

A History of Amba Prisons and Imprisonment in Gojjam (1382 –1941)

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Abstract: *the main objective of this study is to reconstruct the history of Amba prisons and imprisonment in Ethiopia from the 14th to 20th century. The period refers the establishment of Jäbäla Amba as one of prison sites to the beginning of modern prison in 1941. The study employed qualitative methodology with which primary and secondary sources were exhaustively exploited. The study interviewed notable elders who had information about the prison and imprisonment. Besides, the study made practical observations and photographed the Amba prisons and caves. The information was cross-checked with other sources such as travellers' accounts, manuscripts and chronicles. The research identified many prison Ambas in Gojjam that served as prisons where offenses were punished by imprisonment from 14th to 20th century. Jäbäla, Quami Çäriq, Lib Gaša, Wamit and Särka were some of them. Emperor Dawit (r. 1382–1413) built Jäbäla Hobalit Maryam Church on the Jäbäla Mountain, making Jäbäla Amba one of the prisons in Gojjam's history.*

Keywords: Ethiopia, Gojjam, Amba prison, Imprisonment, Bä Heg Amlak

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1. Introduction

As long as people live in groups, disagreements over differing interests and ambitions will inevitably arise, leading to various forms of offense. Most offenses were classified as civil and criminal. Offences such as destroying private property, killing and attempts to killing were categorized under criminal offences; while other offences such as blasphemy, perjury, and treason were classified under civil offences. The classification was made based on their method of procedures and the verdicts provided. Fisher explains the nature of crimes in Ethiopia as follows:

Not only was the method of criminal prosecution "civil" in character, but such offenses were usually "compoundable" because the injured party could accept restitution and thereby save the offender, even after conviction, from penal sanctions. Certain offences such as blasphemy, perjury, banditry, or treason were not subject to this "quasi-civil" procedure but were prosecuted and punished by state officials.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸Stanley, Fisher, "Traditional Criminal Procedure in Ethiopia," (*The American Journal of Comparative*

Each of the Ethiopian customary and modern laws had commensurate punishments for different offences. The *Feteha Nägäst* (*The Law of the Kings*) listed some civil and criminal penalties among many types and levels. The death sentence, fines, imprisonment, exile, amputation of hands or legs or both and lashing were some common punishments.¹⁵⁹ This paper explores imprisonment and prisons and their roles in rendering justice. The prison was one of the most important institutions for the effective functioning of Ethiopia's legal system. This institution transformed itself from time to time in its forms, ways of guarding prisons and prisoners, and the nature of prisons. Therefore, the paper seeks to investigate the administration of prisons from Emperor Dawit I to Emperor Hayelä Sellassé I.

2. Arresting Tactics and the Concept of *Bä Heg Amlak*

It appears to have been a common practice among traditional societies for people to cooperate in detecting criminal activities and apprehending criminals. When a passer-by sees when one commits a crime, it is a moral obligation for him to attempt to stop the criminal from his actions. Besides, when passers-by see physical conflicts while they travel, they must make efforts to bring them to court. On the other hand, if one of the disputant parties cried and required a passer-by or a neighbour to catch his disputant, the passer-by or the neighbour had a moral obligation to handle the case, and at least chain the two and send them to the nearby village head.¹⁶⁰

In Ethiopia, saying *Bä Heg Amlak* had significant weight to stop disputes and to stop criminals from escape. Similarly, if a property owner found the thief in the street, in the market, or anywhere else, the former might ask the latter by shouting *Bä Heg Amlak* so that they could go to a judge immediately. The latter should go without hesitation to the local judge. As a result, the term *Bä Heg Amlak* was widely employed as an arresting tactic of suspected criminals.¹⁶¹ Kābādā contends that people used to invoke the names of rulers like *Bä-Menelik- Amlak* or *Bä-Zāwditu-Amlak* to have the suspect arrested. It is possible to argue that people used the *Yemutu* (lest someone should die) to give an oath in the court and to push the accused to be brought to justice.¹⁶²

2.1. Types of Imprisonment, Chaining and Provision

In the medieval period in Ethiopia, emperors used different natural sites as prisons for their close relatives. The prime purpose was to confine the power contenders of the Emperor to minimum or avoid potential conflicts among the male descendants of the Emperor, especially brothers and sons of the reigning Emperor or lords. Some claim that it was more of a form of protection and

Law, Vol. 19, No. 4, Autumn, 1971), p. 713.

¹⁵⁹ Peter, Strauss (ed), *The Feteha Nagast, The Law of the Kings, Translated from the Ge'ez by Abba Paulos Tzadua* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2009), pp 297-303; John Roberts, *History of Prisons World Encyclopedia of Police Forces and Correctional Eystems* (Ed. George kurian Vol.1.2nd .2007), p.74.

¹⁶⁰ Informants: Antānāh Tamer and Hiruyan Bälāy.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Kābādā Habtāmariyam, *Yä Ityopia Lemadawi Heg, Lébašay* (Addis Ababa: Berhan ina sālām Matāmiya Bét, 2003EC), p.8.

not jail.¹⁶³ Anyone who was engaged in crime was forced to live in exile as punishment and was required to be transported to and detained in a remote mountain.¹⁶⁴ The tradition continued in the 17th and 20th centuries.¹⁶⁵ According to Paez, the political prisoners were detained in Däq Estifanos monastery in the Lake Tana area in the 17th century.¹⁶⁶

Another island, called Däq, is much flatter than the others and so large that its governor told me that 400 pairs of oxen were used to build it. Here the emperor customarily placed certain great men that he seized when he wanted them to be held more securely. This island had two churches and was closer to the kingdom of Gojjam than to that of Dambia.¹⁶⁷



Fig. 1: Ruins of a prison and its gate on the island of Däq on Lake Tana

Source: Photo taken by the author

The idea is to imagine that new methods of forcing people to live in exile and restriction sentences emerged with the establishment of permanent capital and regional capitals. Forbidding criminals from entering the royal capital and provincial capitals like Yebaba and Aringo, started to appear in the 17th century and later. In addition, specific areas within the towns and provincial capitals were constructed for trials, imprisonment and punishment. The homes of well-known and influential people in the communities were also used as prisons. The judges or the governors might allow the offenders to be kept and imprisoned, after the court imposed a prison term, with the criminals being kept under the watchful eyes of an influential person.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ John Hotten, *The Abyssinian and its People or Life in the Land of Prester John* (London: MM Vignaud Barrat, 1868), p.190.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Gänät Ayälä(Trans.), *Bä Itiyopiya Käfitäna Täraroc Qoyitayä (Amharic), Douze Ans d`Sejour dans le Haute Ethiopie (Abyssinia)*, Volume 1, Paris, 1868 by Arnauld M. d` Abbadie. (Addis Ababa: Grafic Printers, Hidar 2009 E.C),p.265.

¹⁶⁶ Christopher, Tribe, (Tras.), *Pedro Paez's History of Ethiopia, 1622 Volume I*(London Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), p.182.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*,p. 260.

¹⁶⁸ Kăbädä, p.72; Gänät Ayälä(Trans.), *Bä Itiyopiya Käfitäna Täraroc Qoyitayä (Amharic), Douze An s d`Sejourn dans le Haute Ethiopie (Abyssinia)*, Volume 1, Paris, 1868 by Arnauld M. d` Abbadie. (Addis Ababa: Grafic Printers, Hidar 2013 E.C), p.291.

The second form of imprisonment was detaining the criminals in camps. Some law abiding citizens helped to performed.¹⁶⁹ A prisoner would stay in the camp chained to a loyal person. Some prisoners even had the right to attend their lords' banquet with their chains. A good example in this regard was the case of *fitawrari* Wäldä Täklé whose leg was chained to a young individual's leg, loyal to *Däjaé* Gošu. But *Däjjazmaé* Gošu still allowed *fitawrari* Wäldä Täklé to attend his banquet with his chains.¹⁷⁰

The other type of prison was called *yäqum isir* or *ayinä-quraña*¹⁷¹ (being placed under house arrest) which required convicts to be held in a specific location such as in a town or in their own houses. Criminals could only reside in a few places or regions. They would not be allowed to go anywhere for any purpose. It was frequently utilized during *Ras* Hayelu Täklähyamant to imprison individuals to stay in their residences.¹⁷² The criminals had the right to wander in the city, but guards escorted them. In this regard, priests from Dima appointed through the order of *Ras* Mikael of Wällo were imprisoned in Däbrä Marqos through *ayinä-quraña isir*. These were *mämehr* Tirfè, *qësägäbüz* Gätahun, *Mägabi* Alämu, and *Raq-masré* Abäbä. Later, they were released from prison by the order of Empress Zäwditu because the people from Gojjam repeatedly appealed to her.¹⁷³

In all prisons, fettering the ankle called *Egrä-muq* (chaining legs), chaining hand, or both were common to prevent escape from prison. The chaining system was called *Quraña* (a type in which a chain companion, a guard, was chained to a prisoner). More precisely, it refers to a correction officer. The system functioned until *lij* Iyasu abolished it by law. The chain was made from iron with a ring inserted in the limbs of criminals.¹⁷⁴ The chains were made of iron and were held on the legs of individuals by experts.¹⁷⁵

Thus, the then society and government used different forms of criminal chaining system. The first one was known as ambulatory custody. The concept of such a chaining system relied on chaining the right hand of the accused with the accuser's left hand in the compound or at the royal camp until justice was delivered. The purpose of being in the accuser's compound was to assure the accused come to court proceedings without delay or absence. The same was true for prisoners who were detained in the royal campsites. In the sixteenth century, according to Alvarez, there were two houses at a good distance from the royal tent or *säkäla* (tent) justice, in front of the king's tent. Large chains and *igir birät* (shackle) were available in the house. Based on the court's decision, the offenders were chained if the sentence was imprisonment. The

¹⁶⁹Gänät (Trans.), 2009, p. 265.

¹⁷⁰Gänät (Trans.), 2013.p.116.

¹⁷¹Informants: Harägäwäyin Manahlot, Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä , Afäwärk Engeda

¹⁷²*Ibid*,

¹⁷³*Ibid*.

¹⁷⁴Tribe , Vol I,p.182.

¹⁷⁵ Henry, Hozier, *The British Expedition to Abyssinia: Compiled from authentic documents*. (London: Macmillan and Co. 1869), p.246.

accused and the accuser may be freed from their chain, if the accused provided acceptable *wass* (guarantees).¹⁷⁶

The accuser had responsibilities and rights while being chained to the accused. One of the responsibilities was providing the accused with food and other necessities. The accuser also had two important legal rights. First, it was his left-hand which would be tied with the right hand of the accused. This means that his right hand was free, which enabled him to do things efficiently. Freeing the right hand of the accuser was considered a privilege for the accuser, and chaining the right hand of the accused was part of the punishment.¹⁷⁷ The second right of the accuser was that he had the right to substitute his loyal servants to be chained. Young members of the family could serve as jailors during the period in the accuser's place. This practice served to detain suspected criminals until a decision was made.¹⁷⁸



Fig. 2: Prisoners chained together: A manacle was placed on the accuser's left hand and on the accused's right hand

Sources: Farago, Abyssinian Stop Press...p.31; see also Bahru, A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991...p.122

Second, only the right arm of the offender was chained to a large log of wood with an iron rope or chain and guarded.¹⁷⁹ In this tactic, a prisoner who had one of his hands chained to a log of

¹⁷⁶ Lord Stanley, (Tras.), *Narrative of This Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the Years 1520-1527, Father Francisco Alvarez translated from the Portuguese* (London : Council the Hakluyt Society, 1881), p.335.

¹⁷⁷ Ladislav, Farago, *Abyssinian Stop Press* (London: Robert Hale and Company, 1986), p.31; Tribe, Voll, p.182.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Kābādā, pp.69-71; Stanley (Tras.). p.335.

wood or stone on the same side had relatively freer movements.¹⁸⁰ The other form of chaining was called *igir tawäré* (chaining the criminal's arm and leg with an iron chain). Beke called it "slave shackles," which means chaining the hand and leg of the prisoner together make him not move easily.¹⁸¹ Thus, two loyal individuals for his movement were assigned, especially to the court.¹⁸² Therefore, the guards were responsible for keeping him and bringing him to court when needed. This mainly functioned for serious criminals where the manacle was placed around their ankles.¹⁸³ According to Beke, only prisoners in Mäqdäla had their legs fettered until 1865. In addition to legs, the prisoners' hands were also chained immediately after the sudden escape of Menelik from Mäqdäla in 1865.¹⁸⁴

Concerning provisions, there were two sources of provisions for prisoners, including food. If the accusers asked that a man be arrested, they were obliged to give him and the guards' food. If one failed to provide this, the prisoner could be set free.¹⁸⁵ Kābādä states that if the accused was imprisoned in the accuser's house and chained to the accuser's loyal person, the prisoner's relatives were responsible for feeding him.¹⁸⁶ If the accusers could not produce the funds, then their left hand with the accused right hand would be bound until justice was delivered. The advantage given to the accuser in this form of prison was leaving his right hand free. But on a closer inspection, we notice that the accuser was trapped for demanding justice. He became a prisoner with the accused in a room because his left hand would be tied with the accused. And if this lasted a few days, the loss of earnings for the accuser could be considerable. The fact remains that this system was beneficial for the powerful service holders or financially capable ones. This is because hiring a *quraña* and feeding him and the accused would require heavy financial obligations.¹⁸⁷

If the accuser was the government, the prisoner's relatives were responsible for feeding and paying some amount in kind for the guards.¹⁸⁸ In order to plow the land and supply some goods to the convicts, the servants of the imprisoned *Šums* were granted land close to the Amba.¹⁸⁹ Royal

¹⁸⁰ Charles, Johnston, *Travels Southern Abyssinia: The Country of Adal the Kingdom of Shoa* Charles Johnston in Two Volumes. Vol. I (London: J. Madden And Co., Leaden hall Street, 1844), pp.419-420; John, Campbell, *The Travels and Adventures of Edward Brown, Formerly a Merchant in London* (London: Palala Press, 2016), pp.288-289.

¹⁸¹ Charles Beke, *The British Captives in Abyssinia* (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer 1867), p.195.

¹⁸² Tribe, Vol I, p.182.

¹⁸³ Stanley (Tras.). p.335; Kābādä pp. 69-71.

¹⁸⁴ Beke, p.145.

¹⁸⁵ Stanley (Tras.). p.335.

¹⁸⁶ Kābādä, pp.68-71.

¹⁸⁷ Elizabet, Filleul, (Translator). *Tractatus Tres Historico-geographic 1634: A Seventeenth Century Historical and Geographical Account of Tigray, Ethiopia, by Manoel Barradas* (London: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), pp.25-26.

¹⁸⁸ Stanley (Tras.). p.335

¹⁸⁹ Zānāb (*Debtera*), *Yä Tēwodros Tarik*, Enno Littman, Editor and Publisher (Princeton: Princeton University, 1902), p.18; Paulos Ņoño, *Aṣé Tēwodros*. (Addis Ababa: Bole Publishing Agency, 1985), p.245.

prisoners were allowed to have their families live with them, including their wives and children, and they had a common garden to raise vegetables.¹⁹⁰

3. Prisons in Gojjam and Their Roles in the Smooth Running of Justice

Until Emperor Hayelä Sellassé I, many mountains and caves served as prisons in Ethiopia and the study area. Amba Gešän, Wähnie Amba, Sar Amba, Däbrä Damo, Jäbäla, Quami Çäriq, Lib Gaša, Wamit, and Sarka were some of them.¹⁹¹ The Ambas (plateaus) were commonly used, and in certain places, there were pillar-like rocks that served as fortresses and were impregnable by nature.¹⁹²

3.1. From Amba-Gešän to Wähni Amba

Geographically, Amba Gešän is currently located in Ambasäl *wäräda*, North Wällo Zone, Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. It was a well-known prison in medieval Ethiopia, especially for male royal family members who were thought to be power contenders to the emperor. According to Alvarz, the Amba used three-foot cutting routes to reach the top of the Amba, and it took more than two days to complete the journey around the Amba.¹⁹³ Scholars disagree about when and how the Amba Gešän became a royal prison in Ethiopia. Some say that it was Emperor Amha Iyäsus or Yikuno Amlak (r. 1270-1285) that established it as a location for keeping the royal male descendants of the bloodline of “Solomon”, and it served as a prison until Emperor Lebnä Dengel.¹⁹⁴

Other scholars argue that following the death of Emperor Yikuno Amlak, power struggles among the royal family members became a serious issue. As a result, five royal descendants governed in five years, one after the other, through a series of battles. These were Säyfä Ra'ad (1294-1295), Häzbä Asgäd (1295-1296), Qädäm Asgäd (1296-1297), Jin Asgäd (1297-1298), Saba Asgäd (1297-1298) and Widim Ra'ad (1298-1299). Thus, Widim Ra'ad established a royal prison system to prevent political power succession problems. Amba Gešän was designated as the state's royal jail.¹⁹⁵ Others say that it was one of the youngest sons of Emperor Yikuno Amlak who violated the existing tradition of inhering power from the eldest son downwards. He was impatient to wait his turn to be crowned and, thus, imprisoned all his brothers at the Amba and

¹⁹⁰Campbell, pp.293; C. F. Kingham and G. W. B. Huntingford(Trans.), *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646 Being Extracts from the History of High Ethiopia or Abassia By Mandel De Almeida together With Bahrey's History of the Galla, Second Series No. CVII*(London: University of Hamburg, the University Press,1954), pp. 288-289; Johnston, pp.419-420; Paulos,p.245; Zänäb (*Däbtära*), p.18.

¹⁹¹ Kābädä, p. 72.

¹⁹²Campbell, pp.288-289.

¹⁹³Stanley (Tras.). pp.140-144.

¹⁹⁴ Mordachai, Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim and European Rivalry in the Region* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1980), p.44;James, Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771,1772 and 1773, Six Vols.*(Dublin: William Porter for P. Wogan, L. White, et al, 1790, Vol.III, 4.), p.7.

¹⁹⁵ Richard, Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: the Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II*(Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University press, 1990),p.27.

took power.¹⁹⁶ Thus, from that time onwards, the male descendants of the reigning Emperor were detained at the Amba and guarded by loyal officials.¹⁹⁷

According to Bruce, Emperor Bädä Maryam (r.1468 – 1478) established Amba Gešän as a royal jail because the Yodit force had destroyed the previous prison at Däbrä Damo Mountain. Her force ruthlessly slew princes at Mount Damo. As a result, from the ninth century until Emperor Bede-Maryam's reign, the princes were forced to stay at home with their families, and the custom of royal jail in the state of the “Solomonic” male line came to an end. We understand from this point that before the establishment of Amba Gešän, Damo Mountain, currently called Däbrä Damo, was the male-line royal family's jail.¹⁹⁸

From the Middle Ages to the end of the Gondärian period, imprisonment at Amba Gišn and later at Wähni Amba was a significant state policy to reduce power struggles.¹⁹⁹ Thus, in the medieval period of Ethiopia, it was from this Amba that the successors were taken from to run the government immediately when the Emperor died. No one was allowed to inherit the king's power outside one who was in this prison, including the eldest son, who had the right of immediate power succession.²⁰⁰

Some writers say that establishing the royal prison was an important tool to stabilize state security by minimizing the power struggle between the male descendants of the royal family and the Emperor. To implement the existing tradition, the first son or the eldest son of the Emperor would be the heir to the throne; but, if the Emperor was without a son, one of his brothers, commonly an older brother, would be the heir. This law was repeatedly violated and caused many power struggles in the empire. Thus, at the time of the death of the Emperor, one of the eligible family members from the Amba would be selected to take the throne. Thus, keeping all power contenders at the Amba was a strategy for the proper functioning of the state. But, practically, it did not prevent the dynastic power struggle until Ahmäd Ibn Ibrham Algazi (Ahmäd Gran) destroyed it in 1540. Robél, the governor of Amba Gešän, and more than four hundred men were slain. After the destruction of Amba Gešän, no more royal family was kept there until the establishment of Wähni Abma during the Gondärian period.²⁰¹

In more recent times, Amba Gešän served as temporary shelter and retreat for soldiers and lords from enemies. For instance, during the national power struggle in Ethiopia between the supporters and opponents of *Lij* Iyasu, the young prince escaped to Amba Gešän after the battle

¹⁹⁶ Mountain prison was a common custom during Ottoman Turks and the ancient Greeks see John Carton Broton, *A New Collections of Voyages and Travels...* Vol II, pp. 45-46.

¹⁹⁷ Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* (New York: Oxford University press,1973),p.25; Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia* p.27.

¹⁹⁸ Bruce, Vol. III, pp. 60, 80 see also Lacy O'Leary. *The Ethiopian Church Historical Notes on the Church Of Abyssinia* (London: Northumberland Atenub, 1936),p. 44.

¹⁹⁹ Tadesse Tamrat., *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972),pp.275 – 277.

²⁰⁰ Bruce, Vol. V, p. 587.

²⁰¹ Stanley (Tras.), pp.332-336

of Sägälé in 1916. He appointed *Ras* Bešir and *Däjač* Amädé as guards of Amba Gešän. Adal, the son of *Ras* Bāzabih, died after Iyasu had fought Habtä Giyorgis in Gärado. *Ras* Yemär was captured and imprisoned. And through negotiation between the Amba guard *Ras* Bešir and *Fitawrari* Habtä Giyorgis, the Amba came under the control of *Fitawrari* Habtä Giyorgis.²⁰² *Ras* Imeru, who visited the Amba in the 1930s, stated that the Amba has only one gate, which is dangerous to climb up. At the top, there were more than five hundred people, including a priest who lived permanently at the Amba.²⁰³

Wähni is located in Dämbiya, which is about 58km southeast of Gondär. It was probably founded during the reign of Emperor Fasilädäs, who struggled with his brother Gälawdäwos between 1637 and 1639.²⁰⁴ Emperor Iyasu I, in the third year of his reign, visited Wähni Amba and provided food and clothing for all the detained nobility at the Amba. He set them free from prison and appointed them to various areas of the province. These were extraordinary measures that differed from the existing traditions in Ethiopia.²⁰⁵

The period of 1706–1721 was challenging for the Gondär royal family since it saw four successive monarchs (Bakafa being the fifth), all of whom either passed away without leaving any successors or had only one son who was too young to be a king. As a result, when the sons of Yohannés I and Iyasu I appeared, it became necessary to turn to other royal descendants. Emperor Bakafa appointed Zä Gabrél as the *šum* (administrator) of Wähni Amba. Later, he appointed Walwaj as a guard of the Amba.²⁰⁶ Many Gondärian emperors, including Iyasu I's sons, were imprisoned there for several years. But given these circumstances, other family lines might potentially vie for the crown.²⁰⁷

3.2. Mäqdäla

Besides the places mentioned above, there were prisons where the Gojjam lords were imprisoned at different times. Among these, Mäqdäla was one of the most important mountain prisons during the reign of Emperor Téwodros II. Mäqdäla is found in Mäqdäla *wäräda*, North Wällo Zone, Amhara National Regional State. The place had only one mountain gate with a vast plain at the top. It is situated between Bāšlo and Jida rivers. Individuals sentenced to jail and those considered power contenders of the emperor from different provinces including Menelik, were imprisoned at Mäqdäla Amba. One important event that made Mäqdäla unique from the other

²⁰² Särgäw, *Yä Itiyopiya Tarikp*.400.

²⁰³ Imeru Hayelä Sellassé(*Leul Ras*), *Kä Ayähut Kä Mastawusäw*(Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa university press, 2002EC),p.169.

²⁰⁴ Bruce, Vol. III, pp. 262, 438; *Twelve years of living ...*, vol. 1, 1980, p. 88

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁰⁶ Alämu Hailé, *Yä Ašé Bakafa Tarikä, Nägäst Amaräna ina Geez*(Addis Ababa: Yä Qeres Tenat Ena Tebeqa Bale Seltan, 2006),..pp.77,97.

²⁰⁷ Täklä Šadiq Mäkürä, *Yä Itiyopiya Tarik Kä Ašé Libné Dingil Eske Atse Téwodros, Second Edition*(Addis Ababa: Berhan Ina Selam Printing Press, 1961 E. C),pp.276-77; Laverle Berry, "The Solomonic Monarchy at Gondär ,1630-1755: An institutional Analysis of Kinship in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia," (PhD dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Boston University, 1976),pp.103-104.

prisons was the imprisonment of foreign citizens. British citizens were imprisoned by Emperor Téwodros II, who was dissatisfied with the unwillingness of the British government to provide him with armament. That led to a conflict between Ethiopia and the British, which finally caused the defeat of the Emperor at the battle of Mäqdäla.²⁰⁸

Famous Gojjam lords, including *Däjač* Berru Gošu, were imprisoned at Mäqdäla Amba. *Däjač* Berru was imprisoned at Sar Amba in Çilga before he was relocated to Mäqdäla Amba.²⁰⁹ In 1858, all political prisoners, including *Däjač* Berru Gošu and European citizens, were transferred from Sar Amba to Mäqdäla. After their transfer, the number of guards increased to nine. The *azač* of the Amba was promoted from *Däjjazmač* to *ras*. The first appointee was Kidanä Maryam, who was from Bägämeder and served in *Ras* Ali's administration and was a respected person. However, after the escape of Menelik from Mäqdäla, he was manacled and imprisoned in Mäqdäla until his death. *Däjač* Bëssäwr was promoted to *ras* and became the *azač* of the Mäqdäla prison.²¹⁰

3.3.Jäbäla Amba

Charles Johnston, who visited Šäwa in the 1830s (during the reign of Sähalä Sellassé) describes the situation of the prison place in Šäwa. According to his geographical description, Guančo prison was located between Aliu Amba and Farrä. He claims it was used as a state prison for convicts sentenced to prison. He observed that males up to five descents from the royal family were incarcerated there.²¹¹ Furthermore, not only were male descendants of Ethiopian monarchs detained in this hill prison, but criminals from outside the royal families were also kept there. He further explains that the prisoners had separate sleeping apartments made from wooden sticks. Of all prisoners, only two were chained.²¹² Similarly, in Gojjam, there were known Amba named Jäbäla -Muçara,²¹³ Quami-çäriq,²¹⁴ Wamit, Dib Gaša, and Soma. These were the most important prison places during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* and after.

²⁰⁸ Informants: Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä, Afäwärk Engeda see also Beke, p. 283.

²⁰⁹ Beke, p. 283.

²¹⁰ Zänäb (*Debtera*), ,p.18;Paulos, p.245 .

²¹¹ Johnston, pp. 419-420.

²¹² *Ibid*; Campbell, pp.288-289.

²¹³ Travellers and academic writers used different words for mountain, some call it, Jäbäla, other call it Mutara and the other call it Šäbälla see Henry, Stern, *The Captive Missionary: Being an Account of the Country and People of Abyssinia. Embracing a Narrative of King Theodore's life, and his Treatment of Political and Religious Missions*(London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin,1869),p.31;,Tsebella was used as fortification and prisons; Some of my informants call it Shi-Bela; Informants: Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä , Afäwärk Engeda .

²¹⁴ According to my sources, the term Quami Çärq is a combination of the words Quami , which refers to soldiers and priests who were always on the ready to serve the church and maintain security, respectively. The term "Çärq" alludes to the clothing that both soldiers and priests in Kumie Çärq cleaned in the two main rivers.

3.3.1. Jäbäla as a Royal Prison

To begin with, Jäbäla-Muṭara was a vast and chained mountain found in Gozamn *wäräda*, East Gojjam Zone, Amhara National Regional State. It is thirty kilometres far from Däbrä Marqos, the capital of East Gojjam Zone. It is located very near to Abbay River. It is impregnable by nature.²¹⁵ The two perennial rivers on the two sides of the Jäbäla-Muṭara hills make the mountain attractive.²¹⁶ In the period under consideration, Jäbäla, a plateau in Gojjam, was covered with beautiful meadows and fertile soil suitable for housing over 2,000 men, including prisoners. The mountain was heavily forested and grew a variety of plant species used for food, cultural remedies and fuel.²¹⁷ My sources claim that the establishment of a church at the Amba called Jäbäla Hobalit Maryam in the past and the accessibility of holy water assisted the prisoners and locals, guaranteeing their religious lifestyle in the region.²¹⁸

Who first used Jäbäla Mountain as a royal jail is debatable. Oral tradition claims that some members of the royal family lived in the Amba during the rule of Emperor Dawit (r. 1382-1413), who erected the Jäbäla Hobalit Maryam church in the Jäbäla Mountain. In this regard, there was a tradition that Emperor Dawit brought eight pictures of Virgin Mary and her Child drawn by Lukas from Egypt, and he gave one of them to the Jäbäla Hobalit church.²¹⁹ Ras Hayelu Yosédéq, who served in Gondär as the Emperor's guardian from 1784 to 1786, was thought to have begun using Jäbäla as prison during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* period. This was evidenced by the frequent mentions in travellers' accounts. I could not find the names of any prisoners at Jäbäla during his rule, though. Jäbäla, according to Cheesman, was one of the renowned jails for political offenders. He says that in the 1850s, many notable political prisoners were housed there.²²⁰

Däjaç Berru and *Däjaç* Gošu imprisoned lawbreakers, criminals and power contenders in the Jäbäla-Muṭara Mountains. *Ṭiqsä Märed*, one of *Däjaç* Berru's well-known commanders, was detained in Jäbäla-Muṭara because he allegedly betrayed *Däjaç* Berru. He was chained on one of his legs to *Däjaç* Berru's loyal servant's leg on the mountain.²²¹

Adal Täsäma rebelled against Tädla Guwalu and entered Damot. With the help of loyal allies like Täsäma Alula and Nazrit Engeda, Adal assembled a military force from Damot and was prepared for battle. After all this, Adal's soldiers burned down Mänqorär and kidnapped *Wäyzäro*

²¹⁵Beke, p.284.

²¹⁷Cheesman, *Lake Tana & the Blue Nile; an Abyssinian Quest*(London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd, 1968) p.369

²¹⁸ Särgäw, *Yä Itiyopiya Tarikp.57*; Abdussamad H. Ahmad, "Trade and Politics in Gojjam, 1882-1935," (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1980), p.58; Travellers and academic writers used different words for mountain some call it, Jäbäla, other call it Mutara, and the other call it Tshebella see Stern, *The Captive Missionary...* p 31.

²¹⁹Cheesman.p.369.

²²⁰*Ibid.*

²²¹ Gänät (Trans.), 2009, p.165.

Gudday, Tädla's concubine. *Däjjazmaç* Tädla instructed his troops to apprehend the rebel groups wherever they were. Then, the troops of Tädla captured Täsäma Alula and brought him to justice, while Adal Täsäma, *Wäyzäro* Gudday and Nazrit Engeda escaped.²²² Tädla Guwalu was both the accuser and the judge in the judicial assembly. He accused the wrongdoers, who plotted to remove him from power and abducted his concubine Gudday. In addition, Mänqorär town, which was the headquarters of his political and judicial authority, was set on fire by the two men.²²³ He welcomed everyone to the trial and invited them to give their judgments in accordance with their rank. Numerous sentences were handed down, ranging from death penalty to public flogging. Täsäma Alula was imprisoned on Jäbäla Mountain in addition to receiving a punishment of one hundred lashes and having his possessions taken.²²⁴

Tädla died in January 1868, and *Däjaç* Negusé took power for a short period. He appointed some officials such as *Balambaras Çulu*, *Balambars Tamré*, *Balambaras Wälädä Abin*, *Fitawrari Hayelu* to the royal court. However, *Däjaç* Dästa Tädla took power and imprisoned all of them in Jäbäla Mountain.²²⁵ Later, *Däjaç* Adal Täsäma fought the bandit Engeda Elyas. Adal Täsäma captured Engeda Elyas in Enäbsé with his men that he had gathered from Simada, Andabét and took his belongings, including his cattle.²²⁶ Finally, Adal Täsäma ordered him to be detained in Jäbäla. After the Kafa campaign, king Täklähaymanot imprisoned Gudday and her son *Däjaç* Bözabih, the governor of Damot, on Jäbäla Mountain due to a dispute Gudday had with another of the king's wife, Laqäch.²²⁷ *Däjaç* Bözabih, the son of the king and the governor of Damot was detained at Amba by his father, king Täklähaymanot, who appointed *Ras Wärqé*.²²⁸

After the death of king Täklähaymanot, a judge named *Fitawrari Wäldä Mäsqäl* was sent to Gojjam with three responsibilities. The first task was administering Jäbäla and Muçara mountains under the central government's control; and secondly, reconciling the two regional leaders, *Däjaç* Seyum (later *Ras* Hayelu) and *Ras Mängäša Jämbärè*. The third responsibility was demarcating the boundary between Damot and Gojjam proper. Jäbäla served as a prison even during *Ras Imeru's* administration of Gojjam.²²⁹

3.3.2. Jäbäla and Soma as Fortification and Justice Square

The territory of Gojjam was said to be surrounded by hostile neighbours.²³⁰ On the northern side during the period of the *Zämänä Mäsafent* there were attempts from Bégämeder to subdue the lords of Gojjam, Damot and Agäw Meder. On the other side of the border, elements from the Oromo and the Sudan routinely carried out periodic invasions, particularly against the

²²² Särgäw, *Yä Itiyopiya Tarik*..pp.220-221.

²²³ Paulos, p. 103.

²²⁴ *Ibid*; Täklä Iyäsus, chapter 30,p.25.

²²⁵ Täklä Iyäsus, chapter 30,p.25.

²²⁶ *Ibid*.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, chapter 44, p.347.

²²⁸ Täklä Iyäsus, chapter.... p.23

²²⁹ Imeru (*Leul Ras*),...p.249.

²³⁰ Gänät (Trans.), 2009, pp. 106-107; Bruce, Vol. IV. p.583.

inhabitants of Gojjam's Mätäkäl and Damot regions. In all these episodes, the lords in Gojjam kept their autonomy and the region's territory from attacks. One of the important factors that contributed to the continuity of the region's autonomy was the presence of defensible positions. The River Abbay and mountains such as Jäbäla and Soma caves were some of them.²³¹

The governors and the lord employed Jäbäla and Soma as fortresses. They possessed impregnable picks and plains used as temporary refuges and fortresses to withstand frequent attacks and invasions from outsiders.²³² Jäbäla and Soma had only an exit and an entry, making it strategically safe from internal and external opponents. Once a lord fortified in the mountains, no one could break the gate.²³³



Fig. 3: Jäbäla Mountain prison and its gate and features

Source: Photos by the author

Ras Gugsa of Yäju organized forces and marched against *Däjač* Gošu. *Däjač* Gošu and his men were fortified at Jäbäla. After many attempts to break the gate of Jäbäla, *Ras Gugsa* returned to Däbrä Tabor by appointing *Gobäna*, his *Endärasé*, over Gojjam. *Däjač* Gošu easily defeated the *endärasé* of *Ras Gugsa* and restored his territory. After the death of *Gugsa*, *Ras Maryä* of Yäju, just like his predecessors, made a similar attempt to subdue the lords of Gojjam and led a campaign against *Däjač* Gošu of Damot and *Däjač* Berru of Gojjam proper. He organized a huge force from Raya and other districts for this purpose. *Däjač* Gošu and *Däjač* Berru entered their fortress at Jäbäla and Soma Mountain, respectively. *Ras Maryä* and his forces could not reach Soma and Jäbäla and returned to his headquarters in Däbrä Tabor by appointing his *Endärasés* *Lägas Qasim* and *Mañintu* over Damot and Gojjam, respectively. After *Ras Maryä* returned to Däbrä Tabor, the two Gojjam lords abolished the *endärasés* of *Maryä*.²³⁴

After the death of *Ras Maryä*, from 1840 onwards, a new governor *Ras Ali II* from Däbrä Tabor continued the attempt to subdue *Däjač* Berru and *Däjjazmac* Gošu. *Ras Ali II* led repeated annual

²³¹ Informants: Antänäh Tamer, Hiruyan Bäläy, Harägäwäyin Manahlot, Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä Afäwärk Engeda

²³² *Ibid*, p.106

²³³ *Ibid*; Charles, Rey, "A Recent Visit to Gudru and Gojjam," (*The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 67, No 6, 1926), pp.25-26.

²³⁴ Bairu, p.30

campaigns against the lords of Gojjam until *Däjjazmač* Kasa Hayelu defeated him in 1853. Jäbäla, Quami Čäriq, and Soma saved the forces of the lords of Gojjam from the repeated expedition of *Ras* Ali II.²³⁵ He appointed *Däjač* Mañintu over Damot, Yemär Guwalu, Ali Aba Bula, Bešir, Wälé and Hayelu (the son of Mänän) over parishes such as Enäsé, Enäbsé and Hulät Eju Enäsé. *Etägé* Mänän was also assigned over Agäw-Meder. *Däjač* Gošu and *Däjač* Berru fought against the *endärasés* of *Ras* Ali II. Ali Aba Bula and Yemär Guwalu were arrested, but *Däjač* Mañintu escaped. Finally, those arrested individuals became mediators between *Ras* Ali II and *Däjač* Gošu.²³⁶

Däjjazmač Berru entered his Soma fortification during Kasa Hayelu's (later Téwodros II's) attack against him.²³⁷ Others assert that Quami Čäriq, the best fortification hub for *Däjjazmač* Berru, was responsible for saving his life temporarily.²³⁸ However, suddenly, *Däjač* Kasa captured *Däjač* Berru when *Däjač* Berru left his fortification in Soma. *Däjač* Kasa Hayelu appointed *Belata* Dästa as administrator over Jäbäla Mountains and Soma. He appointed Tädla Guwalu as war commander and *balmbaras* Wäläta as a *Mesläné* over Gojjam. At Sar Amba in Gondär, *Däja* Kasa put *Däjač* Berru and a few of his obedient servants in prison. *Däjač* Berru was later taken away to Mäqdäla Amba prison.²³⁹ His wife remained at Jäbäla for some time.²⁴⁰

Tädla Guwalu rebelled against *Däjač* Kasa Hayelu, who restored his hereditary governorship. His resistance continued until his death. From 1854 to 1863, Tädla was governor of the whole province of Gojjam by subduing the *mäsläné* of Emperor Téwodros II. Emperor Téwodros II marched to Gojjam through Šäwa to subdue Tädla Guwalu. As his predecessors did, Tädla retreated to the fortress on Mučära-Jäbäla Mountain. The forces of Emperor Téwodros II made repeated attacks on the mountain but could not reach the forces of Tädla. Emperor Téwodros II appointed *ras* Engeda and Baša Hayelu as governors of Gojjam and returned to Däbrä Tabor.²⁴¹ On his way, Emperor Téwodros's forces punished the people in Damot, Agäw Meder, including church functionaries who were suspected of supporting *Däjač* Tädla.²⁴² However, Emperor Téwodros II never fully controlled Mäça, Damot and Agäw Meder.²⁴³

During *Däjač* Dästa Tädla, and later during King Täklähaymanot of Gojjam, Jäbäla continued as one of the best strategies to tackle enemies. That is why at different times, Emperor Täklä Giyorgis and later Emperor Yohannés IV came to Gojjam to subdue *Däjač* Dästa Tädla and Adal Täsäma, who had fortified at Jäbäla and the two forces returned to their regions without success. Jäbäla Amba's second most significant contribution was its natural endowment to serve

²³⁵*Ibid.*

²³⁶Gänät (Trans.), 2013, pp.97,101.

²³⁷Zänäb (*Däbtära*), p 17; Paulos.p. 51.

²³⁸ Stern, *The Captive Missionary...* p.15

²³⁹Zänäb (*Däbtära*), p 17; Paulos.p. 51

²⁴⁰ Stern,*The Captive Missionary...* p.15.

²⁴¹Zänäb (*Däbtära*), p 17; Paulos.p. 103.

²⁴²Beke, pp.45-46

²⁴³Cheesman, *Lake Tana & the Blue Nile...*pp.

as a courthouse, office and open plain for the administration of justice. Different lords used a naturally built but massive stone found at the Amba as *sägänät* or chair to deliver their judicial statements and verdicts. The people attended the judgments in the plain area, locally called Wenwen, in front of the stone chair. During the reign of *Negus Täklähaymanot*, this square was active where judicial councils were gathered at least once per week.²⁴⁴



Fig. 4: A big stone at Jäbäla, served as a chair of justice for Gojjam lords

Source: A photo by the author

Another area at the Amba was identified as residence area for prisoners and their relatives. This area held more than two thousand people, including prisoners. A separate field was reserved for cattle, especially horses, mules and donkeys.²⁴⁵

3.4. Quami Çäriq

Quami Çäriq, another subterranean jail, was found in Gojjam proper, which is today in the Amhara regional state's Eastern Gojjam Zone. During the *Zämänä Mäsafent*, it served as a prison. There were many reasons why the prison's site was selected. The first was the presence of more than 48 chains of caves known as Çerqos cave.²⁴⁶ Second, the Quami Çäriq cave, which had three layers, could house numerous prisoners linked via a pathway. Third, it had just one gate, which made it easy to guard the prisoners from escape and protecting the jail from external attack.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Informants: Antänäh Tamer, Hiruyan Bäläy, Harägäwäyin Manahlot, Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä, Afäwärk Engeda

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*,

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*



Fig. 5: Layers and gate of Çerqos cave

Source: Photos taken by the author

The fourth factor was the availability of two perennial rivers, Anjāb and Ancāṭība, which join in the gorge and form a large river that flows all year, making water provision easy for the prison population. Another essential feature for providing sustenance for the prisoners and guards was the availability of natural plants and fruits and the presence of huge plain space for hoe cultivation.²⁴⁸ Even today, some parts of the gorge are settlements and agricultural areas.



Fig. 6: Settlement in Çerqos cave

Source: Photos taken by the author

The Quami Çäriq housed criminals who had committed crimes in various provinces. People from Damot, Quwara, Bägämeder, Agäw Meder, Mäça and Gojjam proper were found in this prison during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*. *Däjać* Gošu, who ruled independently as a regional lord in Damot until his death in Guramba, was one of the noteworthy regional lords held in this prison. The Yäju lords, who were the Emperor's guardians at Gondär appointed an *endärasé* named Maṭintu over Damot, *Däjać* Gošu's hereditary territory. *Däjjazmać* Maṭintu and Gošu fought each other, and finally, *Däjać* Gošu was captured by *Däjać* Maṭintu. Thus, *Däjać* Maṭintu imprisoned *Däjać*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Gošu and his loyal generals' *fitawrari* Baryaw and *fitawrari* Gälata in Quami Çäriq until they were released by *Däjaç* Berru, who killed Mañintu after a heavy battle.²⁴⁹

Another notable regional lord who spent some time in Quami-Çäriq prison was *Däjäç* Tädla Guwalu, the grandson of *Ras* Märed. *Däjaç* Berru suspected Tädla as his power contender. *Däjaç* Berru charged Tädla for conspiring to overthrow him from power.²⁵⁰ Thus, with the judgment of *Däjaç* Berru, Tädla was captured and imprisoned in Quami Çäriq. After a year of negotiation and mediation, Tädla was released from prison. According to the negotiation, Tädla was exiled to live outside the administration boundary of *Däjaç* Berru. Later, during the rule of *Däjaç* Tädla Guwalu, Täsäma Alula, who joined Adal Täsäma in banditry opposing Tädla Guwalu's authority, was imprisoned in Jäbäla.²⁵¹

Later, *Däjaç* Dästa Tädla, who was appointed governor of Gojjam under the reign of Täklä giyorgis, ordered his army commander Imeru Asägé to capture *Däjaç* Adal. *Däjaç* Dästa's forces commanded by Imeru Asägé defeated Adal Täsäma and his loyal servants, including *Aba* Dandé Wärqé, *Aba* Mishig Lemäne, *Aba* Tuncha Filatie and *Aba* Baher. The battle was held in Mangud located in Agäw Meder, and all the defeated were imprisoned in Quami Çäriq. However, Adal Täsäma and his men took control of the cave. *Aba* Dandé, one of the faithful servants of Adal Täsäma, was responsible for successfully subduing the prisoner guards in the cave. The following poem was coined for him:

ያምርህ እንደሆነ ስጋ ብርንዶ

እንደበለው ዳንዲ ተማታ በሞንዶ

(If you crave to eat raw meat,

Fight with a *Mendo* as Bäläw Dandi (the name of the person) does.)²⁵²

When the news reached the court, *Däjaç* Dästa's forces encircled the cave and began hurling flames mixed with red pepper from the top. The prominent elders and church officials pleaded with *Däjaç* Dästa to end the assault and permit Adal's safe release from custody. Adal was safely withdrawn from the cave prison when the mediation was successful. According to the mediation, *Däjaç* Dästa appointed Adal as *balambaras* over Gubaéa, which included the five *aqni abats* in Däjän.²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Paulos, p. 97.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁵² Täklä Iyäsus, chapter 30, p.24.

²⁵³ Informants: Enyäw Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä, Afäwärk Engeda



Fig 7: The gate and interior of prisoners' residence in Quami Çäriq

Sources: Photos taken by the author

4. Significance of Prison Ambas

From the 13th to the 20th century, the royal prison Ambas established in various regions of Ethiopia had similar characteristics. First, almost all of them served as education centres. It is possible to argue that not only did the churches and mosques serve as centres of indigenous education in Ethiopia, but Amba prisons in Ethiopia also played a significant role in providing theoretical and practical skills for children. The emperors or lords in their jurisdiction selected or appointed the *liqs* or the priests at the Ambas. Thus, they instructed the noble children on reading the alphabets, *zéma*, *qene*, *dawit*, and laws.²⁵⁴ Through this education, judges, political leaders, and attorneys were produced who played significant roles in the smooth functioning of the justice system. For this purpose, literacy skills were developed in the prisons under the shades of trees. Before Emperor Téwodros II, most Amba schools delivered schooling in the Geez language. They studied how to write and read religious books and studied the gospel, their family and the art of government.

For instance, Abba Giyorgis of Gasça served as a teacher in Amba Gešän for many years.²⁵⁵ The author of many religious books he started his career as a teacher of children of kings at the royal court. During the reign of Tädla Guwalu in Gojjam, Adal Täsäma later (*Negus Täklähaymanot*), and Abäbä, son of Tädla, went to school at Jäbäla. *Liq-kahanat* Wärqé was their teacher at Jäbäla. He taught them Dawit (the Psalms of David).²⁵⁶ Besides, the *léba-adän* and soldiers that played important roles in keeping prisoners, hunting suspected criminals, and ensuring law and order in the kingdom were produced by providing practical skills for children. The Amba had a training field for practical skills and different field experiences such as throwing arrows and spears, firing bullets, riding horses and hunting wild animals.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Paulos, p. 102.

²⁵⁵ Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp.277-278

²⁵⁶ Paulos, p. 102.

²⁵⁷ Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp.277-278.

The other significance of the Amba royal prisons was defending the kingdom from external and internal enemies. The lords used these Ambas as defences of their territories to keep their kingdom, power and lives safe from invaders. Since most of the Ambas had only an entry and exit, enemies could not easily break through the gate of the Ambas. Most of the previous Amba prisons and caves were used as refuges during the Italian occupation saving both the lives and property of people from Italian attacks. My informants argued that patriots also used this area as a safe haven for their struggle against the Italians. For instance, *Däjač* Bälay Zäläkä used Soma especially named Filla area, as a strategic command centre. They stored a large number of crops and ammunition and other objects in the Amba. Thus, using their logistics, they might stay until their enemies left their territories.²⁵⁸ In this regard, Amba Gešän in the medieval period was a good example. It was one of the areas where Ahmed Ibrahim Algahzi could not reach, and it saved many lives and properties from the devastation of his attack. He attempted to destroy it first in November 1531, second in 1533, and lastly in 1540. However, he was not fully successful in destroying the royal prison, and now Amba Gešän is one of the religious centres of Ethiopia.²⁵⁹ Similarly, Jäbäla Amba saved the Gojjam rulers from enemies who made repeated attacks. The Yäju lords, Emperor Téwodros II and Emperor Yohannés IV attacked Gojjam lords. The Jäbäla Mountain saved the ruling dynasty's life and autonomy until it was administered by the direct appointee of Emperor Menelik II.²⁶⁰

The second most important purpose of the prisons was to serve as stores for the properties of the royal court and emperors. At different times, the lord and the emperors stored various types of grains on one side of the mountain as provisions during food shortages that might occur because of human and natural disasters. In Jäbäla, *Däjjazmač* Berru stored a large amount of corn, honey, and other provisions collected from the peasants and stored it in this mountain.²⁶¹ During the *Kifu-qän* (the great famine), King Täklähaymanot distributed large amounts of grain to the starved in Gojjam. In addition, the lords kept very important weapons and utensils on one side of the mountain. In Mäqdäla, there were more than seven thousand muskets, two cannons and other treasures.²⁶²

When we see the internal structure of the Amba, in most cases, small huts were constructed in different corners for different purposes. Some huts were reserved for the prisoners' residence, while the wealthy prisoner servants lived in other huts. Foreign prisoners, in Mäqdäla lived in other huts constructed separately. There were huts reserved for storing crops and grains; some others were for treasury and armament near the temporary living quarters of lords at the Ambas.

²⁵⁸ Informants: Enyäu Imeru, Diräs Gäsäsä, Afäwärk Engeda

²⁵⁹ John Peffer, *States of Ethiopia* (Liverpool: Franklin Watts, 1998), p.41; David Buxton, *The Abyssinians* (Britain: Thames and Hudson Press, 1970), pp.48-57; Shiheb ad-Din Ahmad bin 'Abd al-Qeder bin Selem bin Utmen ('Arab Faqih). *Futuḥ al Ḥabaša, The Conquest of Abyssinia*, tr. P.L. Stenhouse and R. Pankhurst. Los Angeles, CA: Tsehail Publishers, 2003), p.254; Bruce, Vol. V, p.587.

²⁶⁰ Informants: Aläm Atalé, Abraham Kasa, Käbädä Endalk, Mäläsä Gäsäsä, Neberät Ewnätu, Negusé Zägäyā, Qidus Ayal, Ṭumi Kasa

²⁶¹ Paulos, p. 76.

²⁶² Stern, *The Captive Missionary...* p.21; Täklä Iyäsus, Chapter 37c, p. 179.

In Mäqdäla Amba, there were five separately constructed houses for female and male prisoners allocated for politicians, murderers and thieves.²⁶³ Because of the shortage of houses, most of the prisoners spent the day outside the house. Among many European prisoners, not more than four used huts day and night. The Amba was full of insects that caused various diseases.²⁶⁴ In Mäqdäla Amba in 1858, there were about six hundred prisoners, including European citizens. According to Charles Beke, 80 died of diseases, 175 were released and 307 were killed.²⁶⁵

Above all, the Amba had a special area for entertainment. There were different traditional games such as *gugis*, *gäbäta* and other forms of games. This was reserved for prisoners and people who lived in the area. Most of the prisoners were not chained; even those who were chained together could play different types of traditional games such as *gäbäta*.

5. Conclusion

Prison, state, police, court and public prosecutors were inseparable institutions that were vital contributors to the proper functioning of a country's justice system. In most cases, the state established the courts, the police force and jails. One of the key responsibilities of police force was apprehending suspects, interrogating them and bringing them to court for trial. Conversely, the court was where litigants strived for justice, and prisons were where offenders were imprisoned for a set period as punishment for their crimes. The police or the court sentenced criminals to imprisonment after hearing their cases. Amba prisons in Gojjam such as Jäbäla, Quami Çäriq, Lib Gaša, Wamit and Sarka were among the jails that the governors frequently used to confine wrongdoers as punishment. The sites served as important tools for the smooth delivery of justice. Besides, it served as the rulers' retreat during times of war or other crises, saving the lives of governors, their loyal subjects and warriors. They also served as centres of education.

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²⁶³Zänäb (*Däbtära*), p.18; Paulos, p. 245.

²⁶⁴Beke, p.144.

²⁶⁵*Ibid*, see also Zänäb (*Däbtära*). p.18; Paulos, p. 245.

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