

Research Article

An assessment of road and bridge construction in Simen and Begemider province, 1963-1991

Tesfamichael Fentie Derso

Department of History and Heritage Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Email: tesfafentie34@gmail.com

Abstract: *Due to different factors the academic literature places less emphasis on road and bridge construction in Ethiopia. The main objective of this study is to deal with the history of road and bridge construction and their significance for the people of Simen and Begemider province during the monarchy and the Derg regime. The monarchical period was crucial in that old structures were repaired and construction of new ones commenced. The Derg also constructed many roads and bridges and its rule was considered a golden age in this regard. The study employs a qualitative research method in the sense that primary and secondary sources were exhaustively exploited. Data were collected from key informants who provided relevant information about the issue under investigation through semi-structured interviews. The data collected from informants were cross-checked with abundant archival sources, which were gathered from Central Gondar Archival Center (CGAZA) existing in the form of photographs, design plans and manuscripts. The study*

identified many roads and bridges that were constructed during the study period. Moreover, the Tekeze River Bridge and many other bridges had been constructed since the restoration of the monarchy in 1941. After it assumed power in 1975, the Derg undertook repair works on the early bridges and began the construction of new ones by giving much attention to road construction. As a result, these roads and bridges played important roles in the socio-economic and political life of the people in the study area and beyond.

Keywords: Bridge, Derg, imperial road, role, Simen, Begemider

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1. Introduction

Humanity has always been captivated by bridges. They have served as icons of science and the arts, as well as of skilled tradesmen, architects, and engineers. They have also represented connections among individuals, groups, and countries. Bridges, both tactical and strategic, have been crucial for exercising power. Thus, the profession of building bridges has always been

highly regarded.¹ Before going to see the bridge in building history in the study area, let us overview the world's experience in this regard. Bridge building is a very old art of man. The first bridges were stone and wooden, including natural bridges, single stone plates, rope bridges, and wooden beams crossing a brook.² Slate stones were first used to create rudimentary arches, which were then constructed by stacking stones slightly off-center until they met in the center. There are examples of this type of arch in Asia Minor, Mexico, Greece, and ancient Egypt. This type of architecture could only support brief spans. Larger spans could be constructed as a result of the Etruscans' creation and application of the true arch in 700 BC. Long ago, floating bridges were also in use.³ Xerxes' famous bridge spanned the Hellespont during the Persia-Greece conflict in 480 AD. In the distant past, bridges were also constructed in the Far East. Although there are few specific details available, accounts of bridge construction in Tibet and China support this. The Tarr Steps in Exmore, England, which dates back to approximately 1000 BC, and the Meles Arch Bridge near Izmir, Turkey, which dates back to approximately 850 BC, are two examples of ancient bridges that still stand⁴.

Although it is not very evident in academic literature, Pankhurst claims that, just like in other parts of the world, there were pre-Christian bridge-building cultures in Ethiopia.⁴ The Aksum, Lalibela, and Harar Wall architectural developments suggest developments of bridge construction in Ethiopia, which has not received attention from scholars. Although in the aforementioned period it was difficult to mention bridges in the country, since Gondar became the center of the country, bridge construction reached its dashing period.⁵ The exact number of bridges constructed during the Gondarian period is not known due to lack of prior studies and sources. The bridges are estimated to exceed ten in number. Most of them are in and around Gondar, and some are in Gojjam and Shewa.⁶ Emperor Sartsa Dengel (1550 –1597) built a very

¹ Jensen, J.J., "History of Bridges-A Philatelic Review," *Consult, dr.tech. Jens Jacob Jensen AS, Trondheim, Norway*, n.d, 1.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴R. Pankhurst, "Notes for the History of Gondar," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1969, 181.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Engdu Gebrewold, Hirute Sintayehu and Solomon Lingerih, "The Gonderian Period Bridges of Ethiopia: Status and Prospects for Tourism," *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, Volume 6 (3), 2017, 1.

fine one-arch bridge near the Guzara Castle. Emperor Susneyos (1607-1932) likewise erected a bridge over the Blue Nile at Alata.⁷

Fasiledes (1632–1667) saw the need for roads in Gondar and made an effort to address the issue. The remnants of seven bridges that once crossed large rivers to link Gondar with the province of Gojjam and other nearby areas serve as evidence of this. The following locations have the remnants of these bridges. Tiss Abbay Bridge, across the Abbay (Blue Nile) river, was partially destroyed by *Dejjach Ejigu*⁸ in 1940.⁹ Additionally damaged during the Italian War was the River Abbay, located near Motta, Gojjam. River Angereb is to the east of Gondar, and Gobatie is located south of Gondar across the Megech River. Defecha, located north of Gondar, and the old road to Axum (this bridge was also destroyed by the Italians), Fenter Bridge, and the River Kaha are all located in the town of Gondar, west of the imperial fortresses. Until the coming of the fascist Italy to Simen and Begemdir, there had not been that much of a history of bridge building. Under the framework of major road construction programs of Italian East Africa, a 546km road constructed between Gondar and Asmarä was completed in 1940. There were about 21 bridges and 1,300 culverts.¹⁰ One of these bridges, with three arches and 46 meters long, was that of Tekeze. While building it, the Italians lost many lives for which they erected a memorial statue at the Wulkifit Pass. Until the completion of this road, the frequented venues between Asmarä and Gondar were Adwä, Satit, Walqäyt, Tagade, Armächiho, Tekel Dengay, and then Gondar.¹¹

Simen and Begemider province were divided into provinces, districts, *meslenes*, and *mikitil meslenes* after the expulsion of the Italians. In 1941, Simen and Begemider province were divided into three *woredas*, sixteen *meslenes* and one hundred and fifty *mikitil meselenes*.¹² In 1945, a new administrative structure was introduced. Accordingly, Simen and Begemider province were upgraded to Governorate General. Thus, it was divided into seven sub-provinces, twenty-seven *woredas*, and one hundred twenty-one sub-*woredas*.¹³ Begemider and Simen

⁷Pankhurst, 181.

⁸ *Dejjach Ejigu* was the brother of the notable Ethiopian patriot, Belay Zeleke. The main reason for the destruction of that bridge was to prevent the Italian fascist advancement into Gojjam. Informants: two anonymities.

⁹ Ghiorghis Mellessa, "Gondar Yesterday and Today," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XII, No.3, 1969, 167.

¹⁰ Solomon Addis, *A History of the City of Gondar*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ayele Tariku, "Security Problems and Afersata in Ethiopia: The case of Semen and Begemider Governorate-General (1941-1974)," *African Security Review*, Vol.31, 2022, 66; Girma Tayachew, "The History and Challenges of Simen Mountains National Park: the Case of Fauna and Flora (1969—1983)," *Ee-JRIF*, Vol. 7, No 2, 2016.

¹³ Girma, 54.

Awraja were upgraded to Governorate General in 1945 by replacing *mislene* and *mikitil mislene* with *woreda* and sub-*woreda*, respectively. Although it was continued for some time in the newly assumed military government, later on the *Derg* introduced a new administrative system by renaming the Begemider and Simen governorate generals the Gondar *kifile-hager*.¹⁴ Despite the great history of bridge and road construction, no independent or significant research has been conducted in the field yet, with the exception of a few scattered pieces of literature. This investigation aims to address the socio-economic significance of the history of road and bridge building in Begemider and Simen provinces.

An approach to qualitative research was used in this study. There is use of both primary and secondary sources. This comprises archival resources, document analysis, key informants, and concentrated group discussions based on who was closer to the incident. First, a series of questions were used to gather the necessary information. Extensive interviews were conducted with elderly people who saw the construction of the bridges and the roads. Five to six groups participated in a focus group discussion that covered various topics relating to the subject. The snowball sampling method was used to choose discussants depending on how close each subtopic was to each informant. In particular, the study made extensive use of secondary literature as well as archival materials from the Central Gondar Administrative Zonal Archives, found in the form of letters, photographs, reports, and minutes. Written records were compared with oral sources gathered through key informant interviews and targeted group discussions. Lastly, the written data and the elders' perspectives were interpreted and described to make the data analysis process understandable. Using methods such as document and narrative analysis, the gathered data were thoroughly and critically examined.

2. Road and Bridge Construction during the Imperial Period, 1963-1974

2.1. Bridge construction on the Tekeze River

As previously stated, roads and bridges have been constructed in the study area for centuries; nevertheless, the construction of roads and bridges did not grow as much when the area's political influence was waning, similar to other social and political difficulties.¹⁵ However, since

¹⁴Ayele, 66; Girma, 54.

¹⁵CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 743/44/58, (1958).

Italy has taken over the entirety of Ethiopia and the surrounding area, work on building new roads and bridges has resumed. Naturally, the Italians constructed roads and bridges to fulfill their colonial objectives; even when the Italians were vanquished, these infrastructure projects continued to benefit the country's society for over eight decades. The Tekeze River Bridge is prominent among them.¹⁶

The Tekeze River Bridge was started by the Italians; however, the Italians left the country without completing the bridge they had started because they were defeated by the combined forces of patriots and the British. The absence of this river bridge not only in the dry season but also in the rainy season has caused a lot of transportation problems to connect the town of Humera with the other sub-provinces of the governorate general.¹⁷ The community has been using insecure transportation options like wooden rickshaws until the restoration of the bridge was completed, and the problems caused by this were limitless. For example, in 1964, a storm overturned a boat while trying to cross with a towed boat and 37 people died. The financial loss was huge. In order to avoid this problem, some people who are in the field of construction asked to construct the bridge, and the whole community was willing to offer money and support the restoration of the bridge.¹⁸

*Ato Semere Abraham*¹⁹ realized the repeated problems of the people and attempted to reconstruct the bridge to serve the people of the area for some time. He cut wood and attached it to the standing cement poles on the river crossings, making it at least 60 meters long. The attempt to reach this high point took six days by laying a strong wire on the bridge. When the heavy wood fell, the steel that was attached to the wire was pulled, and it was cut off.²⁰ *Ato Mengistu* informed Lieutenant Colonel Tamrat Yigezu, Governor General of the province, that side protection in the area that is deemed to be dangerous as well as diagonal standing steel are required for the bridge to be operated in this state. In the future, he continued, if professionals conduct the required research to deliver reliable services, there would be a complete guarantee

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹ He was just a self-employed carpenter; most of the time, he received orders from different district administrators to repair and construct public-use infrastructure with some commission. CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., የሥራ/ቱ/4/2/173/59, (1959).

²⁰*Ibid*

against loss of life and property.²¹ An archival source confirms that an iron bridge was laid and people as well as vehicles could ride on it; however, the continued transportation of heavy trucks damaged the bridge in 1956.²²

Regarding the damage and non-use of this bridge, different opinions have been given by two parties. The first are the Shire District Police Office and the Tigray Provincial Office. According to the information from the police office, the Tekeze Bridge, which is the border between Simen-Begemdir and Tigray provinces, was flooded last rainy season.²³ They reported in their letter that trees were submerged under water and that it was a cliff from the edge of the road. Following the police office, the Tigray provincial office was informed, as in a letter written, that repairs would be done as per the need for a repair department in the province.²⁴ Looking at the observation of the provinces, the experts sent to the bridge, who have been doing research, came to the conclusion that it was different from Shire police and Tigray province. According to the experts, the part of the bridge that was damaged is not from Tigray province, but it is from Simen and Begemider. Therefore, *Graazmach* Admasu, the director of the study, informed Simen and Begemider Governorate that the Tekeze River Bridge needs repair.²⁵

Following this, Tamrat Yigezu told the highway administration of the province that the bridge was out of service due to a few defects. He reminded the people that they are going to face a lot of hardships in the future and urged them to conduct a study to ensure that the bridge works well so that it will serve for a long time.²⁶ As a result, the highway authority Haile-Ghiorigis showed the previously done study, which put in place the repair of the bridge in two options. District engineers from the Eritrea section inspected the bridge site in February 1963. The bridge division has investigated the matter and explained the various possibilities.²⁷ There is a 2m wide steel truss (consisting of very light members) spanning the complete bridge except for the 30m span. The truss on piers and abutments could accommodate a two-line bridge. The type of rehabilitation of such a bridge is entirely dependent on the amount of available funds, volume,

²¹*Ibid.*

²²CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1543/44/58, (1958).

²³CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., ቁ3/3097, (1956).

²⁴CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 232/51/13525, (1957).

²⁵CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1HH/HH53/49, (1949).

²⁶CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 4963/44/4213, (1955).

²⁷*Ibid.*

and type of traffic. The traffic that the bridge is intended to serve may be pedestrian or vehicular. The table below shows comparative types and costs.²⁸

Table 1. The early studies, experts planned to build the Tekeze River Bridge.

Alterative A	Alterative B.
Bridge for pedestrian traffic (only people and animals)	Bridge for vehicular traffic (people, animals, cars, buses and trucks)
a. Concrete deck for 30m span and timber floor for other span . Cost of concrete deck: \$ 36000.00 .Cost of timber decking \$14000.00 .Total cost \$50.000.00 . Construction time 150 days	a. Two lane concrete deck for all span(after removal of existing truss) . Cost of 206 m. deck approaches \$680.000 .Construction time 200 days
b. Bailey bridge from 30m span timber for other span . Cost of bailey bridge \$34,000.00 . Cost of timber decking \$14.000.00 . Total cost \$48.000.00 .Construction time 120 days(90 days for delivery and 30days for erection)	Bailey bridge for all spans using single reinforcement type with tombet deck (after removal of existing truss) . Cost of bailey bridge \$ 240,000.00 . Construction time 180 days (90 days for delivery and 90 days for erection)

Source: CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 530-10/907-55, (1963GC), 1-2.

At the present time, the volume of traffic on the Tesseeneit-Gondar road does not justify the construction of a 2-lane concrete bridge. If the bridge is intended to carry vehicular traffic, the bay bridge of the entire bridge, which, as shown in Table B (b), will cost \$240,000, will be the most practical solution. However, if the bridge is intended to solve the problem of people and animals, the only economic solution will be to bridge the 30m span with a bailey bridge and deck other spans with timber floors (as sown alternative A (b); the cost will be \$48,000).²⁹

The Bailey bridge type is preferred for its simplicity of erection, moderate cost, and future salvage value (for which funds are available). The Bailey can be dismantled and erected somewhere else. The Bailey bridge can also accommodate vehicles up to 16 tons of cargo over a 100-foot span. The reinforced concrete footbridge indicated in alternative A (2) will not have future salvage value in addition to its limited capacity. In light of the above Imperial Highway

²⁸CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 530-10/907-55, (1963GC), 1-2.

²⁹*Ibid.*

Authority recommendations to bridge the 30-meter span with a Bailey bridge and deck the rest with timber flooring, this might generate traffic, which might eventually require the replacement of the other spans with a Bailey type bridge. The Interim Highway Authority, besides its project formation, announced that it was ready to offer technical supervision whenever the funds for the construction of the said bridge were available.³⁰

The plan to build the bridge, which was announced earlier, was not taken seriously until 1959 when Emperor Haile Selassie and Prince *Ras* Asrat Kasa visited the bridge. During the visit, the prince asked the Highway Authorities how much it would cost to build the bridge.³¹ Following this question, *Aba* Shawol Woldemaryam, the general manager of the Highway Authority, informed the materials needed for the repair of the bridge. Taking the previous plan as an example, he proposed the following compensation for tithing: one for both pedestrians and light vehicles, 260,000 Birr; and the other for any traffic, 356,000 Birr, based on that the second was preferred and the building was constructed.³² Then, while the restoration and construction of the bridge continued, Vincernzo Cost Construction Company members were present, visited the bridge under construction, and gave technical assistance. Construction of stone and cement on both sides of the bridge entrance was done by filling in the necessary cracks and excavating the hills in the 2nd section of the bridge and creating a moving area.³³ The Setit district police chief announced in a telegram message that the bridge on the Tekeze River has been completed in 1963 and had started providing services to the community.³⁴

Then, after the fall of the old order in 1974, the military committee assumed power. In 1975, just like the previous protection, the Imperial Body Guard of the Emperor combined with the *Derg* army protected this bridge for a long time. Since this bridge has a crucial role, there may be many enemies suspected (The Ethiopian Democratic Union, EDU) of posing a threat to the

³⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

³¹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., አ11/12/137, (1956); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1411/1453, (1959).

³²CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1411/1453, (1959).

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 232-51-11376, (1963).

country and the newly empowered governments. Apart from the Imperial Body Guard and the army, the police were also part of this protection.³⁵

2.2.The situation of other bridges

To find out the condition of the other bridges in the province and to rebuild and repair the damaged ones, just like the Tekeze River Bridge, the letter written in October 1962 and the registration form for each department were submitted to the different offices in the province. Following this, Simen and Begemdir province coordinated with the ministries under them to fill out the form sent to them according to the situation, collected it for the requesting department through the province, and informed them to send it to the Imperial Ministry of Works and Communications of Ethiopia.³⁶

Following this, different sub-provinces of the government reported in different forms. In this regard, *Graazmach* Adugna, Secretary General of Belsa *woreda*, reported the working bridges to Libo District, in Belsa district, from the Chara in the west of Bahir Gimb to Werehla Gebiya in Belesa district. In the area, Italy had built the road, and car transport had started.³⁷ He suggested that the first district from Chahra vice province, 2nd Kahere, 3rd from Denkez vice province Goba, 4th Chreto from Amba Chore vice province, and 5th Kabteya River be blocked during the rainy season. One of the reasons that inspired the idea to work in the first place is because the district of Balsa is affected by malaria and tuberculosis. If these bridges were not renovated, the area would face the aforesaid diseases, making it impossible to let them into healthcare centers.³⁸ Even though the width of the rivers appeared to be no more than 5-7 meters, he also explained that an engineer should see them.³⁹ Bridges that need to be constructed in Kemkem *woreda* as a priority: Bere-Ber River, Mzere, Senel Walka, Mechat, Kaha, Wonfit, Dangura, Weloty, Gomet, Shema Matebiya, Qarergn, Astde-Mariyam, and Shiwoch.⁴⁰ Chilga district also announced the details of the river that needed a bridge in the district in the table below.

³⁵CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., ማ/መ284/6/44, (1967); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,232/51/11670, (1967).

³⁶*Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, “Letter written from Ejigu Gesese Secretary of ---Kemkem *Woreda* to Libo *awraja* municipal,” (1957).

³⁸CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No, 7144/56, (1957).

³⁹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No, 1417/44, (1957).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

Table 2. Bridges needing repair and construction in Chilga

No.	Name of Rivers	Woreda	Sub-woreda	Kebeles through which rivers flow	
				C h u r c h	G o t e
1	Guange Talake	Chilga	Aykel	Mizaba Mariyamx	
2	W o g m i t e		EnkerEyesus	
3	A w g a			AdazeKidanmihiret	
4	W o j i r a b a			AwredadaMariyam	
5	N a r a			Nara Michael	
6	A b a G u l j a		Chilga	EyahoMariyam	
7	M a t e b i y a			EyahoMariyam	
8	K a r u h i			EyahoMariyam	
9	G i n t e			WalideBemariyam	
1 0	NegadieBahire			AcheraMariyam	
1 1	B e l e h o a		Chaqo	KaberMariyam	
1 2	G u s h A m b a				Gush-Amba
1 3	W e h i n i				Dembiha
1 4	A b a y				A b a y
1 5	M e q a				M e q a
1 6	G o r a r o				Goraro
1 7	NefagnGendewa				Gendewa
1 8	G e n d e w a				Gendea

Source: CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 3702/44, (1956), 1-2.

The governor of Wagara, *Dejazmach* Adane Mekonnen, noted that bridges need to be rebuilt. The road that passed through Wagara, which connected Gondar and Asmarä, was the integral center of the fascist Italian invasion.⁴¹ In their attempt to colonize the area, the Italians built many bridges that enabled them to connect the district with Eritrea on the major river streams of Tekeze and Degoguma. Bridges that were built in these rivers, due to long service, are out of service. The district governor reported that these bridges need restoration or rebuilding, yet he added that it is impossible to report the specific technical issues of the bridges unless experts from the general governorate visit and investigate.⁴² Debark and Deb Bahr districts also mentioned that there were no broken bridges in each district, but they could not dare say that

⁴¹ CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 870/44/55, (1956).

⁴²*Ibid.*

there is no threat of collapse, because this can only be said if the bridges were studied by an expert.⁴³

The municipality of Kola Diba also stated the following about the rivers in the district that demand bridges. The height of the currently functioning bridge was four meters wide and 9 meters long; the distance to be dug into the ground was three meters; and the length was 10 meters from the beginning of the bridge to the right side of the bridge and from the end of the bridge to the right, only eight centimeters.⁴⁴ The entire road that works next to the main bridge was 172 meters long, from the entrance to the end. The width from the beginning to the end is 10 meters. From the length of 120 meters, the base distance from the ground was 1 meter 50 cm from the bottom, which is 32 cm. The base of the series, which was 20 meters in height, was 40 centimeters in size.⁴⁵

According to the order received from the Ministry of Works and Communications of the Emperor's Government, Fogera and Dera districts responded that there were bridges that needed to be rebuilt in their respective areas. In the Fogera *woreda*, there were bridges on the road from Addis Zemene to Bahir Dar that were built under the fascist Italian and the imperial rule needing renovation. Just like Fogera, Dera *woreda* also reported bridges that needed rebuilding.⁴⁶ The town of Debre Tabor also accepted the order from the Imperial Government and sent a plan showing the working bridges.⁴⁷ The first in the center of Debre Tabor was a bridge made of cylinder liked attached iron on the way to the palace. This bridge had been damaged for some time and was providing service to passing vehicles. The second was the road from the top of *Ras Gugs*a to Ajibar Daba Matebiya. The bridge that was built during the Italian occupation and was used to cross the river was damaged by land degradation and should be repaired before it was destroyed.⁴⁸ Following the damage to the bridge, both trucks and buses passed through it,

⁴³CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1119/44/54, (1954).

⁴⁴CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 65/44/54, (1954).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 3935/44, (1954).

⁴⁷CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 357/13, (1950).

⁴⁸CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 251/13, (1954).

crossing the river. However, it was impossible to do the same in the summer season because the volume of the river became too high, which challenged the community and traders of the area.⁴⁹

In Setit-Humera district, three bridges were needed for the town at the time. The one from the main local market that was found in Tekeze and the Eritrean state was 21 meters long. The second from the city to the church was about 22 meters long. The third was from the downtown of the city, which led to Tekeze's 10-meter width, and it was only for the pedestrian bridge.⁵⁰ Although most of the districts reported that there were working bridges in their areas; Dabat, Aykel, Debarak, and some other districts answered that there were no working bridges.⁵¹ For instance, Nifas Mewucha town announced that the road that led to Dessie was constructed by Italians and that the entire road passed through it, not through a river.⁵²

The above-mentioned bridges were collected and handed over to the province by the district administrators in their respective order. The position of the Governorate General was filled and officials were transferred by the Office of the Work and Communication sent by the Emperor. In coordination with the officials of the province's roads authority, according to the budget set by the Emperor, rivers that were difficult for public transport had been sent to be studied by experts.⁵³ Based on the research presented by the research teams, construction experts were sent to the districts of the province where there was an intractable bridge problem to carry out maintenance and construction work. Apart from those identified as non-deployable, other bridges were constructed according to their condition and continued to serve the community.⁵⁴ Bridges were constructed and repaired in all districts, but they could not be done during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. The government that came to power in 1975 accepted these complaints and coordinated the work of renovating and building new bridges with road construction. Bridges that were renovated and constructed since the time of Emperor Haile Selassie had been

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 2177/2/591, (1954).

⁵¹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 122/737/72, (1972).

⁵²CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 10133/44/4213, (1954).

⁵³ Informants: *Ato* Solomon Haile and *Wayzero* Aleme Chanie.

⁵⁴ Informants: *Qese* Tariku Bihonegn and *Ato* Tamrat Tafere.

serving as the foundation of the community's existence and social and economic activities for many years.⁵⁵

3. Road and Bridge Construction during the *Derg* Regime

3.1. Construction of bridges

Since the *Derg* took power, it continued the early bridge building and began road construction in the study area in a remarkable way. The coming of the *Derg* was a golden age for Simen and Begemider bridge building and road construction. There were several bridges constructed and restored.⁵⁶ Among the bridges that were constructed were many small bridges along with the Gondar and Humera road project, namely from Woleka to Humera. There were 21 bridges on high rivers, of which only two were made of concrete and the rest were made of steel. One of the two bridges that were built with concrete and gravel so far was the 24-kilometer Bemble River Bridge. The second one was the Genete River Bridge (53 kilometers), which was started in 1979 and completed at the same time.⁵⁷

In addition to the above-mentioned bridges, Lai Sanja (Muse Bamb), Debuz River Bridge, Lower Sanja River Bridge, and FeleWuha Bridge were all four key bridges, and Bebaw and Angereb river bridges were called very key in the eyes of experts. However, only a few of these bridges were guarded by farmers' associations; the protection of farmers' associations was not reliable after a conflict erupted in the area between the government and some armed groups.⁵⁸ Later, when it was realized that these bridges cost a lot of money and because they were critical for the community, soldiers had been guarding them for many years in coordination with the security department of the farmer's association to offer socio-economic opportunities to the people of the area.⁵⁹

Another important bridge construction during the *Derg* era was the Angereb river bridge, which was renovated to connect Abderafi and Humera. This was a steel bridge assembled earlier in 1971. It was the first bridge built and opened for service at the same time; it was very long. The

⁵⁵Informants: *Wayzero* Yalfale Mekonnen and *Ato* Yosefe Birhanu.

⁵⁶CGAZA, Folder No., ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,3331/742/70/71, (1971), 1-2.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁹CGAZA, Folder No., ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,ሰ/493/15/79, (1971), 1-2.

total cost of the work was 90,000 Birr. Four years after the work was completed and service started, the heavy rain that fell in the area destroyed the bearing wall, and the bridge completely fell into the river.⁶⁰ Although a budget for the purchase of a prefabricated bridge for this bridge was requested for 1980, responses from the concerned bodies made it impossible to do so because the full focus of the budget year was on the road and bridge from Gondar-Humera. There were two arguments that showed the significance of the reconstruction of this bridge to the people in the area.⁶¹

The first argument was that the local community had been suffering since the bridge stopped giving service for some time. The construction of the bridge was a guarantee for the local community to get what it needed at the time. Second, the construction of the bridge was essential for the area to control the problems caused by the local bandits and the neighboring country.⁶² *Fitawrari* Demisse, governor of the *awraja*, suggested that just like the Humera-Gondar road, the bridge that connected Humera and Abderafi, the concerned bodies should reconstruct the bridge at the same time as the aforesaid road, using the pieces of steel from the fallen bridge parts that were stored in the warehouse. Otherwise, the local communities would face constraints during the following year.⁶³

Rawayan Bridge, located on the outskirts of Humera town, was renovated in 1979. Setit district administrators were informed by telegram that the wooden deck of this steel bridge was damaged because tanks had passed through it many times. Instead, they asked for a new deck to be replaced. There was also wood for the replacement, so a road construction expert from the Dansha area was sent to do the work, change the wooden deck, and continue its service to the local people as usual.⁶⁴

Gonge River Bridge was one of the bridges built in the Metema area that was also given attention during the *Derg* regime. However, before this bridge was built, it was a dinghy cabin that was not made of cement, and it was broken and cracked due to the water pressure up to the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., ምብ18/11-2, (1971).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 142/1356/71, (1971).

steel bearing wall. Its collapse was dreadful, but it was repaired in a short time.⁶⁵ Following this observation, the cement for the repair was obtained from Metema Health Center. Experts were sent from the province, led by Mr. Kidane Atsmu and Gezahe Gebrei, who used their extra vacation time from December 14 to 30 to construct the bridge, and they did a good job and put it to use.⁶⁶ The other bridge constructed by *Derg* was the Sanja steel bridge. From the time of the building of the lower Sanja steel bridge until it was completed in 1979, the farmer's association of the area worked in collaboration with the government and experts to complete the bridge, and it offered great benefit to the community.⁶⁷ In 1979, around Tekel Dingay, four iron bridges were built in the Balo River and were providing services to the community. These were on the Das River, the Ba Baw River, the Debuz River, and Muse Bamb bridges. When they were all completed, the local farmer's association protected them in coordination with the government.⁶⁸

3.2. Road Construction

Although the initiators of modern road work were Italians in the province, archival data indicates that it reached the highest level under the *Derg* regime. The attention given to road construction during the military regime was very high. Particularly in 1980, roads were constructed for the province and began to provide service. During the *Derg* regime, apart from the construction of the roads in the province's districts, the roads connecting the province with other provinces were constructed and put into service.⁶⁹

Among the prominent ones was the road work project from Gondar to Humera which started on July 30, 1979. This road project was an asphalt road to be used for urgent development activities. There was a risk that the asphalt would collapse because it was classified. Especially in the rainy season when the road was constructed and put into service the asphalt from Tekel Dengay to Angereb was mountainous on both sides; the land in the area was marshy, as a result it affected

⁶⁵CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 4426/44/68, (1968).

⁶⁶CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 3701/44/68, (1968); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 08/98/2088/72, (1969).

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,437/1471,(1971); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C File No.,3991/4-3/44,(1971); File No.,134/1210/71,(1971); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,404/14/71,(1971); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,134/1165/7,(1971).

⁶⁹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 7079/ሞሰ/71, (1971).

the asphalt road. To solve this problem, the trucks that were from Gondar used to wait until the other trucks reached Gondar, which began their journey from Humera?⁷⁰

To build the road from Gondar to Humera, 65 members of farmers' associations located in upper and lower Armächihio districts and a large number of people in the *woreda* of Tekel Dengaymet on October 13, 1977, attended a meeting chaired by Major Nadew Zakarias, the governor of the province, district administrators, and elders. The road from Gondar to Humera was being constructed for fifty million birr. The procedure, security, and role of the community on the road were discussed in the presence of the local people.⁷¹ Major Nadew Zakarias forwarded his message to the crowd that the people had to work together to protect the road; otherwise, the budget would shift to areas, as it was indeed in Gaynt, following some unrest caused by some bandits who were opposed to the military government.⁷² Among the elders who were invited to be guest speakers about the construction of the Gondar-Humera road, the most notable patriot who fought against the fascists Italians from 1936–1941 was *Ra s*Wubnhi Tesema. In his speech, he remarked:

ከጎንደር-

ሁመራ-የሚወስደው መንገድ በመጀመሪያ በጣሊያኖች ተቀርጾ የተሠራ ቢሆንም በአካባቢው በጀግኖች አርማጭ ሆኑ ዝብብ ደረሰበት ገንጠል ትተው ከትሎ ከአካባቢው ወጡ። ከድህረ ገጽ ለመንገዱ ለቀጣይ ሰላሳ አመታት ለአካባቢው ህዝብ አገልግሎት ቢሰጥም እድሳት ገባለማግኘቱ ድምት አጋጥሞ ታል። ህብረተሰቡም ለንጉሣዊው መንግስት እንዲገነባ በየጊዜው ቢጠይቁም ሆኖም ደርግ እስኪመጣ ድረስም ገንዘብ አይነት አዎንታዊ ለሽልጠና ተገኝቶም። የአርማጭ ሆኑ ዝብብ ከተባረከው ወታደራዊ መንግስት አላማጎን በመቆም ለግንባታው ሂደት እንቅፋት የሚሆነውን ማንኛውንም ሰው መታገል እና እነሱን ማስወገድ አለበት። እየተካሄደ ያለው መንገድ የህብረተሰቡ ኑሮ ማህበራዊ ምህንድስናዊ ስፍራዎችን ያደገው ነው።

The road from Gondar-Humera was originally designed and constructed by the Italians, until they withdrew from the area following their defeat by the brave-hearted Armächihio people. Following the victory the road provided service to the local people for the next thirty years, yet due to lack of renovation it was damage. The community regularly requested the monarchical government to rebuild it. Yet there was no positive response to it till the coming of the Derg.⁷³ The Armächihio people must stand with the blessed motive of the military government and fight anyone who is going to be an obstacle to the

⁷⁰CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C File No.,7079/መሰ/71, (1971).
⁷¹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1563/5/44, (1969), 1-3.
⁷²*Ibid.*
⁷³*Ibid.*, 2.

*construction process and eliminate them. The road under construction is a lifeline for of the community socially and economically.*⁷⁴

The community also announced that they would give their lives to protect the road from the start to the end of the construction. People's representatives shared their opinion that the construction should start and end peacefully.⁷⁵ While this roadwork is being carried out, the rivers that were considered to be very difficult for roadwork in the rainy season had already been bridged: from Angereb to Dansha 19.2, from Dansha to Humera 47.2, for a total of 66.4 km.⁷⁶

Chera Tekle-Haymanot, Kembow, Kesha, Kerker Bale-Egziabhire, KechKidān-Mhired, Muse-Bamb, Worqemider Mikael, Ayera Abo, and Teberi Lukas Quiqluly accepted the call for prepared protection for the road construction, and more than 300 organized community local army members protected the road project in each respective area from its construction progress to its continued giving of service to the community.⁷⁷ The list of machines used during this asphalt roadwork was two dozers, three water boats, two small trucks, a dump truck, a vehicle use for spreading asphalt, and a soil loading truck. Apart from these, two dozers, two soil loading tractors, two water boats, one welding machine, one roller, and other vehicles and machines had been working for the Tekeze River bridge and then for the airport, which later joined the road construction project.⁷⁸

In 1980, besides the above-mentioned roads, more than eight road station centers were completed, and they were inaugurated by the higher officials of the *Derg*. The following data shows inaugurated road station centers with their cost: Sereba with, 26151 Birr; Wekene, 7127 Birr; Gayint, 10446 Birr; Kimere Dingay, 13695 Birr; Simada, 16111 Birr; Arbaya, 16111 Birr; Delgi, 10111 Birr; Wereta-Woldiya; Bahir Dar-Gondar and Metema.⁷⁹

Road and its construction in Begemider and Simen provinces did not run smoothly; it faced so many obstacles particularly when the roads of Bahir Dar-Gondar, Gondar-Aykele and Gondar-Debank projects were being conducted due to the magnitude of the projects in the area that faced shortage of machinery, and it was unable to provide what the projects demanded till other

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵*Ibid.*; Informants: Ato Aschalew Abuhay, Ato Endalkachew Sisay and Wayzero Abye Minilu.

⁷⁶CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 133/490/71, (1071), 2.

⁷⁷CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 15553/12/69, (1969).

⁷⁸CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 133/490/71, (1971), 1.

⁷⁹CGAZA, Folder No. ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., ሰጭ.ከሀ/6092/72, (1972).

machines and vehicles were maintained in the garages.⁸⁰ Security was the second problem; it became a great constraint for the road project which was conducted from Woreta to Weldiya, and the serious challenge was from some groups of people who were opposed to the government.⁸¹ Due to lack of security, the construction team changed its site of project to Weldiya and the Chinese government also asked the Ethiopian government to keep the security of the expertise.⁸²

The other great challenge in the Gondar-Humera road project was shortage of workers. Due to some unrest in the area where the road was being constructed from Setit to Tesenye, many of the workers left their jobs; as a result, they were not receiving their salaries. Unsurprisingly, these workers signed a petition and submitted it to the imperial highway authority of the province.⁸³ The highway authority actively responded to them and passed the following decision regarding the fate of these workers. The contract that they were working under which required the workers to renew the contract every three months was terminated and the workers were signing a one-and-a-half year contract until the project was over.⁸⁴ Unless there was any other misconduct, it was being prepared to enact regulations regarding the rights of all workers who had been working for a long time. The petition had been accepted. The second decision was as follows: the workers of the Humera-Gondar road project were transferred to the Azezo-Metema project and the grievances of the workers were resolved.⁸⁵

4. Socio-economic Role of Roads and Bridges

Roads and bridges have had a tremendous socio-economic role to the people of Simen and Begemider province. Eyewitnesses said that before the construction of bridges, the society of the province had been suffering. Since the bridges have been out of service without repair, the interaction between relatives and neighboring districts has been limited.⁸⁶

⁸⁰CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No.,122/737/72,(1972).

⁸¹CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 1835/44/72, (1972).

⁸²CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., አው-3/32/ወ2, (1972).

⁸³CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, “Letter from Gondar-Humera road project workers to Begemider and Simen Governor,” (1967); CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, “Letter from Denekew Tegegn, Governor of Eritrea to Worku Abebe, Governor of Gondar Sub province,” (1967).

⁸⁴CGAZA, Folder No.ባህል እና ኪነት-8C, File No., 888/4/2/44, (1968).

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Informants: *Ato* Aschalew Abuhay, *Ato* Endalkachew Sisay and *Wayzero* Abye Minilu.

Following the construction of bridges, the province was able to be connected with the neighboring provinces. Districts in the province were connected to neighboring provinces, which enabled them to exchange their culture, values and lifestyle. In particular, the role of the Tekeze River Bridge has enabled Tigray to interact with Simen and Begemider province at a stronger level and develop brotherhood.⁸⁷ Before the construction of this bridge, the people of the two provinces lived in a wooden boat pulled by a rope, so there was not as much interaction before the bridge was constructed and started service. Of course, before the Tekeze River Bridge was constructed and put into service, the Amhara and Tigre communities had had age-long interaction.⁸⁸ However, since the construction of this bridge and its service, many Tigreans had been coming to Simen and Begemider province for seasonal work. For example, they were able to work as laborers, carpenters, builders and in other fields, and later they were able to participate in charcoal production and various business options. This allowed them to strengthen their interaction and integration with the Amhara community. In addition, the Tekeze River Bridge led to the export of various agricultural products from Simen and Begemider to Tigray and goods such as salt were brought from Tigray.⁸⁹

Just like the Tekeze River Bridge, the roads and bridges constructed by the *Derg* were very important. By making the administrations of districts and farmers' associations sell and buy their agricultural products without any fear or concern, it has been possible to strengthen the economic ties of the districts. In particular, the asphalt road and bridges built from Setit-Humera to Gondar brought the sesame production of Wolkait-Tegdie into Gondar city, which not only benefited individuals, but also boosted the economic activity of the province as well as the country.⁹⁰ In addition, following the construction of bridges and roads, namely from Humera to Gondar, from Bahr Dar to Gondar, from Wereta to Dese, from Metema to Gondar, from Debre Tabor to Gondar and other areas of the province where roads had been constructed, various commercial activities started, for example, hotels, shops, traditional and modern pubs, garages and other small businesses started and, some of them are still serving the community.⁹¹

⁸⁷Informants: *Wayzero* Mulu Abraha and *Ato* Mesfin Mekonnen.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Informants: *Wayzero* Maled Tiku and *Ato* Solomon Mekonnen.

⁹¹Informants: *Wayzero* Almitu Degu, *AlmeTegegn* and *Ato* Dessie Niguse.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the history of bridges and roads, as well as their significance to the inhabitants of Simen and Begemider province, from the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie to the *Derg* regime. The construction of bridges and roads in Simen and Begemider dates back to the Italians' initial occupation of the provinces. Nevertheless, the majority of it was not completed due to its defeat and withdrawal. The early Italian roads and bridges helped the local population, as we can see from the available sources following their construction. However, most of them experienced damage after a certain amount of service. The Tekeze River Bridge was among the bridges that were damaged. After the monarchical period, it was restored and served the people. Just like that, several bridges were also constructed in different parts of the province's districts and sub-districts. Although the monarchical government tried to complete the ongoing bridge, its completion followed *Derg's* control of power. As soon as the *Derg* tried to complete the early bridges more than ever, it also constructed several new bridges. Moreover, the new government placed a special emphasis on road construction, citing the 1980s as a golden era in the field. The roads that connected the province's districts and sub-districts were officially named Humera-Gondar, Gondar-Bahir Dar, Debre Tabor-Gondar, Wereta-Dessie, Metema-Gondar, and others. In cooperation with the people of the province, they were completed and began to give service. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that roads and bridges enabled the community of study area to develop their socio-economic benefits. The Tekeze River Bridge in particular enabled the Tigre and Amhara people's to interact socially and economically. Using the bridge, Tigreans regularly came to the province to seek seasonal jobs, enabling the Amhara-Tigre ethnic groups to exchange goods and strengthen their mutual understanding and unity. Many other bridges also enabled provincial districts and sub-districts to foster their interaction in the case of trade and other social forms. Just like the bridges that connected the province community, several trade centers were established side-by-side where the road passed, like hotels, shops, pubs, and others. Roads and bridges enabled people to share their culture, values, and language among different ethnic and religious groups.

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