

**Research Article**

**Local acquisition, transportation and emancipation of slaves in the far west of Ethiopia:  
The case of Bela-Shangul from 1898-1935**

*Adinew Abtew<sup>1\*</sup>, Shumet Sishagn<sup>2</sup> and Aychegirew Hadera<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Department of History and Heritage Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia  
\*Corresponding author email: [adinewabiitew7878@gmail.com](mailto:adinewabiitew7878@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *In the first three decades of the twentieth century, local acquisition and transportation of slaves in the western frontier lands of Ethiopia intensified due to the diversification of actors and destinations of the slaves. Since efforts to introduce ox-drawn plowing in agriculture in the area failed, slaves were locally used to produce gold and ivory. Thus, the area became a major source of slaves for the central government of Ethiopia, which collected wealth in the form of annual tribute and personal gifts. Moreover, varied actors of the slave trade transported slaves from the area to different destinations as tribute and items of trade. These local acquisition and transportation of slaves from this area had economic, social, psychological and legal impact on the enslaved communities of the area. Nevertheless, international law against the slave trade, the British attempts to end the slave trade in the area, the signing of treaties by Ethiopia in the League of Nations and local attempts to*

*abolish slavery and the slave trade could not protect the communities of the borderlands in western Ethiopia. The activity continued in the area even during the Italian occupation. The activities terminated only in the last years of the 1930s when the power of local governors and family members declined. Thus, the main objective of this study was to investigate these developments which did not get the needed attention by scholars. In conducting this research, a qualitative research approach was used and both secondary and primary sources as well as oral data were utilized. Finally, the collected sources were carefully crosschecked and interpreted.*

**Keywords:** *Slavery, transportation, emancipation, impact*

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## **1. Introduction**

The western frontier of Ethiopia was known for its social interaction and trade activities for a long period of time before the area was incorporated into the empire state of Ethiopia towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The social interactions and trade relations in this part of the country were being held most importantly with foreigners from the Sudan. The local people in this area had interacted with the Funji,<sup>2</sup> the Turco – Egyptians and the Mahdist Sudan. Therefore, these series of interactions resulted in various kinds of socio-economic charges. Accordingly, the local people were exposed to Arab cultures, the spread of Islam, slavery and political domination by the newly arrived foreigners. These listed foreign powers supported by local agents had exploited the communities of the area economically mainly by raiding slaves and collecting different natural resources like gold and ivory.<sup>3</sup>

In 1898, the Ethiopian imperial territorial expansion reached the far west of Ethiopia's borderlands in general and the Muslim sheikdoms in particular and intensified socio-economic developments which significantly affected the lives of the local society.<sup>4</sup> Abdusamed states that the slave, gold and ivory trade (after incorporation) was "a predatory commerce that affected Bela-Shanguland Gumuz territories with far greater intensity than other parts of the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands, as the same populations often fed both the Sudanese and Ethiopia markets."<sup>5</sup> Of the trade activities that significantly affected the lives of the society, trading in slaves was the most important one. However, dealing with its social impact, level of complexity which made it difficult to stop it, actors of the slavery and slave trade, its legality and its final abolition in the area remained undisclosed academically and are needed to be investigated.

Before its incorporation into the Ethiopian empire in 1898, the western frontier found to the south of the Blue Nile River had been under the three strong sheikdoms namely Bela-Shangul, Khomosha, and Aqoldi. However, in 1898, they were incorporated both peacefully and forcefully and ruled under a single

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<sup>1</sup>A report by the Assosa Benishangul Awraja, National Archive and Library Agency, 1934, Folder No. 17.1.10.26, File No. 01; Bahru Zewde, 'Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the western Ethiopian frontier, 1898-1935' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1976), pp., 83-4.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, James. "Travel to Discover the Source of Blue Nile in the year 1768- 1773." *Journal of Geographic Studies*, (Vol.5, 1805) pp. 377,386.

<sup>3</sup>Alessandro Triuizi, "Myths and Rituals of the Ethiopian Barta." In M. Lionel Bender and Harold G. Marcus (eds.) *People and Culture of the Ethio-Sudan Board Lands*. Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1991) p. 2; *Ibid*, AtiebAhmadDafallah, and Lionel Marvin Bender, 'Some Notes on the Ethiopian Berta and Their Language'. *Anali: Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 36, (no. 1, 1–23, 1976) p. 9; Alessandro Triuizi, AtiebAhmadDafallah, and Lionel Marvin Bender, 'Myths and Rituals of the Ethiopian Bertha', In *Peoples and Cultures of the Ethio–Sudan Borderlands*, edited by M.L. Bender, 179–205. East Lansing, MI: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1981) pp. 182-3.

<sup>4</sup>Holt, M., *The Mahadist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: Study of its Origins, Developments and Overthrow (2nd ed.)* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp. 215-16; Sanderson, G.N, "The Foreign Policy of Negus Menilek, 1890-1898." *Journal of African History*, (Vol. 1, 1964) p.,37; Ateib Ahmed, "The origins of the Sheikdoms of Bela-Sangul", *A Paper Presented for Discussion at Historical Seminar, Department of History*, (IES, No.d.) pp., 37-8.

<sup>5</sup> Abdussamad H. Ahmad, "Trading in Slaves in Bela-Shangul and Gumuz, Ethiopia: Border Enclaves in History, 1897-1938," *The Journal of African History*, (Vol. 40, No. 3, pp, 433-446, 1999), p. 446.

province called Bela-Shangul. However, this area got different administrative naming in different periods under the Ethiopian statehood. From 1898 to 1935, this area was called Bela-Shangul. During the Italian period its name became Bela-Shangul Commissariat. After the 1942 administrative rearrangement of the Ethiopian empire, the area was renamed as Assosa-Benishangul Awraja. Similarly, when the military government came to power in 1974 and made rearrangement, the area became Assosa Awraja.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1. The pre-1991 Benishangul. A map taken from the work of Von Alexander Meckelburg "From "Subject to Citizen"? History, Identity and Minority Citizenship: The Case of the Mao and Komo of Western Ethiopia", PHD Thesis, 2012.

Currently, a new ethnic-based state structure is in place following the fall of the military regime in 1991. Accordingly, the southern part of the area named Beggi became part of the Oromia National Regional State. On the other hand, the larger part of the Awraja (province) was incorporated into the Metekel

<sup>6</sup>Ahmed Abdela, Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the author, Jan. 2023.

province from Gojjam, and the Kamash area around the Deddesa River valley formed the current Benishangul Regional State.<sup>7</sup> This study, however, covers the slave trade and slave history of the area from 1898 to 1935 in which it was called the Bela-Shangul.

## **2. Method of the Study**

The study involves several methods of data collection and utilization. One of the methods used was gathering information from both published and unpublished sources. An extensive library research has been done so as to gather information from secondary sources. The other method employed was consulting archives from different institutions and in the hands of individuals. The research largely depended on careful collection and investigation of archival sources available at Assosa Zone Administrative Office, East Wollega Zone Administrative Office in Nekemte, National Archive and Library Agency and Wolde Meskel Tariku Memorial Research Center. Moreover, oral information was also collected and utilized in the study. In collecting oral sources, elders who had good knowledge were carefully selected and interviewed. In doing so, semi-structured interview questions on every theme of the research were designed and utilized.

In an effort to select and focus on those informants who had better memory about the history of the area, a focus group discussion was held. In the course of data gathering, informants discussed selected themes of the study in groups and then a few were chosen to be key informants until the end of the study. Finally, the data collected through different methods was carefully examined, cross-checked, analyzed and interpreted.

## **3. Analysis**

### **3.1. Local slavery and agriculture**

In most parts of Ethiopia, slaves in history were domestically used mainly for agricultural and household activities<sup>8</sup>. However, in the western frontier of Ethiopia, slaves were not locally used for agriculture. This was due to the economic activities of the area. In this regard, the area had not been known for well-established agricultural systems. Since the people of the areas were not agriculturalists, they relied heavily on hunting wild animals, gathering plants and herding of animals.<sup>9</sup> Sources indicate that as a result of the economic way of life in the region, it was difficult for the central government even to feed government

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<sup>7</sup> BekeleGeleta, "people and local government in Assosa" BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of Political science, 1973, pp. 1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty: An American History*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Alessandro, *Triulzi Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a No-Man's Land, Belashangul, Wellega, Ethiopia (ca. 1800–1898*, Napoli: IstitutoUniversitario Orientale, 1981), p. 12.

representatives and troops who were sent to the area from the central parts of the country. Therefore, food items and other materials needed for the survival were mostly provided from other areas. In this regard, the Wollega area which was known for its crops, cereals and other domestic animal production had been playing a significant role. Based on the direct request from the central government or based on their will, the Wollega governors sent necessary items to the remotest areas for the troops and administrative workers.<sup>10</sup>

The agriculturally rich areas situated to the east of the Dabus River served as source of these items. Provision of agricultural items were being organized and sent by *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher of Neqemte. In requesting the local chiefs in facilitating these provisions from the highland areas of Wollega to the lowland areas of western frontier borderlands, a letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher states as follows:

*...ዱልለተቀመጠው ለፊታውራሪ ጉልላት ሶስት መቶ ዳወላ እህል እስከ ሸሀሆጃሌ አገር አሰሳ) ድረስ በቶሎ አስጭነህ እንድትሰድለት ይሁን። ካገሩ በደረሰ ጊዜ ሸሀሆጃሌ አስጭኖ ለፊታውራሪ ጉልላት ያደርስለታል።<sup>11</sup> As soon as possible, let you send three hundred dawlas<sup>12</sup> of crops (cereals) to fitawrari Gulilat who resides at Dull. You have to transport the crops (cereals) to the country of sheik Khojele (Assosa). From Assosa to Dull, the materials will be transported and received to the fitawrari by the sheik.*

In fact, both Gebregziabher and the emperor tried to introduce the culture of agricultural production in the western frontier areas. Since the incorporation of the area to the Ethiopian empire, significant numbers of oxen were sent from the center to Bela-Shangul province repeatedly throughout the reign of Emperor Menelik.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Gebregziabher Moroda requested the emperor to start agriculture in the previous three sheikdoms, then he called the Arab Land. Similarly, the emperor responded that the proposal was interesting and he gave a direction to cultivate hundred *timad*<sup>14</sup> of land in areas which were under *Dejazmach* Abdurrahman, Mohamed and Khojele.<sup>15</sup> However, it seemed that due to the nature of the soil, climate of the areas and lack of interest by the people, the attempts were not successful to introduce and expand the intended agricultural practice and productivity<sup>16</sup>.

Similar to the previous efforts done by emperor Menelik, the central government continued to expand the culture of oxen-drawn plowing during the reign of Emperor Haile Sellassie in the areas of Benishangul. In

<sup>10</sup> A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to Gebregziabher, 02 July, 1908, Neqemte, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 2, File No. 157; 158.  
<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*  
<sup>12</sup> 'Dawla' is a traditional quantity measurement unit equivalent to one quintal  
<sup>13</sup> Menelik II to Gebregziabher, Adiss Ababa, 19 Sept. 1909, Wollega Museum, Folder No.1, File No. 247.  
<sup>14</sup> 'Timad' is a traditional measurement of cultivable land that can be ploughed by oxen in a day.  
<sup>15</sup> A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to Gebregziabher, 02 July, 1908, Neqemte, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 2, File No. 157.  
<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

the 1910s, sheik Khojele himself was engaged in bringing oxen from other parts of Ethiopia through purchasing. The sheik had an interest in expanding agriculture in the different areas under him, particularly in Assosa and the surrounding areas. Moreover, Khojele was said to have a big interest in enhancing the productivity level and production of agriculture in the highland areas of Beggi by providing oxen for the cultivators. At this time, Khojele faced a challenge from the neighboring Oromo chiefs who obliged his men to pay customs for oxen which were coming through the Oromo inhabited areas in the east. When the Oromo chiefs were challenging his men by asking high amount of fees in different tax collection spots, Khojele explained that during the reign of emperor Menelik, oxen were being transported to the western lands without paying such kind of customs. He added that paying customs should be avoided so as to encourage the expected expansion of oxen-driven agricultural activities in the western frontier areas. As a response, *rass*Teferi wrote a letter to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to allow the sheik to transport oxen for agricultural purposes without paying customs in all areas as it was done during the period of emperor Menelik.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, in the 1920s and 1930s, Emperor Haile Sellassie continued to provide sheik Khojele with oxen. It was said that the emperor had a big interest in transforming the society's way of life in the lowland areas of Benishangul into agricultural and settled ways of life. However, as it was unsuccessful previously, the intended objective of the central government in this period was not achieved for different reasons. Firstly, the oxen were mostly purchased from the highland areas of the Oromo inhabited areas in the east. Therefore, the oxen faced difficulties to survive in the west frontiers which were lowland areas in which they could not adapt to the hot climate.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, as archival sources reveal, the oxen bought from other areas mainly from the Horo-Gudru area, were accustomed to eating a kind of grass locally known as *Chomo* in the Oromo language. However, these cattle which came from that area to the lowlands of Benishangul could not get the same kind of grass.<sup>19</sup> In fact, there was no shortage of grass in these areas. The problem was that the cattle had no desire to eat this grass which was not similar to what they were used to.<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, and most importantly, the cattle in the lowland areas where they newly arrived faced health problems. The existence and repeated occurrence of a rampant and deadly disease locally called *gend* (scientifically, Trypanosomiasis), mostly killed the oxen.<sup>21</sup> Swampy areas of the west most frontier areas were comfortable for the reproduction and expansion of an insect called tse-tse fly that can cause this

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<sup>17</sup> A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to Gebregziabher, 02 July, 1908, Neqemte, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 2, File No. 57-58.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to Gebregziabher, 02 July, 1908, Neqemte, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 2, File No. 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Abdela, Wakil Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the author, Jan. 2023.

animal disease.<sup>22</sup> Not only at that time, but also until recent years, this animal killing disease was a big challenge to bread cattle in the area. However, currently, the government is making a big effort to make swampy areas in the region free from these insects and the problem is being solved from time to time. These efforts were started by the Dergue government following the huge government sponsored resettlement in the area and resettlement campaigns.<sup>23</sup>

Having become eager to introduce oxen-drawn plowing, as a result of the previously repeatedly fruitless efforts, sheik Khojele refused to accept oxen sent to his areas by the central government. In explaining this, the archives revealed that in 1931, about 343 and 26 oxen from Horo-Gudru and Qellem areas respectively were bought by the central government and sent to sheik Khojele through Habte Mariam of Neqemte. However, the sheik who himself was buying oxen for the same purpose, did not welcome them and the oxen stayed at the hands of Habte Mariam's men. There, significant number of the oxen died and the remaining were sent back to the central government. The above information taken from archives clearly shows the development discussed above.

*...ለኛህሆኛሌ ይሰጥ ተብሎ የነበረው ሠንጋ ከብቱን በሽታ ይፈጅዋልና አልቀበልም ስላሉ ... ከእኔ እጅ ያለው በድምሩ ሶስት መቶ ሰድሳ ዘጠኝ--ጥንት የሚኖርበት አገር የሚባለው ጨዋ የሚባል ሳር ነበር። ... ይህንን ጨዋ የሚባል ሣር የሚበላ ከብትም ላምም ይሆን ፈረስ ወደ ሌላ ቦታ ቢሄድ አይለመድም። ... በበሽታ መሞቱ ስላሳዘነኝ--እኩሉ አገር አለምድ ብሎ ፈፀመው ማለቃቸው ነው። ... Since sheik Khojele refused to receive the cattle sent to him reasoning out that they will be dead from disease...at my hand, the total number of cattle is three thousand sixty-nine ... These cattle grew feeding themselves with grass named Chomo in their hom land ... oxen, cows, horse which fed on this Chomo grass could not survive everywhere ... I felt bad seeing these cattle dying due to disease ... even in the future, half from disease and the rest from hunger, the cattle are going to die entirely...<sup>24</sup>*

Since agriculture could not be expanded in the Bela- Shangu area, slaves were used for non-agricultural activities mainly mining and military services. After the incorporation of the area, using of slaves in mining activity strengthened due to different reasons. In the first place, the need for local need for slaves increased since the region became a ‘gold basket’ of Ethiopia. Locally, the majority of slaves were used to produce gold. Gold produced in the area by local slaves was acquired by the central government in a variety of ways. Local chiefs were expected to send about six hundred ounces of gold from the province as annual tribute. Moreover, it was common to them to send significant amount of gold to the royal

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to Gebregziabher, 02 July, 1908, Neqemte, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 2, File No.57-58.

family as a gift to create smooth relation and to get more acceptances.<sup>25</sup> In addition, they were expected to send gold to support national projects like railways. On the other hand, the chiefs needed gold to trade with the neighboring Oromo chiefs and Arab traders who came from the Sudan. Thus, the gold needed for these diversified purposes was produced by local slaves through a traditional panning system.<sup>26</sup>

The slave trade and slavery in the western frontiers of Ethiopia was diversified by interdependent participants. The first actors of the activities in this area were local leaders. In this regard, leaders who controlled the political and economic power before the period of the incorporation played a significant role<sup>27</sup>. A group of Sudan Arab descendants who came to the area in the first quarter of the nineteenth century controlled the whole political, religious and economic power through assimilating themselves gradually and wisely.<sup>28</sup> These Arab groups came to the area as merchants and Islamic preachers. Their active participation in the local and trans-border trade enabled them to control the economic domination in the area. On the other hand, since these Arab groups were actively engaged in expanding Islam among the Berta people in the Ethio-Sudan borderlands, they gained widespread acceptance.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, they established marriage alliances with locally respected personalities. In these ways, the Arab traders and preachers achieved political, economic and religious domination and established their own sheikdoms in the area. Since then, leaders of these sheikdoms engaged in slavery and slave trade activities.<sup>30</sup>

Before the incorporation of the area in 1898, all *sheiks* had equal chance to take part in the activities. After 1898, however, the slave trade strengthened and change in local actors had been observed. The area which was a source of slaves for foreign powers that invaded it from the Sudan became a source for the Ethiopian empire too. Moreover, the gold sent to the central government of Ethiopia was greatly needed the engagement of slaves in traditional panning systems which needed intensive human labor. In terms of change in local actors, the three *sheiks*, called the Black Arabs, namely *sheik* Khojele of Aqoldi, Wad Mahmud of Khomosha and Abdirahman Khojele of Bela-Shangul (Qebash) were arrested due to their different respective reactions towards the incorporation process. Thus, the area became under the direct rule of warlords from the Leqa Neqemte Oromo.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>AdinewAbteu, 'Political and Socio-Economic History of AsossaWäräda, 1941-1991', (M.A Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University, 2011), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Marcus, p. 7; Menelik II to Gebregziabher, Addis Ababa, 14 Oct. 1910, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 156, File No., 193; WakedAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the author, Jan. 2023.

<sup>27</sup>Menelik II to Gebregziabher, Addis Ababa, 23 Dec. 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 379.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, File No. 366.

<sup>29</sup>WakedAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>30</sup>Bahru, Relations, pp. 83-6.

<sup>31</sup>*TeferiMekonnen* to Gebregziabher, Addis Ababa, 22 Nov. 1918, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 3, File No.1, 343.



Evidence revealed that warlords sent to the area under the leadership of *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda became engaged in a slave trade. Thus, they created additional burden over the enslaved communities being engaged in the slave trade together with the families of the arrested *sheiks*, mainly Khojele. In increasing the intensity of slave raids and slave trade, social crises occurred following the political instability in the area in the first decade of the twentieth century and this also played a significant role. When the three sheiks were arrested, the area was characterized by instability, social displacement and local civil war. Requesting for the release of the *sheiks* by the society, competition to control the political power of the arrested *sheiks* and the interest to control Beggi were the basic reasons for the then social crisis. This time was a convenient window period for the newly assigned warlords in the area to satisfy their economic interests. They were highly engaged in taking part in slave trade rather than controlling the social crisis and displacements. For instance, commander Jirata, who was assigned by the central government and Gebregziabher, was highly blamed to be engaged in his own wealth accumulation through slave trade rather than bringing the crisis under control.<sup>32</sup>

The instability increased and the society was highly displaced to the Sudan when the relatives of Khojele entered into open war at Assosa. The conflict which was headed by Khamid and Musa aggravated the social crisis when warlords gave high attention to their trade in slaves. Therefore, the central government repeatedly changed warlords understanding the movement of the people into the Sudan. Finally, the three *sheiks* were released in 1908 and engaged themselves in the existing slave-based economy. However, no change was observed as needed. After this time the local chiefs started again slave raids and dominated the slave trade.<sup>33</sup>

At their release in 1908, *sheik* Khojele Al-Hassen, the son of Al-Hassen Mohamed, the founder of the Aqoldi sheikdom, took political and economic supremacy over the rest of the former two sheikdom leaders. After controlling the highest local power, *sheik* Khojele together with his family and his appointed lower-level chiefs was highly engaged in slavery and trading in slaves.<sup>34</sup> As had been done since the incorporation period, the area continued to pay tribute in slaves, gold and ivory to the central government at Addis Ababa. Thus, Sheik Khojele became the most important actor of trading in slaves. He intensified the raid of slaves for his own domestic consumption and to send them to the central government to sustain his power. For local chiefs of the region, being active participants in slavery and slave trade was a matter of prolonging their power.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Debela, *pp.* 15-8.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, *p.*17.

<sup>34</sup>Ateib, 86; Abdisamad, *pp.* 442-3.

<sup>35</sup>Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 27 Dec. 1909, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 370-369; Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte 30 April 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 370-369.

More importantly, the Ethiopian imperial government and the Sudan demarcated their boundary in 1902.<sup>36</sup> According to this border demarcation, communities living on the western borders like some parts of the Berta in the previous three *sheikdoms*, the Mao and Komo in the Fadasi area and the Gumuz in Guba became part of the Ethiopian sovereign territory. The remaining parts of the Berta, Gumuz, Mao and Komo people, on the other hand, remained within the Sudanese territory. This boundary demarcation minimized the number of these slave source communities in a time when raids increased. The people who were under the rule of *sheik* Khojele and his lower-level chiefs became targets of slave raids due to the need to send slaves as tribute.<sup>37</sup>

More importantly, slaves were used as significant items of trade. Khojele, together with his chiefs, carried out trading for slaves, coffee and ivory in line with politics. In addition to the Berta and Gumuz in the north, slaves were smuggled from the Mao and Komo communities in Beggi area to the south<sup>38</sup>. In addition to paying slaves as tribute, Khojele had established slave centers in the Sudan that could enable him to pass about 600 slave children at a time.<sup>39</sup> In explaining the intensity of slave raids in the region after incorporation, Abdusamed states the following:

*Sheik Khojele himself took part in raids into the territories of the Mao, Komo and other minority groups, from 1909 to 1911; he introduced a new tax lijgibir (child tribute) into the newly conquered Mao territories of Beggi. Khojele bred slave children, and when they reached maturity, he sent them as tribute to the central government at Addis Ababa. Khojele provided slave children to emperor Menelik II (1889-1913), LijEyasu (1913-16), RasTeferi (1916-30) and Haile Sellassie (1930-74).<sup>40</sup>*

Similar to politically appointed local chiefs, there were also relatives of local leaders whose economic domination relied heavily on slave trade. In this regard, Khojele's wife AsitAmna can be mentioned as a good example. She had been actively involved in trading in slaves from Benishangul to the Sudan from 1905 to 1928. This woman settled herself in the Sudan at specific places called Jebel Ora, KhorYabbus and Morto Sore one after another. There, she received slaves sent from the Ethiopian borderlands and sold them to the Sudanese traders to earn a lucrative profit.<sup>41</sup> In 1928, Asit Amna was arrested at a place called Wadi Halfa by the British in the Sudan due to her slave trade in a country where the activity had been officially banned, at least legally. This woman, however, became released in 1935.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*; Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 20 Jan. 1909, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 370-369; Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte 30 April 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 370.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup>Abdisamad. 437.

<sup>39</sup>Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, 437.

<sup>41</sup>Ateib, 46.

<sup>42</sup>Abdisamad, 438.

Asit Amin was not the only active participant in slave trade among the family members of *Sheik Khojele*. Together with their mother, sons and grandsons of the *Sheik* were also active participants of slave trade. Sons of Khojele were engaged in raiding slaves from the Mao and Komo in the Sudan that were to be sent to Addis Ababa. On the other hand, slaves who were raided from the Ethiopian western frontier lands were being sent to this woman in the Sudan. For instance, Muhammed Al-Mahdi was said to have been sending slaves to his mother after she was released in 1935 and settled at Wad Medani.<sup>43</sup> At Wad Medani, Asit Amna had trade connection with Sudanese traders who came from Araba Gumal, Badiyana and Watish. In addition, based on archives in the Sudan, Abdusamed tells us that Abdel Galil al-Mahdi, a grandson of Khojele, was active participant in the slave trade in this frontier area and in the Sudan. These family members, other traders and local chiefs who engaged in the slave trade and raiding activities had strong trade connections to trade slaves to each other and to generate a lucrative profit. In this regard, *Sheik Khojele* himself was sending slaves from Assosa area to his wife, sons and grandsons and he can be mentioned in this connected trade network.<sup>44</sup>

In their interest to raid a greater number of slaves, the local leaders of the frontier localities were known by extending their geographic area. Beyond their spheres of influence, these local chiefs were engaged in raiding slaves from the surrounding areas. For instance, a chief named Yassin Chorqa was entering into conflict with Jote Tulu of Qellem. This chief was known for his repeatedly committed slave raiding activities crossing the surrounding areas to the south and west. Reports of the time indicate that this chief had hundreds of weapons which he used to raid slaves mainly from the Mao, Komo and Gumuz communities. More importantly, he crossed into the British Sudan as a means to escape from attempts of Gebregziabher to arrest when Jote was appealing the issue.<sup>45</sup> Yassin Chorqa and other local chiefs were also raiding slaves from the surrounding areas crossing the Dabus River to the east and the Qellem area to the south even after *sheik Khojele* was released and the Benishangul area became out of the direct leadership of Gebregziabher Moreda of Neqemte in 1908.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, *Dejazmach Abdurrahman Khojele* was also entering into conflict with Gebregziabher in his attempts to control the areas to the west and east of the Dabus River. Immediately after his release from prison in 1908, for instance, he tried to control these sides of the river which were inhabited by the Mao and Komo people and were sources of slaves for the Oromo chiefs. From 1898 to 1908, the Oromo chiefs were using these areas freely since he was arrested due to his resistance against the Ethiopian

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<sup>43</sup>Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 18 Nov. 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., 365.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

incorporation campaign together with others. Moreover, reports indicate that Abdurrahman wanted to relocate the people settled immediately to the east of the river to the western side.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the local leader of Guba who had trade relations with the sheikdoms of the area was under the rule of King Tekele Haimanot of Gojjam who incorporated the western frontier area into the north of the Blue Nile. Similar to the Benishangul area, the slave raiding and trading was being under taken by different warlords sent to the Guba area by the central government.<sup>48</sup> In the Guba area, Manji Hamdan, the seventh-generation descendant of the Funji kingdom of sennar,<sup>49</sup> continued to rule the area from the period of conquest to 1938. During this period, in addition to his active engagement in slave raiding mainly from 1900-1918, different warlords came from the North West Ethiopia and engaged themselves in slave trade activities. For instance, evidence reveals that the Agaw chief named *Fitawrari Zeleke*, who was assigned to rule the Belaya and Tumha (1905-1935) and his slaves raiding troops made the Gumuz lowlands between the Beles River and the Agawmidir reservoir of slaves. Not only the troops of *Fitawrari Zeleke*, but also different warlords from the Agaw and Amhara lands came to the area and transported slaves from frontier areas in the far west and sold them mainly at Dangila secretly. In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century warlords were engaged in slave raidssimilar to the local leaders of the people in these frontier areas.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the warlords who had an interest to serve their own personal economic interests through trading in slaves, there were overlords who ordered the lower warlords to provide them with slaves. For instance, in 1920s, *Ras Hailu* of Gojjam, Damot and Agawmidir (1911-1932) was ordering warlords to bring slaves from the region between Wombera and Guba<sup>51</sup>. In the same decades, *Ras Bitwaded Mengesha* of Damot, Agawmidir, Mecha, Achafar, Wandige and Quara ordered his troops to collect tax in gold and cotton. Consequently, when the troops and lower lords returned back from the western frontier areas, they brought slaves who failed to pay taxes in kind.<sup>52</sup>

Compared to the Benishangul areas, the Gumuz inhabited areas were highly exposed to slave raids and were highly depopulated. This was because the Gumuz were exposed to five-dimensional raiding purposes. Firstly, they were raided and used locally by their own local governors. Secondly, the Gumuz were sent to the Sudan as trading items. Thirdly, they were significantly raided and transported to the northwestern parts of Ethiopia to satisfy the economic interests of warlords and the nobility at regional

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<sup>47</sup>Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 07 Feb. 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., 344-343.

<sup>48</sup>Abdusamed, pp. 347.

<sup>49</sup>Tay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sennar* (East Lansing, 1985) pp. 21-38.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>Abdusamed, *Trading in Slave*, p. 440.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*p. 441.

levels. Fourthly, they were sent to the central government at Addis Ababa as tribute or as gifts. Lastly, but most significantly, the Gumuz society were used to be exploited by serving personal farmers of the neighboring communities. The Berta, Mao, and Komo of the Benishangul areas, however, were at least free from raids and being displaced, also the Berta were not sent to Addis Ababa as gifts or tribute.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.2. Slave transportation**

In addition to local leaders and their family members, other actors that made the slave trade complex and difficult to stop practically were Arab traders who came from the Sudan to the western frontier areas of Ethiopia. These Sudanese slave traders entered Ethiopian lands following different trading routes and made trading in slave more lucrative.<sup>54</sup> These traders usually visited the area as far as Assosa and Fadasi. The main outlet of the slave trade was Kurmuk found at the border of Ethiopia and the Sudan. The outlet connected various trade centers in Ethiopia from the borderlands to Assosa. In another direction, from Kurmuk to the Sudan, there were different trade routes through which slaves from the Berta, Gumuz, Mao and Komo were transported further to the interior of Sudan. From Kurmuk to Belawara, there was a big trade route. After Belawara, however, three routes of slave trades were stretched further to the White Nile part of the Sudan. The first trade route which was frequented by the Sudan Arab traders and their slaves stretched from Belawara to the White Nile passing through slave centers at Surkum, Abeldagu, Dehnima, Sillaka, and KhorDoleib. The second route also had the same destination from Belawara, but crossing Abeldagu, KhorDoleib, and Gule. On the other hand, the third route stretched from Belawara to Mortosoro, BeniMayok, KhorSamaa, Ulu and Gelhak.<sup>55</sup>

Since these Arab traders had strong commercial connections with different local chiefs and domestic traders, the slave trade increasingly intensified and was easily undertaken in the frontier western Ethiopia. These Arab traders were highly eager to have slaves from the Ethiopian borderlands due to high amount of profit they earned from the trade. They were getting about five- to six fold profit after they buy slaves from Ethiopia and sell them in the Sudan. The average price of a slave was 7-10 pound in Ethiopia, but it reached 46-50 pounds in the White Nile province of the Sudan. Thus, these Sudanese traders, who could speak the language of the area and had the same religion and cultural elements with the local chiefs of the borderlands, encouraged the slave trade.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Ateib, Sheik Khojele, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

In addition to the local governors and Sudanese trades, the other most important actors of the slavery and slave trade in western frontier areas were the royal family members in the center of the country. The central imperial government becomes responsible for the intensification of the slave trade in the region in two ways. In the first place, the royal government by itself was highly dependent on slaves transported from different parts of the country for their labor in the palace and in the homes of the nobility. From the period of incorporation of western frontier lands to the Italian occupation, a bulky of archival materials accumulated at Neqemte reveal that the successive regions, from the period of Menelik to Haile Sellassie, highly demanded and requested to get slaves from these areas through subordinated local chiefs.<sup>57</sup>

Based on the repeatedly sent requests and on the basis of expected annual taxation system, a significant number of slaves were sent to the central government. Slaves were sent either as annual tributes or personal gifts to the royal family in Addis Ababa. In addition to providing labor in the palace and personal homes of the ruling class, slaves were significantly being used in the construction processes at different towns including Addis Ababa.<sup>58</sup>To mention only one instance, in October 1916, the central government under *Liji Iyasu* ordered *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to receive hundred slaves from *sheik* Khojele Al Hassen and to send them to Addis Ababa. At another time, the *sheik* also sent about one hundred and fifty slaves to Neqemte through which they were to be reached at the royal palace in Addis Ababa. As archives underscore, nineteen slaves, out of these, were directly sent from Assosa. However, the rest sixty were raided from the land of *Dejazmach* Mohamed of Bambassi by Khojele when they went to war at Mendi.<sup>59</sup>

Khojele was also sending slaves to the palace as a personal gift for the royal family at a personal level. To mention one instance, in 1920, he sent about twenty male and female slaves to *Etege* Menen, the wife of the emperor. These slaves were sent through Gebregziabher together with Khojele's letter.<sup>60</sup> The communities situated between Bela-Shangul Province and the neighboring Oromo areas were exposed to raiding competition among the local rulers. The chiefs entered into competition since they needed slaves to send to the Addis Ababa palace. For instance, archives indicate that Gebregziabher Moreda of Neqemte was raiding slaves from the surrounding community whom he called *shanqillas*. Slaves were sent to Addis Ababa together with children. This continued even after *Ras Teferi* came to power. In Addis

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<sup>57</sup>Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, Neqemte, 07March 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., 305.

<sup>58</sup>Gebregziabher to *Teferi* Mekonnen, Neqemte, 30 Oct.1917, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., 285.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>Gebregziabher to Menen, Neqemte, 1920, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 237.

Ababa, slaves were mainly used for labor. However, as archives indicate, they were also used as different musical instrument carriers and players during ceremonial times.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to its direct involvement in the slave trade activities in the western frontier parts of Ethiopia, the central government had also failed to implement the international and national laws and policies that were designed to ban trading in slaves and enslaving them domestically. Here, the most important responsibility which was to be carried out by the central government was providing protection for the society that was a victim and impacted by the slave raids. However, laws and policy were not implemented practically by the central government. One can argue with evidence and convincingly that the royal family members were taking their own share for the continuation of the slave trade contrary to the laws.<sup>62</sup> In fact, there is evidence that shows that the central government of imperial Ethiopia wrote letters which requested and even warned different local leaders to terminate enslaving people and trading in slaves. For instance, Emperor Menelik II had written a letter to the king of Jimma *Aba Jifar* ordering him not to enslave the people. This letter states the issue in the following way:

*ከጅንጃሮ ወደ አንተ አገር የመጣውን ሆሎ ሕዝብ አንድም አንግድህ ከእጅ ከገባልኝ ብለህ ጭብካቤ ገብህ ባረዳህና አንተንም ልበድልህ፤ ልጅህንም አምጣና እንደከብት ልሸጠው ፣ ልለጠጠው አትበል። ... ባደባባይም ባረዳህና እያልክ አትሟገት። የሰው ባረዳ የለውም። ሁላችንም የእግዚአብሔር ባረዳዎችን። ... ከኔም ጋር በእግዚአብሔር ችርነት ገንደሬ ሁሉ ተሰብስቦ እዚህ ሸዋ መጥቶ ተቀምጧል። አገሪ ልግባያለ እንደሆነ ባረዳህ ተብሎ ሊያዝነውን። ... ደሀው እወደደው እተመቸው ቦታ ይደር። ...*<sup>63</sup> *Do not enslave the Oromo people who came from Janjaro area to reside in your region. Do not oblige them to provide their children like cattle for the purpose of selling or exchanging ... do not insist that they are your slaves. We human beings are not slaves for each other. Rather we all are slaves of God ... Here in Shewa, people who came from Gonder are residing with me. Can we enforce them to live in Shewa without their consent for the purpose of enslavement? ... Let the poor people reside everywhere on the bassets of their consent...*

This and other directions given to local regional leaders indicate that the Ethiopia government wanted to end slave trade by implementing the international and national slave trade emancipation laws. However, due to the nature of Ethiopia economy and the diversified actors of the activity the government could not practically end the slave trade, and its resultant socio-economic impact continued until the Italian occupation. Thus, the western frontier parts of Ethiopia remained one of the major reservoirs of slaves in the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century and three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup>*TeferiMekonnen* to Gebregziabher, Adiss Ababa, 22 Nov. 1918, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 3, File No., 137; Gebregziabher to *TeferiMekonnen*, Neqemte, 30 Oct. 1917, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., 285.

<sup>62</sup>Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 18 Nov. 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No. 237: 285.

<sup>63</sup>Menelik II to *Aba Jifar*, Addis Ababa, 10 Feb. 1902 E. C., National Archives and Library Agency, Folder No. 134, File No. 209/02.

<sup>64</sup>*WakelAbdela*, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

### **3.3. Emancipation and Ethiopian attempts to abolish slavery in the area**

Only eight years before the incorporation of the western frontier areas to the Ethiopia empire, an international law was enacted at Brussels to ban slave trade and slavery. According to the act of Brussels (1890), slave trade included any form of human raids for the purpose of selling in cash or exchanging for items. In addition, it states that disposal of people with the intention to reduce them to slavery can be considered as slave trade. Moreover, the act also underscores that any activity of transporting people as trading materials is part of slave trade.<sup>65</sup> Identifying which activities were considered to be slave trade and enslaving human being, the 1890 Brussels Act clearly prohibited participating in slave trade internationally. Therefore, based on the above definition of slave trade and its excommunication, members of the League of Nations signed to accept and practically implement it.<sup>66</sup>

In 1920s, Ethiopia had become one of the member nations of the League at a time when the people on the Ethio-Sudanese borders were being significantly depopulated by slave raids and subsequent displacement.<sup>67</sup> Aiming at countering criticism raised from Europeans, the Ethiopian government under Emperor Haile Sellassie issued an edict in 1924 which imposed heavy penalties on slave traders. However, the Ethiopian government did this without abolishing the legal status of slavery itself. In addition to the 1924 edict, the emperor accepted and signed the 1926 slavery convention.<sup>68</sup> However, letters written by Emperor Menelik to regional lords, the 1924 edict by emperor Haile Selassie and Ethiopia being one of the signatories of the 1926 anti-slave trade and slavery convention, never brought a practical change in ending the practical activities of slavery and slave trade in the western Ethiopian border society. The local leaders, military lords, the Sudanese Arab traders and even the royal family continued to use these frontier enclaves as sources of their slave until 1938. Thus, parts of Ethiopian society in western borderlands like the Berta, Mao, Komo, and Gumuz people continued to be highly affected by trading in slaves and domestic slave labor exploitation.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, attempts were made by the British government in the neighboring Sudan to suppress the slave trade in Ethiopia frontier lands. The people suffering from slave raids were having protection by the British in the Sudan. For instance, the Gumuz people were significantly displaced and fled to the lowlands of Sudan, south of Galabat. The British attempted to protect the borderland slaves in two basic

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<sup>65</sup>Abdusamed, 443.

<sup>66</sup>*ibid.*, 443.

<sup>67</sup> Key Informants; Abdusamed, p. 442.

<sup>68</sup>Abdusamed, p. 444.

<sup>69</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38



practical ways – establishing settlement centers for displaced slaves and instituting a Sudanese slavery repression department.<sup>70</sup>

In 1890, the British colonizers established a settlement center for the people who moved to the Sudan as a result of an intensified slave trade in the borderlands. Accordingly, liberated slaves were moving to the Sudan so as to get protection from the British government in the Sudan. At a particular place called Wad Halfa, a ‘battalion garden’ had been established and served the displaced people to live in. Moreover, agricultural settlements were established in the Sudan by the British government for slaves who liberated themselves in different mechanisms or those who fled before becoming captured. Thus, people from the Ethio-Sudanese frontier society, significantly moved to the Sudan and settled in agricultural settlements established by the British in specific places called Galabat, Gedarrif and Kassalla.<sup>71</sup> For instance, in the first decade of the twentieth century, significant number of refugees mainly from Guba and other areas had fled to Sudan and attained settlement around Roseries.<sup>72</sup>

Besides protection centers for slaves emigrating from the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands, the British Government in the Sudan institutionalized the anti-slave trade by establishing Sudanese slavery department in 1902. The headquarters of the department was at Roseries. This anti-slave trade department worked to end slave trade by establishing a number of posts along the Sudan Ethiopian borders. At these British posts, slave traders who brought slaves from Ethiopia to the Sudan were being blocked by the British forces. The British government using anti-slave trans-border trade posts namely Gule, Jebel Geri, Khor Tumat, Belatoma and Yabus, confronted slave traders from the Ethiopian borderlands. For instance, in 1911 and 1912, the British forces confronted the slave dealers and transporters across the borderlands. During the confrontations, the police force assigned by the British, killed the notorious slave traders and dealers.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, the society of the Bela-Shangul areas were trying to escape from the existing slave raids to the area called Wombera across the Blue Nile River to the north. In fact, they had been doing this since they had no information how frequent slave raids were there. Escapes of slaves to the north from Bela-Shangul areas sometimes brought conflicts between the local chiefs. This happened when the men of local leaders were following the footsteps of the escaping slaves crossing the Blue Nile River into the North. For instance, in May 1907, the men of Gebregziabher went to Wombera to get back their escaped slaves and

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<sup>70</sup>Abdusamed, p. 439.

<sup>71</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>72</sup>Abdusamed, p. 444.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*,p. 441.

entered to conflict with the local leaders there. As a result, death and injuries were recorded, but the escaped slaves remained unreturned.<sup>74</sup>

Although slavery ended only in 1942 by Emperor Haile Silassie, attempts were made before this period to end the activity and the institution. These attempts were made in Ethiopia before and after the study area became under the Ethiopian empire.<sup>75</sup> In the modern history of the country, the first attempt to bring an end to the institution of slavery was made by emperor Tewodros II before his coronation. In 1854, he tried to ban slavery mainly buying slaves from Muslim traders and baptizing them and selling of prisoners of war by soldiers.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, after his coronation, Tewodros also made an attempt to ban slavery and slave trade with strict penalty. Knowing how far the slavery institution was a deep-rooted way of life and was difficult to ban it, the king issued a decree banning the trade by Christian and non-Christian slaves. According to this decree of Tewodros, a person who violated this decree and caught trading in slaves would be penalized by amputating his limbs. However, Tewodros's efforts had little effect and slavery flourished.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, in 1884, an attempt to bring an end to slave trade and slavery was made in Ethiopia. Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) agreed with Britain to ban the importing and exporting of slaves and to end the slave institution in the region. This agreement, signed in 1884, also included giving protection for slaves already freed. However, similar to his predecessor, the emperor could not bring effective results in ending this deep-rooted and widespread activity among the society.<sup>78</sup>

Similar to his predecessors, Emperor Menelik II also made efforts to bring an end to slavery and slave trade. He made an effort to make the slave trade and slavery end before and after he became emperor of Ethiopia. In 1876, Menelik issued a proclamation which prohibited both Christians and Muslims from being engaged in slave trade. With regard to the Christians, Menelik banned the usual buying and selling of slaves in his territories. Moreover, Menelik declared that Muslims who moved to his territory with slaves should be placed under custody and tried.<sup>79</sup> At this time, Menelik was not effective due to his lack of consistency and being limited only to creating awareness among the population about the injustice in slavery, but slave trade remained a way of life in the society.<sup>80</sup> His inconsistency to practically implement

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<sup>74</sup>Gebregziabher to Menelik II, Neqemte, 18 Nov. 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No. 1, File No., p. 373.

<sup>75</sup> Haile Sellassie I, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, 1892-1937: The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellassie I*, (Edward Ludendorff, trans., Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 80.

<sup>76</sup>BahruZewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Addis Ababa University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2001), 34; Pankhurst, 1968, p. 93.

<sup>77</sup>Hanibal, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Pankhurst, 1968, p. 99.

<sup>79</sup> Pankhurst, 1968, p. 100.

<sup>80</sup>Hanibal, p. 1.

his regulation was witnessed when the Emperor himself continued to levy taxes on slave markets in his territories at different times.<sup>81</sup>

After he ascended to the throne in 1889, Menelik declared another anti-slavery law. However, not only in practice, but also theoretically, this law had limitations.<sup>82</sup> For instance, this law allowed people to continue to enslave prisoners of war. In response to the limitation of the law theoretically, the emperor used enslavement as a way of punishing certain criminals practically.<sup>83</sup>

As discussed above, from 1898 to the 1930s, the Benishangul area became a major source of slaves. The society of the area who were highly enslaved and transported by different foreign powers before the period of the incorporation continued to be exposed to enslavement from the east, too. Since this period, the area had been characterized by intensive slavery and slave trade.<sup>84</sup> In the 1930s, the government of Ethiopia made both theoretical and practical efforts to ban slave trade and slavery in the west most areas of Ethiopia. For instance, in 1932, Emperor Haile Silassie wrote a letter to the governors of provinces in western Ethiopia about the strict commitment that the central government had to end slavery in the country. According to this directive letter, the governors in the western Ethiopia including the Bela-Shangul area were ordered to organize a special force called *Netsa Zebegna* (emancipation guard) in each district. So as to bring an end to slavery and slave trade in the area, from 50-100 *Netsa Zebegna* members were recruited in each district based on their geographic coverage. Out of these guards, six people who were expected to be loyal had been selected and became *Mistir Zebegnoch* (secret guards).<sup>85</sup>

The *Netsa* guards were recruited from the already established and serving security forces in each locality. These emancipation guards had their own responsibilities. These included controlling *kellas* at border areas between each district. Patrolling in their respective district and ensuring the enforcement of the anti-slavery law was the responsibility of these emancipation guard members.<sup>86</sup> When the *Netsa* guards arrested slave traders, they brought their cases to the court. In order to punish the traders committing the banned activity, there were specially assigned judges to work for the implementation of anti-slavery and slave trade. These judges were called *Netsa Dagnoch* (emancipation judges). The judges had power to punish those who committed slavery and slave trade based on the extent of their participation. When

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<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>83</sup>Hanibal, 2.

<sup>84</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>85</sup>Ministry of Provincial Administration to Habte Mariam, Addis Ababa, 25 April 1932, Wollega Museum, Folder No.AHM, 137, File No.1097.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

judges were recruited from the people of localities, similar to the guards, the chairman of the judges, however, was sent from the central government.<sup>87</sup>

With regard to the responsibility of the local chiefs in this campaign, they were engaged in teaching their people about the issue in villages, market places and *kellas* by co-operating with the guards in addition to punishing those found committing slavery. Moreover, they were responsible for evaluating the work based on their authority and to report the progress to the central government.<sup>88</sup> When the chiefs, reported about the progress in 1932, the major problem to implement the law was shortage of the *Netsa Zebegna* members to cover areas in their districts. As response to this report, the central government allowed them to recruit up to 200 guards considering the level of slavery activities and geographic coverage of their districts. Moreover, from 5 to 25 birr was to be paid for each *Netsa Zebegna* as an incentive to their future careers.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, throughout the nation, Ethiopian emperors from Tewodros II to the Italian occupation had issued proclamations to bring an end to slavery but these had made little difference.<sup>90</sup> In October 1935, De Bono proclaimed the end of slavery in Ethiopia. During this time of Italian occupation, owners of slaves became unable to feed slaves because their livestock moved to feed the Ethiopian army in the south. Thus, freed slaves were looking help from the Italian authorities.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, the Italian rule was not successful in avoiding the slavery system from Ethiopia. Similarly, the system continued in the borderlands of western Ethiopia.<sup>92</sup>

Generally, the British attempts to ban slave trade, the signing of treaties by the Ethiopian government and local attempts to ban slavery and slave trade could not protect the communities of the borderlands in western Ethiopia. The complex interests of various actors and the high level of slave trade profit and slavery labor advantages let the activity sustain for about four decades after incorporation. The activity continued in the area until the death of Sheik Khojele Al Hassen, who was the principal participant of the activity together with his family members and lower chiefs.

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<sup>87</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Smith Clarence, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Ninetieth century*, London: Frank Class, 1989, p.103.

<sup>91</sup> Baker, *Rape of Ethiopia...*, p.35.

<sup>92</sup>Debela, pp. 43-4.

### **3.4. Impact of slavery and slave trade in the area**

The slavery and slave trade which were intensified following the incorporation of the western frontier lands of Ethiopia in 1898 brought varied impact on the slave community. To begin with, the system had brought an economic impact on the enslaved people. They served their masters, both locally and abroad, being sources of income and means of sustaining power. In Bela-Shangul, for instance, slaves served in digging and panning gold for their masters. When they were sold abroad, in Sudan or other parts of Ethiopia, they served in cultivating farmland. Thus, the slaves had no chance to serve themselves and to develop economically. They simply worked for the economic benefits of others.<sup>93</sup> More importantly, the slaves were being exploited in labor activities in the Guba, north of the Nile River. There, Hamdan Abu Shok established cotton and tobacco plantation based on the labor of slaves. Hamdan generated income by selling cotton and tobacco products in Roseries and cemented his power economically and politically while the slaves were exploited for their life time for nothing. His labor exploitation intensified from 1900 to 1920s. There, the slaves were obliged to be enslaved without their consent. When the slaves were searching for freedom through escaping from Guba to the Sudan, soldiers recaptured and forced them to serve for the economic interests of the local rulers.<sup>94</sup>

In most cases, the slaves who were recruited from the Berta, Mao, Komo and Gumuz people were forced to serve as servile soldiers. This also forced them to be out of their economic interest and to serve the local chiefs and others in their respective destinations.<sup>95</sup> In this regard, slaves who were raided from these frontier communities were serving the local chiefs of the Benishangul area particularly *sheik* Khojele and his lower chiefs.<sup>96</sup>

Moreover, the slave trade had social impact, both at individual and community levels. To raise one most important instance, this activity resulted in the depopulation of the region.<sup>97</sup> When the actors and destinations of slaves became more diversified from the period of incorporation to the Italian occupation, it was reported that the area become significantly depopulated. The young people in the region were transported to different directions and elders and children remained alone. Based on British archives in the Sudan, Abdusamed underscored that the whole western borderlands became sparsely populated within the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>98</sup> Slaves from Berta, Mao, Komo, and Gumuz localities

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<sup>93</sup>WakelAbdela, Mohamed Hamid, and YassinSeid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, *pp.* 37-38

<sup>94</sup>Abdusamed, 439.

<sup>95</sup>Mohamed Abas, Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher, Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, *pp.* 37-38

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup>Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, Neqemte, 18 Nov. 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No. 365.

<sup>98</sup>Wakel Abdela, Mohamed Hamid, and Yassin Seid (Key informants of the study) in discussion with the researcher,

were sent to Sudan by the local chiefs and Arab traders through Kurmuk and Gizan. Moreover, the slaves were sent to northwestern Ethiopia and Addis Ababa by warlords and loyal local chiefs, respectively. Thus, family breakdown happened and this highly affected the social basis of the frontier people.<sup>99</sup>

In addition, the slave trade had brought psycho-social impact on the enslaved people. Slaves, in this regard, were used as concubines at their destinations. In most cases, young female slaves were more expensive than the male ones. For instance, in 1920s, the average price for a female young slave was about 95 Maria Theresa Thalers when a male slave cost only about 65 Thaler. The young slaves were exposed to sexual harassment without their consent which had psychological impact on slaves. More importantly, slaves, both sexes, were exposed to forceful separation from their families and this could cause psycho-social impact.<sup>100</sup> More importantly, slavery and trading in slaves in this area led the victims to exercise ways of life they did not want. Slaves had no the right to be considered and recognized as human beings. It was reported that female slaves raided from these areas were hired out to travelers after they arrived in Nubia and later at a number of destinations in the Sudan, mainly the White Nile areas. Moreover, 'as female slaves gave birth, their offspring belonged to their owners, just as slaves belonged to the owners of the cows and not to owners of the bulls'.<sup>101</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, locally consuming labor force of slaves by government appointees intensified. Since efforts to introduce ox-drawn plowing in the area failed, slaves were locally used to produce gold and ivory. Local governors highly needed gold, mined by slaves in a traditional way, as source of their own economic power and to send it to the central government as tribute or as personal gift. Moreover, transportation of slaves from the western frontier lands of the Ethiopia also intensified due to the diversification of actors and destinations of the slaves. Slaves were transported both to the Sudan and central parts of Ethiopia. These local acquisition and transportation of slaves from this area had economic, social and psychological impact on the enslaved communities of the area. Nevertheless, international law against slavery, the British attempts to end the slave trade in the area, the signing of treaties by Ethiopia in the League of Nations and local attempts to abolish slavery and the slave trade could not protect the communities of the borderlands in western Ethiopia. The activity continued in the region even during the Italian occupation. It was terminated only in the last years of the 1930s when the power of local governors and family members declined.

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Jan. 2023.; Ateib, Sheikh, pp. 37-38

<sup>99</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>Abdusamed, p. 434.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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