Not surprisingly, elite collaborators to the Italian cause were drawn from disgruntled nobility who sought redress from political alienation and restoration to their earlier prestige and hereditary land claims.

Dejach Haile Selassie Gugsu, the former son-in-law of the emperor, had been offended by the latter’s choice of Ras Seyoum as governor of Tigre in exchange for central control over the provinces finances. As early as May 1934, Dejach Haile Sellassie expressed his interest and availability as a potential ally to Italy to whom he defected with fifteen hundred well-armed men in October 1935.<sup>329</sup> Ras Hailu was another Italian favorite living in relative luxury in Addis Ababa and recognized as the first noble of the land. Even when he surrendered and arrived to pay homage in 1941, Ras Hailu continued to wield influence over maintaining order in Gojjam.<sup>330</sup> Ras Getachew also joined the Italian side after a

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<sup>328</sup> Informant 8, Summer 1997.

<sup>329</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellassie I*, *ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>330</sup> Richard Greenfield, *ibid.*, p. 259.



disagreement with the emperor in Jerusalem and was later relegated to provincial exile.<sup>331</sup>

The political and social turmoil caused by the Italian invasion make 1936-41 difficult years to trace elite marriage history. Of the few examples available, unusual liaisons can be detected, suggesting the disrupted nature of social relations. While in Jerusalem, the widowed wife of Ras Desta Damtew, the young Princess Tenagneworq, had a secret liaison with her English tutor, Ato. Abebe Retta, a man of Tigrean origin. They had a daughter, Wzo. Mary, (also known as Tsige Mariam), who was not awarded full recognition or title (she was addressed as Imebet Hoy and not Li'ilt) and was raised in relative isolation from the palace.<sup>332</sup>

While imprisoned in Azinara, Sinidu Gabru was linked for a time with Dejach Amede Ali, the grandson of Nigus Mikael of Wallo , who had fallen out of favor and had earlier been exiled from the capital, no doubt due to his family background. He was courted by Italians while Wzo. Sinidu was part of the Black Lions patriotic resistance. Another curious marriage took place between Wzo. Ketsela Tulu and Dejach Taye Gulelate, who was a leading "pretender" to the throne, a male descendant of Sahle Selassie from a line that challenged central authority since Menilek's era. He had also incurred the displeasure of the emperor and was the former husband of Almaz Mengesha, Emperor Yohannes's granddaughter, while Wzo. Ketsela was the wife of Hakim Workineh, the

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<sup>331</sup> Although entirely speculative, it is hinted that latent personal rivalry over Wzo. Aster Mengesha may have contributed to this decision. According to her death announcement, she had already passed away in 1928 E. C. *Berhanenna Selam*, 8 Hidar 1928 E.C.

<sup>332</sup> Dawit, Abebe Reta's son, later married Indalkachew Makonnen's daughter Rosa.

Ethiopian Minister in England. The scandalous nature of this union was due to close blood relations between Wzo. Ketsela and Dejach Taye – he was a third generation descendant of Sahle Sellassie and she a fourth, thus violating the seven generation custom of marriage between relatives held in high esteem by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

## **POST-1941 BACKGROUND**

Immediately after Liberation, Emperor Haile Sellassie was faced with the arduous task of rebuilding government and reinstating central authority. Patriots and leaders of insurgence movements expected rewards and appointments while some were openly resentful of what they perceived to be the emperor's desertion and the inclusion and promotion of traitors or collaborators in the new government.<sup>333</sup> The British capitalized on their military presence as part of the liberating Gideon force, placing limitations on government activities. Along with aims to expand influence in areas of finance and administration, Britain took control of both Eritrea and Ogaden with plans to sever ties of these territories from Ethiopia.<sup>334</sup> In an effort to establish his position as head of a sovereign state, Haile Sellassie issued ministerial appointments effective on 10 May 1941, five days after his official return to the capital and five years to the day of Italian arrival. He selected men who had served him well before the war and during exile, as well as one notable leader of the resistance.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Among these were famed patriotic fighters Belay Zelleke and Negash Tekle Haimanot from Gojjam and Takele Wolde Hawariat.

<sup>334</sup> Bahru Zawde, *History*, *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>335</sup> The first list of ministerial appointments included: Ras Seyoum as Governor-General of Tigre, Ras Birru as Governor-General of Jimma, Ato. Yilma Deressa as Director-General of the Ministry of Finance, Ato. Akale Wold Habte Wald as Director of the Municipality of Addis Ababa. The complete list can be found in *Negarit Gazetta*, 1<sup>st</sup> Year no. 3, 1942.

National and provincial administration was overseen by members of the traditional nobility and by functionaries composed of newly elevated patriots, ex-collaborators and exiled returnees. The need to counter the power and influence of the nobility with the presence of recruits who depended on the emperor's patronage for their position was a persistent feature of the post-Liberation government. Because many of the educated elite had perished at the hands of Italians, the emperor made use of the combined experiences available, thus ensuring a measure of continuity and stability in this transition. The impact of the first post-war graduates in government was not apparent until 1955 -1960, when most influential noblemen had died or retired from public office.<sup>336</sup> This was accompanied with the slow replacement of traditional methods of government with more administrative methods, although personal connections remained important.

In the decades following, the emperor foresaw reforms that more fully integrated provincial administration and increasingly centralized power in the state machinery and in his person. Emperor Haile Sellassie presented the physical embodiment of unquestionable authority, responsible for final decision-making in legislative, judiciary and administrative areas. He took an active role in the appointment of ministers and high officials as this was the primary method by which he balanced internal factions and forces of dissent.

Although the bureaucratic complexity of the government grew with the establishment of 11 ministries and the office of the Prime Minister in 1943, major decisions awaited the emperor's approval which meant that officials were unable

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<sup>336</sup> Clapham, *Haile Sellassie's Government*, (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1969), p. 88.

to act independently. This in turn created administrative difficulties especially after Haile Sellassie's increasing involvement in international affairs which left domestic matters to the ministers. The revised Constitution of 1955 reinforced this absolutism with a legal frame. Dissenting political views had little room for expression and the high priority given to the reorganization of the police force and the military between the 1940s and 50s paved the way for growing reliance on the army as the coercive element of the state.

The personal nature of power extended to the workings of government. In his 1960s study of Haile Sellassie's government, Christopher Clapham observed how channels of recruitment to power depended on strong personal links to the emperor or family connections at court. Officials were chosen from members of established families, but outsiders who entered government service through their own merits could also establish similar genealogical links through marriage to such families. Other paths to office included education and military training, both of which were connected to the emperor's modernizing intent. The younger generation of noblemen had both their foreign education and family connections to access positions in government. Nonetheless, whether officials were of noble background or of the new meritocracy, the emperor had no tolerance for the independent assertion of power. Personal initiatives were often met with demotion or transference to foreign service or less desirable posts.

Opposition to the government occurred both in rural and urban communities as evidenced by resistance against the encroachment of the state that manifested as peasant uprisings as early as 1943. The Weyane rebellion, as

it came to be known, occurred in eastern Tigre and was triggered by maladministration, corruption and excessive taxation. According to Gabru Tareke, who has done the most comprehensive study of the rebellion, the restorationist orientation of regional nobility, which was partly based on pre-existing rivalry with Shoan primacy, played a key role in the outcome.<sup>337</sup>

Gabru's conclusions indicate that the Weyane revolt was designed by disenchanted groups with converging interests to challenge the weakened monarchical state without questioning its legitimacy or the ideological basis of the ruling aristocracy. Although the rebellion was a failure from the perspective of peasants, by 1947 Ras Seyoum was appointed governor general while dissident nobility and implicated associates were reinstated to positions of provincial administration with diminished individual power and primarily as instruments of the state.

In the capital, the growing discontent of Ethiopian intellectuals to bring about change for accelerated development and their impatience with the backward state of the country, compared to the recently independent nations of Africa, culminated in the coup of 1960. The coup was masterminded by two brothers, Geremame and Mengistu Neway, who were members of the power elite

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<sup>337</sup> The major participants in the rebellion were: semi-pastoralist communities like the Raya and Azebo, whose communal ideals were threatened by centralization; a peasantry subjected to the corrupt activities of state officials; and regional nobility who wanted to counter the steadily eroding traditional autonomy and access power and economic resources. New appointees displaced local chiefs while the two perennial rivals, Ras Seyoum and Dejach Haile Selassie Gugsa, were respectively detained in Addis Ababa and exiled in Seychelles in solitary confinement for twenty-three years. With the help of British air power and two seasoned generals, one of whom was Ras Abebe Aregay who remained as governor, the emperor dealt decisively and violently with the uprising which lasted from around 16 September – 7 October 1943. See Gabru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia: The Case of Weyane," *Journal of African History* 25 (1984) and *Ethiopia: Power and Protest – Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

both by birth and service. Brigadier-General Mengistu who was the commander of the Imperial Bodyguard since 1956, was part of the Holeta graduates who started the Black Lions resistance and whose tenets included allegiance to the emperor. He shared his patriotic sentiments with his brother Germame, who provided the intellectual tone of the coup and was the more radical of the two. Germame had attended college and graduate school in the US, writing a master's thesis that explored Kenyan resistance to colonialism entitled "The Impact of White Settlement Policy in Kenya," (1954, Columbia University).<sup>338</sup> He returned to serve as a civil servant with a heightened sense of civic responsibility and concern for the underprivileged.<sup>339</sup>

The emperor was away on a state visit to Brazil when the coup took place on the evening of 13 December 1960. Ministers and officials were rounded up and placed in the Ganata Leul palace and the following day, a new government with the Crown Prince as a constitutional monarch, the liberal aristocrat Ras Imru as head, and the popular general Mulugeta Buli as chief of the armed forces, was publicly declared. Although this marked the biggest challenge to Haile Sellassie's regime, the coup lacked good organization and despite the support of the police force and the Imperial Bodyguard, it failed to include other units of the armed forces (the army and air force) in their plan. Loyalists to the emperor were victorious in the two-day exchange of fire that ended with the Neway brothers

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<sup>338</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 167.

<sup>339</sup> Bahru Zawde, *History*, pp. 211-213. The obituaries of those killed in the palace shoot out were published in *Menen* newspaper. Among them were Ras Seyoum Mengesha, Ras Abebe Aregay, Ato. Makonnen Habtewold, Major General Mulugeta Buli, Afenigus Eshete Geda, Abba Gebre Hanna Jima. See *Menen* November-December, 1960.

shooting the hostages and finally meeting their own fate – Germame died in the shootings while Mengistu was captured wounded, then hung after a trial.<sup>340</sup>

By the late 1960s, less investment was available for development programs and economic deterioration was prevalent. The coup had broken the mystique surrounding the emperor's person and the government's response further undermined the regime's credibility in the eyes of the public. University students were especially receptive to the message of progressive change advocated by coup leaders. Reliance on the military to curb expressions of opposition did little to control the growing Ethiopian student movement which took to the streets of Addis Ababa in annual demonstrations that became more radical in response to government repression and the condition of the country and peasantry.<sup>341</sup>

## **POST-1941 ELITE FAMILIES AND MARRIAGES**

Source materials on family histories after the Italian invasion are scarce and information is difficult to attain, especially after the first decade of reconstruction. A number of reasons contribute to this scarcity. First, given the traumatic experience of most members of the power elite after the fall of Emperor Haile Sellassie, remaining informants are reluctant to speak on the subject of marriage and politics without risking perceived harm to themselves or others living relatively anonymous lives. Second, though the oral accounts collected may mention names and marriages, they have few biographical backgrounds or dates to specify and elucidate the context. Third, the scanty secondary sources

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<sup>340</sup> Bahru Zawde, *ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

<sup>341</sup> Bahru Zawde, *ibid.*, p. 222.

available make no mention of the names of elite women, thus rendering the picture of family continuities incomplete and complex identities obscure. Despite these research difficulties, certain preliminary remarks can be made on the pattern and significance of elite marriages of this period.

Easily observable is that, in general, elite marriages with obvious political intent occurred less and less frequently, especially after the 1950s. This did not mean that they ended, or that their social significance waned, but that the central government's reliance on marriage as a means to consolidate empire was less critical. The administrative integration of provinces and the accessibility of peripheral areas through Italian-built roads allowed other avenues for government control while the importance of education for political mobility opened alternate paths for recruitment.

With some degree of overlap, certain themes remained consistent for the pattern of elite marriages in the post-Liberation years. First, the character of continuity of the power elite was reproduced by a new generation of nobility, regional aristocracy, educated elite, and other outsiders that were absorbed to the center after the 1940s. Second, imperial marriages with regional nobility continued well into the second generation, indicating that the social symbolism represented by these alliances still upheld the concept of a diverse national elite. Third, this diversity becomes more difficult to trace because of the increasingly bureaucratized nature of the state and the passing of prominent nobility from public life, especially after 1960. This would in turn suggest the eventual displacement of these families, were it not for the fact that many of the wives of



ministers and key army officers in Haile Sellassie's government drew from the same power elite that traced its origins to Menilek's era.

### **Marriages of the Imperial Family**

From the pattern of post-Liberation imperial family marriages, one can infer that many alliances of political significance, with the exception of the one mentioned below in 1955, took place in the 1940s. Of the emperor's children, his eldest daughter Tenagneworq was intended in marriage to one of the most powerful figures in the post-Liberation government, Tsehafe Tazaz Wolde Giorgis Wolde Yohannes. Born into a humble family, Wolde Giorgis was the Minister of Pen and the most influential politician under the emperor until his removal in 1955. Sometime before 1945, the emperor proposed the marriage of his widowed daughter to Wolde Giorgis but the fierce opposition to such a union by the nobility of birth, who were already threatened by Wolde Giorgis's fame and success, halted any plans.<sup>342</sup> Tenagneworq eventually married Ras Andarge Messay, among the pre-war educated individuals who served as Councilor in Eritrea.<sup>343</sup> Tenagne's Ato. Abebe Retta's daughter, Mary/Tsigemariam Abebe, was married on Tikimt 18 1955 to an Eritrean man, Seyoum Haregot, who was duly appointed Councilor in Eritrea.

The Crown Prince quietly separated from Wzo. Walata Israel Seyoum, whom he had married with Communion, and had a purported liaison in Desse

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<sup>342</sup> Makonnen Tegegn, "Walda-Giyorgis Walda-Yohannes and the Haile Sellassie Government," *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 1997. Also see, "Comments on a New Generation of Ethiopians," Foreign Service Dispatch to the Department of State, Washington, National Archives and Records 875.41/4-2155, 1955, p. 13.

<sup>343</sup> Andarge Messay's mother, Wzo. Tsedeqeworq Abinet, was the paternal sister of Wzo. Konjit Abinet (Ras Abebe's wife and cousin of the emperor).

with a beautiful woman named Wzo. Zeleka Tafesse, the daughter of Kegnazmach Tafesse, Ethiopian ambassador to Egypt, and the goddaughter of Tenagne.<sup>344</sup> According to informants, this was not approved by the emperor and separation was encouraged.<sup>345</sup> Soon afterwards, Wzo. Zeleka went on to marry Bitwoded Negash Bezabeh, the grandson of Negus Takla Haimanot of Gojjam. He was a leader of the resistance movement in Gojjam and had been appointed vice-minister of Post, and later president of the Senate. In 1951 Bitwoded Negash led a conspiracy to assassinate the emperor and proclaim the country a republic. The conspirators were caught in their planning stage and meted different terms of imprisonment.<sup>346</sup>

As it was, Crown Prince Asfa Wosen married a woman identified as Shoan through her paternal lineage but who was also the maternal granddaughter of another important Gojjame family, that of Ras Mengesha Atikem's.<sup>347</sup> His marriage to Wzo. Medferiashworq Abebe, whose uncle Ras Desta Damtew was the emperor's son-in-law before he was killed in the war, was an event that took place away from the capital and was tacitly acknowledged only by a reception at the palace in the absence of the bride and groom.

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<sup>344</sup> Her sister, Wzo. Yeshimebet, had married Wagshum Wesen Hailu from Wag nobility on 27 July 1947. See *Wedding Invitations Scrapbook*, Vol. 1, Addis Ababa University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

<sup>345</sup> Informant 6 and 7, Summer 1997.

<sup>346</sup> Bahru Zawde, *ibid.*, p. 210. The ironic speculation is if part of Wzo. Zeleka's displeasure of rejection as potential wife of the Crown Prince drove her to marry the disgruntled Gojjame noble. The conspirators were apprehended by the Imperial Bodyguard on July 5, 1951. Among those listed in US Foreign Office correspondence were Fitawrari Wolde Berhan Akalu, Girma Abayneh, Yohannes Rimha, Aleka Fetene Gazai, Berkela Anasimos, Iquale Beyene and Kebede Yimar. The trial was conducted secretly and all seven pleaded guilty to the charges. See "Conspiracy to Assassinate His Imperial Majesty Haile Sellassie I," *Records Relating to Ethiopia 1950-62*, National Archives and Records.

<sup>347</sup> Wzo. Medferiashworq was the daughter of Ras Abebe Damtew and Wzo. Wesenyelesh Mengesha.

On 10 February 1946, Leul Makonnen married Wzo. Sara Gizaw. A memo to the Department of State from the American Legation in Addis Ababa recounts that the bride's father, Dejach Gizaw Abara of Indarta Begemdir, was of distinguished Tigre parentage, but not wealthy nor a prominent leader whereas her mother Wzo. Kebedech, was an Oromo from between Shoa and Gondar. Wzo. Sara was selected from the Empress Menen's school by the empress and lived in the palace with four other girls for two months, all candidates for the marriage.

According to this letter, the choice of a part Oromo bride stimulated discussions among Ethiopians, some of who commented on it not being "in the best traditions of the imperial family." Though this comment is not explained, the author states that "while not making for the purity of the imperial line..." the union was interpreted as a gesture toward the Oromo "... who are continuously in a state of discontent (not necessarily disaffection)." <sup>348</sup> Interesting to note is the so-called "purity" of the imperial family and the fact that most present-day informants identify Wzo. Sara as Tigre and seem unaware of the Oromo connection. <sup>349</sup> Apparently, the wedding itself was "no 'shotgun' affair" with a reception at the palace to which the Diplomatic Corps was invited.

Another such letter dated 8 February 1949 reports the marriage of "a favorite granddaughter of the Emperor, Princess Aida Desta to Dejazmach Mangasha Seyuun, a son of the hereditary ruler of Tigre: Ras Seyoum." <sup>350</sup> This

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<sup>348</sup> "Marriage of the Duke of Harar," 6 March 1946, National Archives and Records, 884.0011/3-646.

<sup>349</sup> Informant 5 and 6, Summer 1997.

<sup>350</sup> "Political Marriage of Princess Aida, Granddaughter of Emperor of Ethiopia," 8 February 1949, National Archives and Records, 884.0011/2-849.

took place on 30 January with much ceremony and elaborate entertainment hosted by the royal couple. The letter notes that this marriage was considered important from a dynastic standpoint that linked the old kingdom of Shoa to the rulers of Tigre. The twenty-one year old princess is described as "charming and intelligent, with a good command of English, having spent many years in England and having attended Newnham College at Cambridge." The twenty-three year old groom is described as pleasant though a "rather listless young man dominated by his vigorous and shrewd father, Ras Seyyum."<sup>351</sup>

The political significance of this marriage did not escape the American Legation. The letter discusses that separatist tendencies at the time of the Weyane uprising in Tigre were suspected to have received support from the family of Ras Seyoum, though not he himself. The eighteen-year old Dejach Mengesha Seyoum, then Acting Governor of Tigre for his father, who was in forced residence in Addis Ababa, was suspected of an ambiguous attitude toward the revolt and was tried in Addis Ababa and sentenced to be hung. A special appeal tribunal intervened to change the sentence, and the alternative of sending Dejach Mengesha to the American University in Beirut was approved by the emperor. Oral informants add that the plan to marry Aida was also included in the amnesty. (ADD FN)

The memo further connects this marriage to another important event, the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia:

The marriage is of particular significance at this moment in the history of Ethiopia, at the time when the Emperor seems likely to acquire a substantial part of Eritrea. Because of the natural affinity between Tigre

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

(and, to a lesser extent, the Province of Begemdir) and parts of Eritrea inhabited by the racial cousins of the Ethiopians in Tigre and Begemdir, the Ethiopians of the north may acquire a relatively stronger position in the Empire, if, and when, a major part of Eritrea is attached to Ethiopia by virtue of a decision of the United Nations Assembly. ... The trend of the Empire's expansion has heretofore been to the south; and Addis Ababa, which is, in effect, an enclosure in almost Galla [*sic*] country, is far south of the traditional center of the Amhara. The Tigreans, as well as the neighboring Ethiopic Eritreans, regard themselves, with some reason, as superior and of purer blood than the mixed population of Shoa, and of the south as a whole. ... Therefore, it is understandable that the Emperor should wish to establish an effective dynastic alliance between his family and that of the most powerful Tigrean: Ras Seyyum, who is a direct descendant of the Tigrean Emperors, Theodore and Johannes."

Such dynastic alliances thus continued to carry their own political weight among the first generation of imperial descendants and regional nobility. Three of the emperor's grandchildren were married to members of Wellega nobility: Seble Desta to Kassa Wolde Mariam, the son of Askale Jote; Ijigayehu Asfawossen to Fikre Sellassie Habte Mariam<sup>352</sup>, the heir to Wellega's traditional nobility whose sister Mahetsente was married to the emperor's youngest grandson, Sahle Sellassie. In addition, Iskinder Desta was married to Sara Ammanuel, the daughter of Ato. Ammanuel Abraham, a Wellegan who had served as secretary at the Consular in England in the years of exile and as a trusted minister and diplomat in various capacities.

### **Other Elite Families**

Continuity of elite families could be traced in the above examples of imperial marriages with nobility from Wellegga, Gojjam, Tigre and Shoa. Other elite marriages reflected similar patterns. From Ras Kassa's family, Dejach

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<sup>352</sup> According to one Foreign Dispatch, Lidj Endalkachew Makonnen, the son of the Prime Minister, was one rejected suitor. "Comments on a New Generation of Ethiopians," Foreign Service Dispatch to the Department of State, Washington, National Archives and Records, 875.41/4-2155, 1955, p. 18.

Asfawossen Kassa was married to Wzo. Zenebework Mesfin, the daughter of Nigist Takle Haimanot of Gojjam and Ras Mesfin of Damot. Leul Asrate Kassa, the Emperor's Representative in Eritrea from 1964 and the only surviving son of an important Lasta/Shoan marriage took Li'ilt Zuryashworq, a descendant of Nigus Mikael and Ras Mulugeta as his wife. Ras Kassa's grandson, Dejach Berhane Meskel Desta married Wzo. Menbere Admasu, whose father was Wagshum Admasu Wesen and whose mother was Belaynesh, the daughter of Ras Seyoum of Tigre.

Ras Imru's children belied their intellectual leanings in two instances: the second marriage of Wzo. Yemisirach Imru to Blat. Herui's son, Fikade Sellassie, and Lij Mikael's to Almaz Takla Hawariat, both spouses being a part of or kin to the educated elite.<sup>353</sup> Wzo. Alemseged, the daughter of Yemisirach and Fikade Sellassie married Lij Abata, the son of Wzo. Aster Mengesha (Emperor Yohannes's granddaughter) and Ras Getachew Abata, Menilek's trusted general and official. Wzo. Marta Imru married Col. Tamrat Yigezu, the grandson of Menilek's Nagadras who had been married to Ras Hailu's daughter, Seblewongel.

Of other prominent nobility, some married descendants of Sahle Sellassie. Among these were Indalkachew Makonnen whose wife was Inkenyelesh Shiferaw (a fifth generation Sahle Selassie descendant) and Ras Mesfin's brother, Dejach Bezabih Sileshi, who married Wzo. Dinqinesh Tafari, the granddaughter of Tesseme Darge and Dejach WoldeTsadik of Menilek's times. Ras Mesfin married the Wellegan noble woman, Wzo. Yeshimebet Guma while

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<sup>353</sup> Almaz Tekle Hawariat was the sister of Girmachew Takla Hawariat.

her brother Col. Kenea was one time husband of the Crown Prince's love interest, Wzo. Zeleka Tafese. As mentioned earlier, the Minister of Finance, Yilma Deressa was married to Wzo. Elsabet Workineh and two of Dejach Habtemariam's children were in-laws of the imperial family. The third, Wzo. Astede Habtemariam was married on 15 January 1950 to the emperor's powerful Imperial Bodyguard, General Mulugeta Buli.<sup>354</sup>

Indeed, many notable army officials were linked to the power elite through their wives. General Abiye Abebe was briefly married to the emperor's daughter, Li'ilt Tsehai. After her untimely death, he married the daughter of Menilek's Afenigus Nasibu, Wzo. Amarech. A granddaughter of the emperor, Li'ilt Hirut Desta, was married to Col. Negga Tegegn. Of those pushing for progressive change early on, Takele Wolde Hawariat was connected in marriage to a relative of the emperor's, Wzo. Askale Wolde Ammanuel.

In addition, of the key players in the 1960s coup, General Mengistu Neway's wife was Wzo. Kefei Tafere, the granddaughter of Wagshum Hailu Kebede, a distinguished patriot and heir of Wag nobility.<sup>355</sup> Gemame Neway's wife, Wzo. Ayalnesh Zewde, was a granddaughter of Wallo 's Ras Gebrehiwot Mikael. Generals Merid Mengesha's and Negga Haile Sellassie's wives, Wzo.

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<sup>354</sup>The wedding invitation is found in the first volume of the invitations scrapbook at Addis Ababa University. As early as 1959 and more so after the 1960 coup, correspondence speculating on the problem of succession to the Ethiopian throne and possible contestants, General Mulugeta Buli's name was repeatedly cited along with Mengesha Seyoum, Ras Imru, Empress Menen (if she outlived the emperor), and Ras Abebe. See "The Problem of Succession to the Throne" (June 1959), "Confidential" (from the British Embassy, February 1959), and "Succession to the Ethiopian Throne," Letter from Robert D. Baum to Mr. Hugh S. Cumming, Jr., (December 1960) in Records Relating to Ethiopia 1950-62, National Archives and Records.

<sup>355</sup> Wzo. Kefei Tafere and her sister Wzo. Belaynesh Tafere were married to Birgadier General Mengistu Neway and Fitawrari Gebrewahid Aberan on 15 February 1950. Wedding Invitation Scrapbook, Vol. 1, AAU. Though unclear if it was this sister or another, a younger sibling was also married to the brother of Li'ilt Sara, Duchess of Harar.

Gebeyanesh and Wzo. Kefei, respectively, were sisters whose father was Dejach Haile Sellassie Abba Jebel and whose mother was Berhane Mengesha Seyoum, a granddaughter of Emperor Yohannes IV.

Among the seeming outsiders, Ras Abebe Aregay's children from his marriage to Wzo. Admasworq Seyoum Leulseged had themselves married into the power elite while Ras Abebe remained husband to Wzo. Konjit Abinet, an imperial relative, until his death in the 1960 shoot-out.<sup>356</sup> Mention must be made here of the Habtewold brothers who arguably created their own recruitment channel through family connections, but demonstrated the relatively unique occurrence of having no marriage links to the power elite while maintaining importance in the government.<sup>357</sup>

### **Elite Women of Twentieth century Ethiopia**

The fact that Ethiopian women were seldom in institutionally visible positions makes their presence in politics or government almost impossible to trace. This did not mean that they were absent. For instance, along with other members of the royal family, the emperor's eldest daughter Tenagneworq, was said to have enjoyed considerable leverage in the advisory Crown Council and according to oral informants, had staked her own claim for her son's ascension to the throne in the final days of the emperor.<sup>358</sup> Older elite women like Li'ilt

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<sup>356</sup> Daniel Abebe married Yeshimebet Habte Mikael Biru (a Sahle Sellassie descendant), followed by Konjit Atnafsegged and may have been linked to the daughter of Feleke or Kifle Irgetu. Sosina Abebe married General Debebe Haile Mariam.

<sup>357</sup> Aleka Habtewold married a woman from Bulga named Yitot Yadegdigu and had five children. Among them, Mekonen married Yeshimebet Abebe then Belaynesh Beza; Akalewold married Almaz Dehne and Aklilu married Mademoiselle Collette.

<sup>358</sup> Bahru Zawde, *A History*, *ibid.*, p. 206.



Yeshasworq, the emperor's cousin, were considered powerful in court politics and were awarded special gifts of acknowledgement befitting their stature.<sup>359</sup>

Beyond the palace, the twin concepts of education and progress were launched to women in numerous newspaper articles that serve as useful documentation of social commentary. Enthusiastic calls to transform oneself through education that would better everything from personal hygiene, hairstyles and nail care, to making for a better wife, mother, and citizen were published in the government paper. Women were simultaneously encouraged to take off their headscarves, do away with their long hair, and wear shorter skirts for better mobility on the path to progress while sternly admonished to keep from involvement in matters of men by remaining firmly in their own sphere of influence - that of the home.

Elite women pioneered and represented most of these ideals with their access to education, their "modern" appearance, and visible involvement in social work. Thus among the royal family women, beauty pageants were organized by Imebet Hirut Desta, who also had an interest in promoting tourism, her sister Sophie was involved in education, Li'ilt Tsehai was a nurse promoting health issues while an Ethiopian women charity organization headed by the Empress and overseen by Li'lt Tenangeworq set up orphanages and undertook several efforts to help the poor and needy.

Elite women were at the forefront of those sent abroad for education. As early as 1927, the story of seven year-old Princess Yeshimebet (Tsehai) being sent with Amsale Herui on a ship headed to Cambridge to pursue her education

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<sup>359</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 24 November 1932.

was reported in *Berhanenna Selam*. Her strong conviction that princes and princesses who acquire education would be the hope for Ethiopia was expressed in an interview that echoed the emperor's push for progress.<sup>360</sup> A 1957 list of those studying abroad contained several names of elite women, among them: Mhatsenta Hapte Mariam, Mary Retta, Miss Lorenzo Taezaz, Mulumebet Mesfin, Princesses Seble Desta, Sophia Desta, Hirut Desta, Igigayehu Asfa Wosen, Sergut Senegiorgis, Sofia Abraham (studying in the United Kingdom); Azeb Andom (studying in India) and Elene Babitcheff (studying in France).<sup>361</sup> It is difficult to track what work these women engaged in upon their return, and only one example, that of Ras Imru's daughter Hirut, who worked in the Foreign Ministry, provides for their absorption in an official capacity.

Despite this, no doubt education widened the career choices of Ethiopian women though the appeal of remaining dutiful wife while being an emancipated woman was emphasized. An enlightened woman would free her husband from worries of home or children's education while in rare cases such as that of Wzo. Ketsela Tulu, actively support her husband's endeavors.<sup>362</sup> In relation to marriage, elite women of the early twentieth century, such as Wzo. Tsehaiworq Darge, Wzo. Tesseme Darge and Wzo. Aster Mengesha, had themselves

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<sup>360</sup> *Berhanenna Selam*, 28 July 1927. Amsale was the daughter of Herui Wolde Sellassie, the early intellectual and progressive supporter of the emperor. She returned and was married to Lij Legesse Gebremariam then died soon after in childbirth on 4 Ginbot 1925 EC. *Aymero*, 5 Ginbot 1925 E.C.

<sup>361</sup> These were the daughters of Dejach Habte Mariam, Abebe Retta, Lorenzo Taezaz, Ras Mesfin, grandchildren of the royal family, the sister of Mulugeta Buli (according to "Notes and Anecdotes," a letter detailing the 1959 visit of the Crown Prince to the US of which Wzo. Sirgute was a part), the daughter of Amanuel Abraham, and the Russian, Babitcheff. It is interesting to note the ethnic diversity of the group – Oromo, Tigre, Shoan and Eritrean. *Ethiopia Observer*, Special Issue dedicated to "The Ethiopian Woman," Vol. 1 No. 3, February 1957, pp. 100-101.

<sup>362</sup> Wzo. Ketsela Tulu, was the wife of Azaj Workinch Martin. *Berhanenna Selam*, 9 June 1927.

exercised choice when “marrying down” men of lesser social standing.<sup>363</sup>

Education further widened such alternatives as<sup>3</sup> seen in the 14 Hamle 1926 *Berhanenna Selam* announcement of Sara Workineh Martin's wedding where she was noted to have had a prolonged engagement to Lij Seife Mikael – an insight she was praised for as having acquired through education. Others, like several of Ras Imru's daughters opted not to marry at all.

Foreign perceptions of the mid-1950s educated elite is provided in a lengthy dispatch from the American Embassy in Addis Ababa which found them to be “by far the most interesting class of Ethiopians from a political point of view”.<sup>364</sup> Although by its own admission a generalized treatment, this 1955 piece attempts to document the “...composition, attitudes, problems and the future of an important generation.”<sup>365</sup> The general categories of those British, American or locally trained individuals with further divisions into a variety of fractions are discussed and their activities detailed. The conflict that many of those educated felt with family and the preceding generation is supported by anecdotes although the most worrisome personal problem facing the group was said to concern marriage, and more particularly, finding a suitable life partner.

According to the findings of this letter:

“Of those that have married only two or three known to the reporter seem happy. Nearly all complain that the modern Ethiopian girl is far inferior in intellectual and social development to the male. Since most educated Ethiopians wish to marry into wealth this makes competition keen for the

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<sup>363</sup> These were: Ato. Tessema Eshete, Lij Iyasu's guardian; Bitwoded Wolde Tsadiq, at the time, the secretary of Ras Darge; and Balambaras Ashebir, an educated but not politically powerful man, respectively.

<sup>364</sup> “Comments on a New Generation of Ethiopians,” Foreign Service Dispatch to the Department of State, Washington, National Archives and Records, 875.41/4-2155, 1955.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

relatively few educated, socially poised Ethiopian girls, with boys of wealth and position usually winning out.”<sup>366</sup>

Of the three illustrative examples presented (Lij Endalkachew Makonnen, son of the Prime Minister, Lij Daniel Abebe, son of Ras Abebe and Colonel Emmanuel Andom), one had arranged for his fiancée to be sent abroad “to civilize her”, another had been banished from court for having left his first wife, a relative of the imperial family, and was refreshingly in love with his second wife who attended social functions with him, and a third complained of his wife’s social adjustment despite her promising start as a bright student in the Empress’ school.<sup>367</sup> This document suggests that even among the power elite, education, along with family background, may have increasingly become a measure of compatibility among potential partners.

In conclusion, the two-hundred year process that had created an intricately connected power elite with family relations across different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, arguably completed its evolution in the final years of Haile Sellassie’s reign. The need to rely on marriages to cement alliances for political intent had lessened considerably, though the social significance of these arrangements remained. The marriage of imperial grandchildren, for instance, was less monitored than those of their parents with some, like Li’lt Hirut, credited with having made independent choices for husbands.

As discussed above, a number of reasons contributed to the conclusion of this process – among them, the level of power consolidation and centralization

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

achieved under Haile Sellassie, the gradual effacing of regional nobility, and the replacement of traditional modes of government by more institutional and bureaucratized structures, as well as the role of education in creating another path to power and a merit based system of evaluation. When the Ethiopian revolution erupted in 1974, ethnic fragmentation was not a major political or social concern. In no small part, an inter-married power elite at the center represented the interwoven fabric of the nation – symbolically and literally upholding the sense of togetherness and belonging similarly reflected through intermarriage among other levels of Ethiopian society.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of this research, certain observations can be made on the nature of elite marriages in the broad categories of Haile Sellassie's era (especially post-Liberation years) and the preceding era, mainly Menilek's reign but including Iyasu and Zawditu's time. First, in accordance with the fact that Menilek's empire of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was still newly assembled, regional identities and power bases were highly pronounced in marriage alliances. Both in political and symbolic terms, inter-marriage between the royal houses of Shoa, Tigre, Wallo, Wag, Lasta, Wellegga and Gondar carried substantial weight. This is demonstrated by the changing political and marriage alliances, especially during the last years of Taitu, under the regency of Ras Tessema Nadew and the reign of Iyasu in the first fifteen years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Haile Sellassie's era, particularly his rule after the Italian invasion, regional powers were systematically incorporated to the center and the shift toward meritocracy greatly reduced previous privileges enjoyed by the provincial nobility. Elite marriages continued to carry symbolic significance, but their political indispensability was lessened.

Second, and in connection to this, in the climate of the new empire, marriages were important both for both the imperial family and regional nobility. The imperial family could be drawn in and divided over the outcome of marriages, as Menilek's and Taitu's disagreement over the issue of Nigist Tekle Haimanot's suitors, a measure of the political consequences of such

arrangements. By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, although marriages between the imperial family and those of regional nobility continued to occur, it seems less attached to political purposes. So, for instance, the marriages of Haile Sellassie's children seem more carefully chosen for political mileage than those of his grandchildren.

Third, because regional identities were more pronounced in the previous era, marriages were more obvious. One can easily point to the Gondar-Tigre, Shoa-Tigre, Wallo -Shoa, Wallo -Tigre, Gojjam-Shoa, Wellegga-Shoa and the one later example of Kaffa-Shoa marriages. It is also possible, where such information is available, to trace that newly married elite would relocate to the husband's region where he or his family enjoyed hereditary rule. With the effacing of provincial power, and the more complete political and administrative centralization after the 1940s, marriage alliances became less obvious. Education injected a new value system into the society where, although family connections continued to matter for social mobility and political promotion, education presented alternate access to imperial favor.

By the late 1950s and 60s, while most of the educated elite had been absorbed into the power elite through marriage, it became less important to highlight regional identity though the links between the largely Addis Ababa based regional nobility and their hereditary land of rule were maintained through imperial appointments. For instance, Lij Kassa Wolde Mariam served in the capacity of president of a national institution (Haile Sellassie I University). His family was of Welleggan nobility and he was married to the grand-daughter of Emperor Haile Sellassie. Although appointed as Governor-General of Wellegga

in 1969, he would less readily be identified as a Welleggan noble than as an educated member of the power elite with certain family connections. Besides the issue of their invisibility, the difficulty of tracking the family genealogies of women or wives of elite men after the 1950s both in oral interviews and written documentation also demonstrates that the question of “which region or which regional elite did he/she come from?” seem irrelevant. Informants could readily place the regional roots of most elite families of the previous era, but the inquiry appears a moot point in the latter years of Haile Sellassie's reign.

In this dissertation I have attempted to create a chronological narrative for the history of elite marriages from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have relied on secondary sources, oral histories, family genealogies, newspaper articles and announcements, as well as the few scholarly works available on the subject to build this narrative. The material was organized around the intersection of three themes: state formation, marriage and ethnicity. The history of the Ethiopian state is one that has been amply considered by contemporary scholars and my interest here was not to debate the ways in which the state was shaped but how marriage alliances contributed to the process. In this sense, the Ethiopian empire as marked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Menilek and consolidated by Haile Sellassie in the 20<sup>th</sup> century provides the geographical, economic and political frame of reference.

Marriage is brought to the foreground of empire-building activity as a way of including previously overlooked factors, such as elite families and women, in our understanding of Ethiopian political history. What exploration was possible on



elite Ethiopian women suggests their not so negligible role in politics – often in the hidden, subtextual workings of power. Within the limits of their social and cultural constraints, women did not all respond uniformly to their political environment. Some paid painful sacrifices in their choices of spouse (and the elusive notion of national well-being, or loyalties thereof) over family – this was seen, for instance, with Tewabech and Tewodros, Menen and Ras Tafari, or Wzo. Menkele and Dejach Jote in Wellegga. Others reproduced the power structure in their socialization of daughters and involvement in future elite marriages (also best seen in Wzo. Menkele's reaction to Wzo. Yeshimebet's betrothal). Still others made choices emboldened by family connections and sense of political entitlement, such as Wzo. Tsehaiworq Darge's defense of Lij lyasu. Although more documentary sources would be needed, this beginning indicates the involvement of elite women in politics a worthwhile line of inquiry.

By presenting the intricate relations across religious, linguistic and ethnic groups sustained in elite marriages over 200 years, I hoped to explore just how complex issues of identity could be. The most potent example that I encountered of this complexity comes from a casual conversation with a great-grandchild of Haile Sellassie. A true product of extensive inter-marriage, she recalled as a young girl, the challenge of navigating through the cultural and linguistic variables of her Wellegga paternal family members, her Tigre grand-mother and the strict palace protocol of her grand and great-grandfather's world. As can be imagined, internal tensions and rivalries between family members are detectable though

elusive to explore. Whatever the internal state of affairs, the grand scheme of creating and maintaining a national elite sustained itself for a lengthy period.

The greatest difficulty of this dissertation lies in measuring precisely what implications the existence of a national elite had on the politics of the country. The inclusive nature of elite marriages allowed certain families from regional nobility to participate in central politics, in part because their support was critical to the activities of the state. Marriage alliances point to the subtextual power and influence latent in both men and women of the elite – power that is often visible when outwardly expressed in relation to the state but may have to be inferred once it moves beyond formal structures. In other words, it is easier to understand what power negotiations were at stake when members of the regional nobility rebelled or objected to central authority and harder to detect what the timing of certain marriages had to do with political occurrences. This is partly due to the intimate nature of marriage and family histories and the outward denial, even by most contemporary informants, that politics motivated or had anything to do with certain marriage arrangements.

Added to this is the dichotomy of monarch vs. nobility in Ethiopian history with focus on the divisive characteristics of the nobility as compared to the integrative efforts of the monarch. The inherent fragility of elite marriages, the frequency in which they occurred, and the difficulty of assessing their impact may lead one to dismiss their role as insignificant even when they were an essential mechanism of Ethiopian statecraft. The value of considering such unifying features as marriage alliances here is in complementing the existing discourse

and debates of forceful incorporation and subjugation by the Ethiopian state with a different process of a more peaceful nature that was, nonetheless, tied to the same outcome – that of forging a nation.

What needs to be underscored is that from this process emerged a national elite that could claim origins from several parts of the country. Despite its imposed elements, the process of 'Ethiopianizing' the power elite indicated a certain arrival of the center and regional nobility to mutual gains and shared values. Neither the terms of negotiation nor the benefits were necessarily ever apparent. What the marriage histories and patterns suggest though, is that this 'Ethiopianizing' process that began in Menelik's times was closer to completion at the end of Haile Sellassie's reign. By the 1960s, there was little need to monitor the marriages of the emperor's grandchildren and at least some of them seemed to have made independent choices for partners. Based on this trend, one can speculate that had the revolution not interrupted, perhaps the supra-ethnic reality of this Ethiopianized elite would well have created the desired impact of an integrated center which would in turn shift public perception.

Although the language and approach of the 1974 revolution made no provisions for family connections and alliances, marriage as a mechanism to align loyalties around power is still a part of the political landscape.<sup>368</sup> Due in no small measure to the symbolic existence of a united elite at the center of 'official culture', the immediate aftermath of the revolution did not result in ethnic fragmentation. Notwithstanding the challenging task of evaluation, hindsight

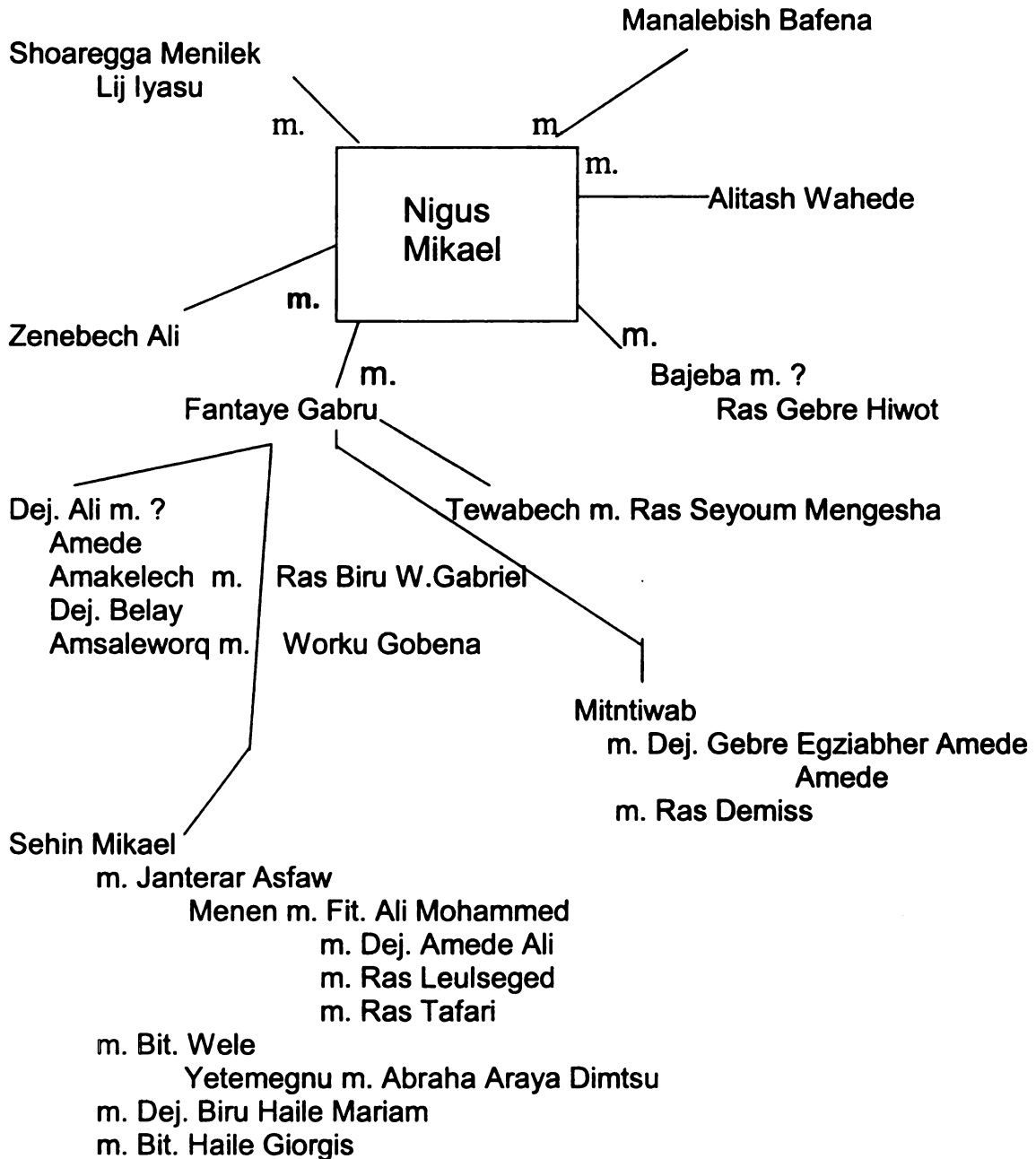
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<sup>368</sup> Paulos Milkias briefly notes the dynamics of family relations within the current government whose members are connected in marriage. See Paulos Milkias, "Ethiopia, TPLF and Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor," Forthcoming *Northeast African Studies*, 2002.

suggests that, along with other elements such as cultural, economic and social ties over hundreds of years, marriage among the diverse power elite of the country may have had its part in upholding shared national identity.

## APPENDIX

**Nigus Mikael of Wello**  
**Fig. 1.1**



**Key**  
 m = married  
 Name of children indicated below name of father

Ras Mengesha Atikem of Gojjam  
Fig. 1. 2

Tenagne Welete Rufael

- m. | 1. Askalemariam m. Ras Hailu  
          Seblewongel m. Dej. Yigezu Behabte  
          m. Lij Iyasu  
          Alemtsehai m. Dej. Abebe Asfaw
- m. | 2. Ras Kebede m. Mintiwab Wele  
          Tsigemariam m. Dej. Desta Biru  
          Ras Kebede m. Atsede Asfaw

Mengesha Atikem

- m. |
- m. | ( m.1 Yigezu Yishalu had Ras Mulugeta  
Sifrash Bizu Yifru (his g.dtr. Zuryash m. Ras Asrate Kasa)
1. Wzo. Laketch m. Gebrerufael Gobena  
    Li'ilt Tsigemariam m. Ras Imru
2. Dej. Merid
3. Lij Wolde Leul
4. Wzo. Wesenyelesh m. Gen. Abebe Damtew  
    Wzo. Mulumebet m. Ras Biru Habtemariam  
        m. Lij Araya Abebe  
    Medferiashwork m. Crown Prince Asfa Wosen
5. Wzo. Aklog m. Tekle Roro

Debitu Ali

- Wzo. Zawditu m. Makonnen Indalkachew (m2 Li'ilt Yeshashworq)  
    Indalkachew  
    Wzo. Berhane

Key

m = married

m2 = second marriage

Name of children indicated below father

Ras Gobena Daci  
Fig. 2

RAS GOBENA DACI m. Wzo. Ayelech  
Menilek's General

|  
Afenigus Aregay m. Askale (also m. Fit. Mulugeta Bantyiwalu)

1. Aynalem

2. Lakech

3. Ras Abebe m. Admasworq Seyoum (Ras) Leulseged  
Daniel m. Konjit Atnafseged (niece of Ras Imru)  
Sosena m. Gen. Debebe Hailemariam

Ras Abebe m. Konjit Abinet (niece of Haile Sellassie)  
Lij Ayelework  
Lij Wondwossen

Key

m = married

Name of children indicated below



<b>Name</b>	<b>Under Taitu (1890 – 1909)</b>	<b>Ras Tassama Nadew (1909-1911)</b>	<b>Lij Iyasu (1911-1916)</b>
Ras Wolde Giorgis	Yeshimebet (niece of Taitu)	Same	Same
Fit. Habte Giorgis	Altaye	Same	Same
Ras Mengesha Yohannes	Kefei Wele		
Ras Makonnen Wolde Mikael	Mentewab Wele		
Ras / Nigus Mikael	Shoaregga	Zenebech	A new wife?
Afenegus Nasibu Mesqele	Desta		
Ras Tassama Nadew	Beletshachew		
Ras Leulseged	Asselefech Wolde Hanna		Menen
Ras Abate Boiyalew		Getenesh (sister of Ras Tassama)	
Dej. Abraha Araya	Yetemegnu (niece of Ras Mikael)	Same	Same
Dej. Seyoum Mengesha			Tewabech Mikael
Ras Demissew Nasibu	Asselefech Wolde Hanna	Abonesh	Mentewab Mikael
Dej. Tafari Makonnen			Menen
Dej. Yilma Makonnen	Asselefech Wolde Hanna		

**Fig. 3**

**Political Marriage Pattern in Ethiopia (1890s -1916)**

Source: Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)."

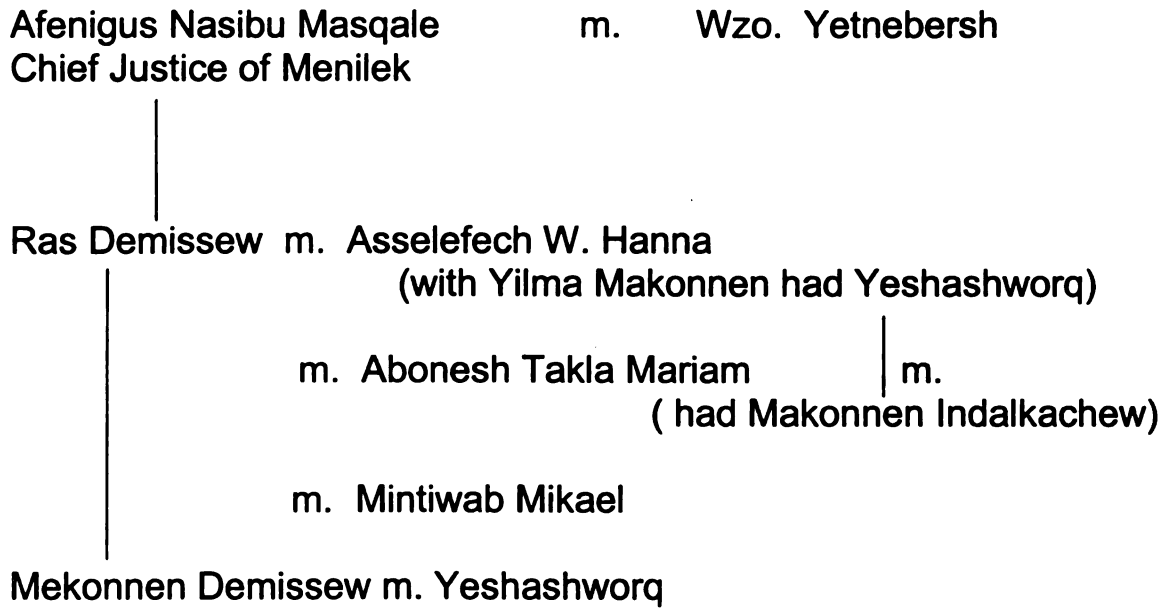
<b>Name</b>	<b>Under Taitu (1890-1909)</b>	<b>Ras Tassama Nadew (1909-1911)</b>	<b>Lij Iyasu (1911-1916)</b>
Dej. Bezabih Takla Haimanot			Zenebework Mikael
Dej. Seyoum Takla Haimanot (later Hailu)	Asselefech Wolde Hanna		
Dej. Gessese W. Hana  Dej. Merid Mengesha	Nigist Takla Haimanot	Laqech Tassama	Sehin Mikael
Nagadras Haile Giorgis	Yetemegnu Alula		
Nagadras Hailu Behabte	Ayelech		

**Fig. 3**

**Political Marriage Pattern in Ethiopia (1890s -1916)**

Source: Aleme Eshete, "Political Marriage and Divorce in Ethiopian History (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century)."

Complicated Inter-relations  
 Fig. 4



Key  
 m = married

Regional Interconnections  
Fig. 5

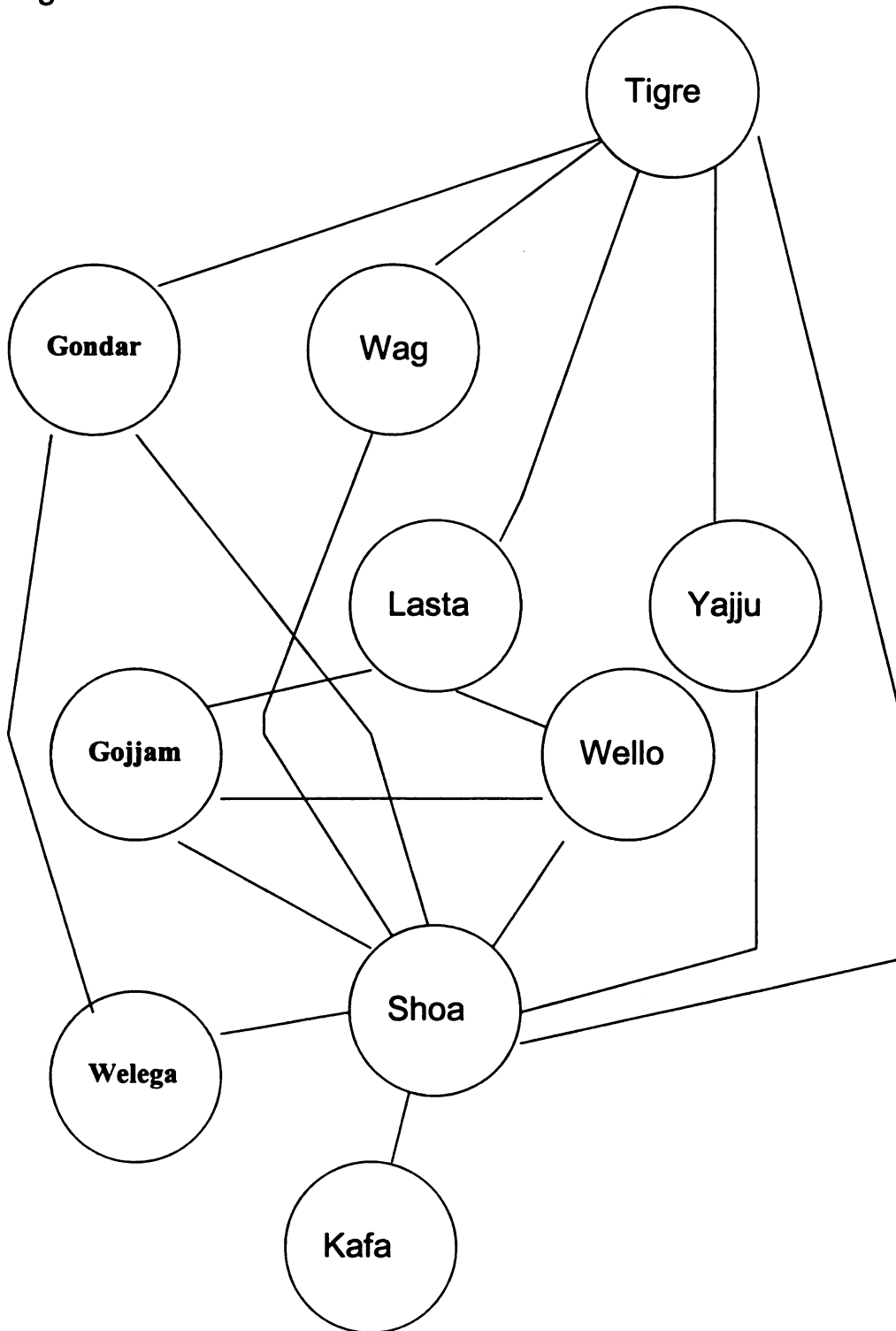


Fig. 5. 1

LIST OF MARRIAGE ALLIANCES

**Gondar – Tigre**

Ras Mengesha Seyoum & Tewabech Wolde Gabriel

**Gondar – Lasta**

Ayichesh Tedla & Dej. Megabi Kiros (had Dej. Hailu)

**Gondar – Wag**

Ayichesh Tedla & Wagshum Gebre Medhin (had Gobaze, later Emperor Takla Giorgis)

**Gojjam – Semen/Yajju**

Dej. Betul Haile Mariam & Wzo. Yewibdar

Dej. Gessese Wolde Hanna & Nigist Takla Haimanot

**Gojjam – Shoa**

Makonnen Indalkachew & Zawditu Mengesha Atikem

Asfawossen Kasa & Wzo. Zenebworq (g. dtr. of Ras Mesfin of Damot)

**Gojjam/Shoa – Shoa**

Li'ilt Medferiashworq & Asfawosen

Wzo. Mulumebet & Ras Biru

**Gojjam – Tigre**

(Nephew of Emperor Yohannes & Ras Adal's daughter)

**Gojjam – Wag**

Beletech (maternal sis. of Gobaze) & Desta Tedla Gualu (Ruler of Gojjam, 1855-67)

**Yajju – Gondar**

Tewabech Ali & Emperor Tewodros

**Lasta – Shoa**

Dej. Hailu Kiros & Tisseme Darge

Ras Kasa & Li'ilt Tsige Beshah

**Lasta – Wello**

Asrate Kasa & Zuryashworq

**Semen/Yajju – Shoa**

Empress Taitu & Emperor Menilek  
Ras Makonnen & Mintiwab Betul  
Ras Gugsa Wele & Zawditu Menilek

**Semen – Shoa**

Qataro Merso & Dej. Germame

**Semen/Yajju – Tigre**

Yewibdar Haile mariam & Sebagades (d. 1812)

**Shoa – Wallo**

Tisseme Kassa & Amede Ali  
Sehin Mikael & Dej. Biru Haile Mariam (nephew of Ras Makonnen)  
Amakalech Ali & Ras Biru Wolde Gabriel  
Shoaregga Menilek & Nigus Mikael  
Manalebish Bafena & Nigus Mikael  
Tafari Makonnen & Menen Asfaw

**Shoa – Tigre**

Abraha Araya & Menen Asfaw's younger sister by Yetemegnu  
Araya Sellassie & Zawditu  
Ras Seyoum Mengesha & Li'lt Atsede Asfaw  
Zenebworq Haile Sellassie & Haile Sellassie Gugsa  
Gugsa Araya & Yeshashworq Yilma  
Asfawosen & Welete Israel Seyoum  
Abera Kassa & Kebedech Seyoum

**Shoa – Gondar**

Menilek & Alitash Tewodros

**Tigre – Wag**

Dej. Hailu Kebede & Shoanesh Abraha Araya

**Tigre – Wallo**

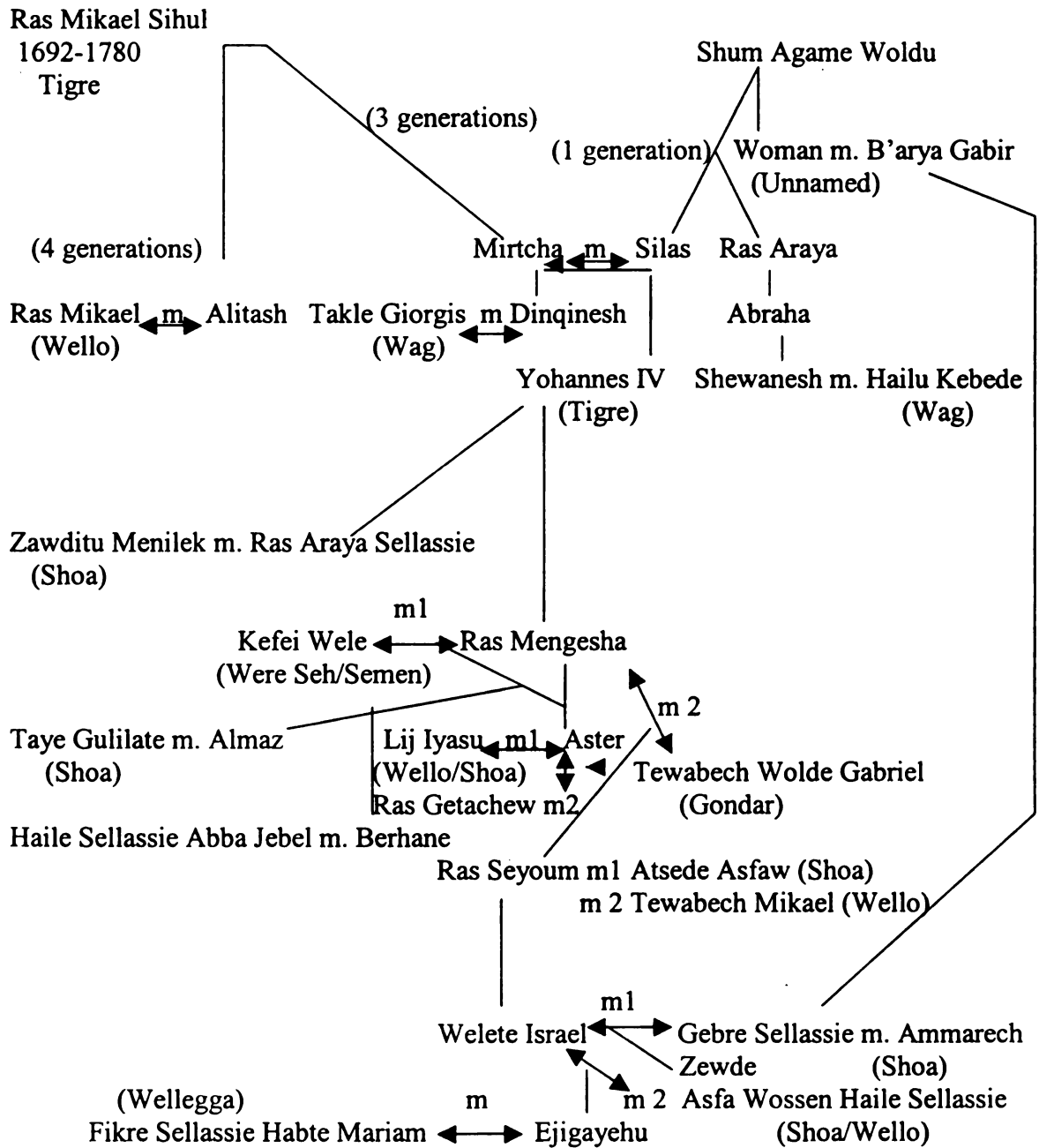
Nigus Mikael & Alitash Wahde (niece of Emperor Yohannes IV)  
Tewabech Mikael & Ras Seyoum Mengesha Yohannes  
Abraha Araya & Yetemegnu Wele

**Wag – Tigre**

Emperor Takla Giorgis & Dinqinesh Mercha

Wallo/Shoa – Gojjam  
Lij Iyasu & Seblewongel Hailu

Interconnections Charted  
 Fig. 5. 2





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