

Research Article

The British Sudan and western frontiers of Ethiopia: Encroachment on and cooperation in Benishangul, 1898-1908

Adinew Abtew^{1}, Shumet Sishagn² and Aychegirew Hadera³*

^{1,2,3} Department of History and Heritage Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

*Corresponding author's email: adinewabiitew7878@gmail.com

Abstract: *Following the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, the European colonial powers gave legal cover for their effective control over African nations including territories neighboring Ethiopia. To the west of Ethiopia, the Sudan was ruled by the British. Thus, the potential aggression by the British colonialist rulers of the Sudan threatened emperor Menelik. Therefore, the relation between the British Sudan and Ethiopia, in relation to the Benishangul area, was characterized by this threatening atmosphere. Moreover, the imperial government of Ethiopia wanted the western lands mainly the Aqoldi, Homosha and Belashangul sheikdoms found to the south of the Blue Nile River for their natural resources like gold, slaves and ivory and for their geographic proximity to the Blue Nile River. Thus, the three sheikdoms became incorporated into the Ethiopian empire in 1898. After the incorporation, fearing the potential encroachments of the British Sudan, two domestic measures were taken by the emperor. Firstly, Sheik Abdurrahman Hojele of Belashangul, sheik Mahmud Mohamed of the Homosha and sheik Hojele Al Hassen of Aqoldi*

sheikdoms were detained. The first two sheiks were detained due to their attempts of resistance during the incorporation process. The last sheik, on the other hand, was suspected of secret negotiation with the British Sudan. Secondly, from 1898 to 1903, the areas came under Ras Demisew Nesibu, who was carefully selected and appointed to solve Ethiopia's fear of British encroachment. In this period, Britain itself began to worry about Ethiopia's further encroachment upon the Sudan and requested for a border agreement on the basis of "Effective Occupation". From 1903 to 1908, the three sheikdoms came under the direct rule of the Leqa Neqemte governors. This period was characterized by British encroachment upon Ethiopia's borders to exploit the natural resources. Similarly, this period saw population movement to the British Sudan from Ethiopia's borders. On the other hand, the two administrations made a joint venture in the region although it failed in a short period due to strict controlling mechanisms that Ethiopia had. British encroachment, population movements and mining cooperation between the British Sudan and the Ethiopian empire in the region

were not adequately covered in the existing literature. This article aims at filling this gap. In conducting this research work, qualitative method of research was employed. Moreover, archival materials, oral information and secondary sources were utilized.

Keywords: The British Sudan, Sheikdoms, Encroachment, Cooperation, Mining

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1. Introduction

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 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 Belashangul. During the Italian occupation its name became Belashangul 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 rearrangements, the area became Assosa Awraja.¹

Currently, new ethnic-based state structure was created 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 bigger part of the Awraja was incorporated into the Metekel province from Gojjam, and the Kamash area around the Deddesa river valley formed the current Benishangul Regional State.² This study, however, covers the British encroachment and social dislocation and mining relationship between the British Sudan and the Ethiopian government in this western frontier of the country in the first decades of the twentieth century.

2. Method of the Study

In conducting this research work, different methods of data collection and utilization were used. One of the methods was gathering information from both published and unpublished sources. An extensive library search had 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

¹ A report by the Assosa Benishangul Awraja, National Archive and Library Agency, 1934, Folder No. 17.1.10.27, File No. 01.

² Bekele Geleta, "people and local government in Assosa" BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of Political science, 1973, pp. 1-3.

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 conducted. In doing so, informants discussed selected themes of the study, and then a few were chosen to participate as key informants until the end of the study. Finally, the data collected through different methods were carefully examined, cross-checked, analyzed and interpreted.

3. The British Sudan Encroachment and Population Displacement

The relationship between the British Sudan and the Ethiopian imperial government, with respect to Ethiopia's western boundary with the Sudan, in the last years of the nineteenth century was characterized by mistrust and fear. The threat which worried Ethiopia was increased significantly following the escalation of the colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa after the Berlin-Africa conference of 1884/85.³ Since then, the British expanded southward from Egypt to the Equatorial regions of the Sudan. The British occupation of Egypt and the Suez Canal provided the base for an invasion of the Sudan⁴. The government of Ethiopia had an interest to expand its territory and to incorporate the western frontier forestalling potential expansion of the British government from its colony, Sudan.⁵ To this effect, as Triulzi mentioned, emperor Menelik indicated his

³Marcus, Harold G., "Ethio-British Negotiation Concerning the Western Border with the Sudan (1896-1902)." *Reading at the East African Institute for Social Research conference*, Kampala, 1962, p.6; Matt Craven, *Between law and history: the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the logic of free*, London Review of International Law (Vol.3, No.1:31-59, March 2015) p.23; J Keltie, *The Partition of Africa* (Edward Stanford, 1893) pp.56-58.

⁴Loban RA JR, *Global Security Watch-Sudan*, Praeger Security International, Westport, CT, 2010, p.25; Shay, S, and Liberman, R, *The Red Tea Terror Triangle: Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Islamic Terror*, Transaction publishers, NE Jersey, 2006, P.5.

⁵BahruZewde. "Relation between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier, 1898-1935." PhD Dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978, pp.16-18.

territorial claim on his letter sent to the neighboring imperial colonial Europeans, mainly Britain.⁶

When the Mahdists, who had established control over the area, were removed and the area appeared to be occupied by Britain, Menelik launched a campaign and began to realize his effective occupation through his generals.⁷ However, his efforts were disturbed by the Italian aggression in the northern parts of the country. After repulsing Italian threat at the 1896 Battle of Adwa in which he scored a decisive victory, the emperor incorporated the whole sheikdoms of the Benishangul area in 1898 through both peaceful and forceful means.⁸

After the occupation of the area, Menelik focused on domestic issues to avoid potential border problems with the British Sudan. Firstly, he detained the three strong sheiks of the borderlands fearing that they could be obstacles to his effective occupation of those territories. The first thing the emperor observed was the cultural, linguistic, religious and other similarities between the borderland societies both in the Sudan and Ethiopia. This homogeneity of the society was, possibly, an important social factor that might lead the frontier people to look toward to the British occupied region.⁹ The second threat that was felt by the central government was associated with the position of sheik Hojele Al Hassen who was ruling the whole Benishangul areas following the imprisonment of the two most resisting sheiks, Abdirahman Hojele of the Belashangul sheikdom and Mohamed Mahmud of the Homoshasheikdom.¹⁰ It seemed that Menelik understood the fragile stand of sheik Hojele based on the experience he had. In the course of the incorporation of the area into the Ethiopian empire, the sheik had shown some hesitation while requested to submit to the Ethiopian army stationed in the nearby Mendi. Although he agreed to peaceful submission, he was at the same time showing a tendency to join

⁶Triulzi, Alessandro *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, 173.

⁷Holt, M. *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: Study of its Origins, Developments and Overthrow (2nd ed.* Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp. 215-6; Triulzi, Alessandro *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. 172; Sanderson G.N. *Conflict and Cooperation Between Ethiopia and the Mahadist State 1884 1898*, Khartoum: Khartoum Printing Press,1969, pp. 32-3.

⁸DebelaAlemu. "A Historical Survey of Asossa Town to 1991," MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 2007, pp. 11-2.

⁹BakureTsyionTilahun. "YaAsossaBenishangulAwrajaGezatTarik," IES, Ms. No. 359., pp. 15-7; informants: YssinAbdulqadir, Mahmud Hamza and Seid Musa.

¹⁰Ateib Ahmed. "The origins of the Sheikdoms of Bela-Şangul". *A Paper Presented for Discussion at Historical Seminar, Department of History.* IES, No.d, P.6.

Abdirahman Hojele, who was organizing resistance against the Ethiopian army. Thus, fearing the secret diplomatic relationship between the sheik and the neighboring British Sudan, the central government arrested Khojele.¹¹

Secondly, the emperor carefully selected a man who could replace *Ras* Mekonnen and put the area under *Ras* Demisew Nesibu of Arjo who was an experienced chief and did not have close contact with the British. This *ras* carried out his responsibilities effectively not only by securing the area but also by establishing strong military garrisons in the Belashangul and Homosha sheikdoms commanded by *Fitawrari* Gulilat, *Fitawrari* Getaneh, *Fitawrari* Jote and *Fitawrar* iOda.¹² When the emperor managed potential problems internally and established effective occupation on the ground, request to border negotiation and settlement came from the British. In this regard, Ram argues that “it was Britain the victor of Omdurman and Fashoda, worried about the dangerous consequences of Ethiopian invasion on the security of the newly re-conquered and tenuously held Sudan, which was anxious to reach a quick frontier settlement with emperor Menelik of Ethiopia.”¹³

In May 1902, the boundary agreement was reached and the British agreed to implement the principle of effective occupation, “a principle which Britain had rejected in concluding frontier agreements with rival European powers in Africa.” Since then, the British encroachment upon Ethiopian lands could not have a legal cover and the threatening situation was solved.¹⁴ A year after this agreement, *Ras* Demisew returned to Arjo and the border sheikdoms came under the rule of *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher, the governor of Leqa Neqemte in Wollega from 1903 to 1908.¹⁵

As it was feared by the central government, the British made encroachments due to their interest to extract the economic resources of the area mainly gold and ivory. Since local governors represented by Gebregziabher were mostly engaged in accumulating personal wealth at the expense of carrying out political and military responsibilities, an opportunity was created for

¹¹BakureTsyion, pp. 10-11

¹² Ateib Ahmed, “Sheikh Hojele and Bela-Shangul,”(BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 1973), pp, 34-6.

¹³ K.V. Ram. “Antecedents to the Sudan Ethiopian Border Negotiation and the Agreement of May 1902”, *Trans African Journal of History*, (Vol.,10, No., 1/2, pp.45-60, 1981,) p.45.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Ateib Ahmed, Sheikh, pp. 45-7.

British incursion without much resistance. In 1904/05, the British began to engage in exploiting the natural resources of the areas crossing borderlands.¹⁶ Although the people of Belashangul and Khomosha, through the leadership of their lower local chiefs tried to resist them, the British reached as far as the Assosa area. This happened when commander Jirata, a chief assigned by Gebregziabher, was engaged in trading in gold, ivory and slave. Jirata gave priority to his personal interest by collecting tax from British Sudan traders rather than protecting the Ethiopian borders. This commander watched silently the British intrusion into the frontier borders of Ethiopia like Kurmuk, Burun, Mayaka and Mufuwa.¹⁷

Observing how far both the British and the Ethiopian commander were engaged in economic exploitation, Menelik was forced to be directly involved in the issue and advised Gebregziabher to replace the commander and the problem was temporarily solved. However, people from British Sudan kept crossing the borders to collect gold and ivory throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Though no practical responses were obtained, letters were written by the emperor to the British Sudan to solve the problem of encroachment.¹⁸ However, the British Sudan encroachment continued to be carried out repeatedly until the end of the administration of the area by Gebregziabher and the restoration to power of the imprisoned sheiks.¹⁹

In the first decade of the twentieth century, socially, the relationship between the British in the Sudan and the Ethiopia administration in Benishangul was shaped by population dislocation and trans-border movements.²⁰ As archival materials clearly reveal, the British in the Sudan were using encouraging mechanisms that led a significant amount of the frontier society of Ethiopia to move to the Sudan. Facing constant threats from slave raiders and slave traders mainly on the Ethiopian side of the borderlands, they moved to the Sudan in order to get protection. Centers

¹⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷Debela, p.16; Ateib Ahmed. Sheikh, p. 46; A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, July 15, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 381.

¹⁸ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, July 15, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 381; Debela, pp. 16-7.

¹⁹ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, July 15, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 381; Ateib, pp. 42-3.

²⁰ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to Emperor Menelik II, September 01, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 381; A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher, January 20, 19012, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 381.

established in the Sudan to host the people from Ethiopia were responsible in depopulating the borderlands though nothing was done by the Ethiopian government.²¹

However, trans-border movements that had political motives remained to be contentious between the British and the Ethiopian government. Locally respected people who had political dissatisfaction within the Ethiopian borderlands accelerated trans-border movements. In this regard, Hamid who was dissatisfied with the imprisonment of his brother, Sheik Hojele Al Hassen between 1898 and 1908, accompanied by a large number of people, moved to the Sudan with properties of Khojele. In explaining this development, an archival source states: “የዛሬ ሁለት ዓመት ሐሚድ የሚባለው አገር ነቅሎ ወደ ፈረንጅች ገባ። እኛም ደግሞ ተከታትለን ሄደን እንግሊዞችን ሐሚድ ገባሪያችን ነውና እጁን ስጡን ብለን ብንል ሐሚድንስ እጁን አንሰጥም---አሉን” (“Two years ago, a man named Hamid moved to the British Sudan with the whole people of the area. We followed him and told the British that Hamid is our subject and should be handed over to us but they refused to do so.”)²²

The British officials in the Sudan and the Ethiopian government had exchanged letters agreeing to extradite political rebels. In these letters, they did not specify the agreements in detail²³. Based on this agreement, the Ethiopian representatives in the borderlands appeared to have kept their promise. For instance, in 1906, a man from the Sudan named Ibrahim Mahmud crossed to Ethiopia due to his dissatisfaction with the British rule and was handed over back by the Ethiopian governors based on the direct order given to them by the emperor. An Amharic letter in 1906 states: “...እኔም በጃንሆይ ማህተም ኢብራሂም ማህመድን እጁን ይዠ መልሽ ለእንግሊዞች ሠጠኋቸዉ...” (“I (Gulilat, the then Ethiopian governor), based on the letter from the emperor, handed over Ibrahim Mahmud to the British...”)²⁴

The British in the Sudan, however, were not fulfilling their responsibilities. In 1906, *Fitawrari* Gulilat, who replaced commander Jirata and handed over the rebels from the Sudan to the British, requested them to hand over Hamid. However, the British refused to do so. They focused on cultivating good relation with the chiefs and other socially accepted personalities from the

²¹ 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), pp. 443-6.

²² A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, July 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 396.

²³ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, February 30, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 379.

²⁴ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, July 05, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 379.

western Ethiopian borderlands. Together with Hamid, a woman who was politically, economically and socially very important named Asit Amin escaped to and lived in the Sudan trading in slaves despite the British condemnation of the practice. This woman was one of the wives of sheik Hojele and she had a big role in organizing the border society, together with her son, to move to the Sudan. The response of the British was that Hamid was an ordinary man who could live wherever he wanted.²⁵

However, in reality, Hamid was not a common man. He was an important leader who led the Aqoldi civil war against the men of Musa when Hojele was arrested.²⁶ More importantly, Hamid had a big acceptance and that was why a significant number of the community moved with him to the Sudan.²⁷ In addition to his social influence and political role, Hamid, reportedly, was said to have moved to the Sudan with properties, mainly, weapons of sheik Khojele. Archival sources indicate that he moved to the British Sudan with about 710 functioning weapons of Hojele in addition to other properties. When the Ethiopian government requested to get back these weapons, only 46 were returned. Out of these returned weapons only nine were functional.²⁸ Regarding the number of Hamid's followers an archival source states the following:

...አባሙሳና አባሶምቢያና ያሲንጨቆ አባሞቲ እነዚህ አራቱ ናቸው እንጂ ወደዚህ የቀሩት የሸህ ሆገሌ ሰው ሁሉም ምንም አልቀረም፡፡ሐሚድ ይዘት ወደ ነሱ ሄደ፡፡ የሰውንም ስም አለቃ አለቃውን በመዘገብ ጽፎ ስድጃለሁ፡፡...²⁹ ...*Except Aba Musa, Aba Sombia, Yassin Choka and Aba Muti, all chiefs who were under Sheik Hojele moved to the Sudan with their people. They moved to the Sudan following Hamid. I [local governor, Gulilat], attached and sent list of the chiefs and the people that moved to the Sudan from western borderlands...*

In addition to the reluctance and refusal of the British to return Hamid and other lower chiefs, the social and economic factors aggravated trans-border movements and dislocations. Socially, the

²⁵ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda, August 05, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 396.

²⁶Ateib Ahmed, Sheikh, *pp.* 46.

²⁷Informants: YassinAbdulqadir, Mahmud Hamza and Seid Musa.

²⁸ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda, December 23, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 378.

²⁹ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda, December 23, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 379.

border society situated both in the Sudan to the west and in Ethiopia in the east have blood relation beyond their cultural and language homogeneity. When the Ethio-Sudan boundary was demarcated in 1902, significant lands from the Belashangul, Homoshaand Aqoldi sheikdoms remained in the Sudan. *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher, in this regard, reported:

...እንግሊዞች ወሰን የከለሉ ጊዜ የደጃዝማች አብዱራህማንና የፊታውራሪ ሙሐመድን አገር ብዙ አገር ብሩክን፣ ምጉፍ፣ ጀሮክ፣ ማያክ የሚባል ወደ ታች ወደ እንግሊዞች ተቆረጠ። ... ይህንም ለጃንሆይ አመልክቻለሁኝ። ...³⁰...*When the British were demarcating the boundary (in 1902), many localities of Dejazmach Abdurrahman and Fitawrari Muhammed like Biruk, Miguf, Jerok, Mayak remained in the Sudan. ... I have reported this to the emperor...*

Therefore, since the boundary between the two countries bisected the same society, the situation became one factor for social dislocation. People wanted to join their relatives crossing the politically demarcated geographic boundary.³¹

Economically, on the other hand, the area was exposed to multi-dimensional tribute, customs duty and slave raids.³² Slaves were being sent to the central and northwestern parts of Ethiopia by the local chiefs. Moreover, individual traders in these frontier sheikdoms were sending slaves from these areas to the Sudan and further to the Arab world. Thus, so as to make themselves free from this diversified economic exploitation in the western parts of Ethiopia, the frontier societies were dislocating themselves crossing to the British Sudan. In fact, the neighboring Sudan to which these people were moving was not free from the same economic exploitation. Whatever the case, the dislocation put its resultant impacts on Ethiopia. In this regard, *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher wrote a letter to Menelik stating that since the people moved to the Sudan with Hamid, he could not collect the expected 600 ounces of annual gold tribute from the Benishangul areas.³³

³⁰ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, April 27, 1907, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 370-369; A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, April 30, 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 370-369.

³¹ informants: Yassin Abdulqadir, Mahmud Hamza and Seid Musa.

³² A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, August 11, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 358.

³³ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, February 30, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 383.

Although the British were reluctant to respond to the Ethiopian request, the Ethiopian government continued to pursue the issue through smooth diplomacy. In this regard, local government representatives carrying the emperor's letters repeatedly requested the neighboring British officials to gain positive and practical responses in their efforts to stop the population movement and to hand over politically needed figures from the British Sudan.³⁴ At the same time, the central government at Addis Ababa attempted to take the issue before the British government in London.³⁵ More importantly, the Ethiopian government, in addition to returning Sudanese rebels, took measures against Ethiopians who were trying to get gold and ivory from the Sudan crossing the border. In order to keep the diplomacy smooth, the local representatives took actions to restrict Ethiopians, who tried to cross to the Sudan to obtain natural resources. For instance, *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher, through his officials in the Sudanese border areas, prohibited Ethiopians from hunting elephants crossing the border.³⁶

Finally, the issue of Hamid got a solution only when emperor Menelik and *Sheik* Hojelehad established smooth relationship following the latter's release from prison in 1908. The sheik agreed that, upon his return to the area, he would deal with Hamid and send him to the emperor's palace. In the same year, keeping his promise, Hojele convinced and sent Hamid to meet the emperor. Hamid was accompanied by Sertse Wold, whom Menelik sent with Hojele for this purpose. On the bases of the direction given by the emperor, Hamid, on his way to Addis Ababa, was well received and accompanied by the provincial governors in Neqemte. For instance, archives reveal that about two oxen and sixteen sheep were given to him by Gebregziabher in addition to food and fuel supplies. Similarly, Hamid was warmly received at the palace of the emperor in Addis Ababa.³⁷

However, the return of Hamid and his men did not bring a complete solution to the continued population movement to the British Sudan. After his release, Khojele's contentious relation with Abdirahman and Mohamed of Belashangul and Khomosha, respectively, proved to be another

³⁴ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, December 23, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 379.

³⁵ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, December 23, 1907, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 394

³⁶ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, October 11, 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 367-366.

³⁷ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, May 17, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 357-355.

source of population dislocation to the British Sudan. However, the previous massive movement headed by chiefs and prominent figures had stopped.³⁸

4. Mining Cooperation

Despite these difficulties in border areas, an area of economic corporation started between the governments. This area of cooperation was primarily focused on gold mining activity in western borderlands. The Ethiopian imperial government assigned Ethiopian mining experts to carry out surveying and identifying specific areas in which gold could be extracted. Thus, this group of mining experts stayed in the western frontier areas for about four years from 1902 to 1906. However, due to lack of capacity and absence of the technology for testing materials, the team was not successful in achieving the goal set by the government.³⁹ After four years of attempts by Ethiopian experts, the emperor began to look to other alternatives so as to enhance the economic gains from the gold resource in the western frontier lands of the country. This alternative was to invite foreign investors to the area and to realize common economic development.⁴⁰

Since the incorporation of the western areas, including Benishangul under the Ethiopian Empire in the 1880s and 1890s, the colonial government of Britain in the Sudan could not exploit the region except for the above-mentioned occasional encroachments. Thus, it planned to start prospecting from the direction of Addis Ababa through Neqemte and Nedgo-Mendi in the east. Therefore, a team from the British Sudan moved to Addis Ababa to agree to the economic cooperation, particularly gold mining in Ethiopia's western lands. The Ethiopian government signed the agreement with the British gold mining experts led by Muse Eagle in 1906. It was said that this gold bearing group agreed and planned to search and extract gold in all areas between the Nedgo and the Sudan boundary. According to the agreement, the work was to be implemented through investment cooperation and to share the resources that could be produced.⁴¹

³⁸ A Letter from *the central government of Ethiopia to Dejazmach Gebregziabher Moreda*, January 13, 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 29.

³⁹ A Letter from *Dejazmach Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II*, December 22, 1908, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 346-344.

⁴⁰ A Letter from *Emperor Menelik II to Dejazmach Gebregziabher Moreda*, July 05, 1906, E.C, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 401.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In launching the work, the team started its surveying and identifying activities around Nedgo and expanded its geographic areas to the western and eastern sides of the Dabus valley. This mining team had a major base in the Sudan and mainly used the Gambella route to transport the needed materials and personnel from there.⁴² The team, moreover, was manned by experienced experts in the field of mining mainly in their colony, the Sudan. Besides, it was equipped with important technologies of the time which were needed in identifying, producing and transporting activities.⁴³

From the very beginning, the emperor extended significant support for the British gold mining team. To begin with, the government assigned and sent the needed personnel with them when they moved to western Ethiopia. Beyond sending people from the center, the emperor, through a letter, ordered the governor of Wollega, Gebregziabher, to give high attention to the team and to instruct Ethiopians to support the team whenever they wanted their help. The emperor's letter reads: "You have to oblige the people I sent with the British men to serve properly. I sent this letter because the British men informed me that the people are not obeying orders and even their number is not enough."⁴⁴ Moreover, significant numbers of slaves were given to the British men by the local administrators so as to realize the intended economic goal. On August 28, 1906, Gebregziabher wrote: "... based on the direction given from the emperor, I gave one hundred slaves to the British men.... In addition to these slaves, about 500 local people were employed on a monthly basis. For these local workers, the English men were providing food and paying money..."⁴⁵.

In addition to assigning the needed personnel to the British gold mining team, the imperial government made attempts to create smooth relationship between them and the local chiefs. For instance, when the English experts were erecting tall sticks with pieces of colored clothes on mountains as technical symbols, *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher and his men suspected that they were

⁴² A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, August 08, 1906, E.C, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 348.

⁴³ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, August 08, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 401 A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, August 08, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 400.

⁴⁴ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 06, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 60.

⁴⁵ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 06, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 396-395.

putting their flag for future colonization. When they wanted to interfere in this activity, the emperor ordered them not to disturb the work.⁴⁶

In August 1906, the gold producing activity began. In the early stage of the work, the mining had been done day and night with high interest. The work was being conducted using slave labor and low wage local workers. The mining activities were intensively done mainly in the Dabus valley areas. The working team used power generators to get electricity at night. After a while, the work extended its geographic coverage and extracting technologies. In this regard, the intensive labor force was replaced by trucks and other machinery to produce more and more.⁴⁷

However, after a few months of work of mining, this British gold mining company terminated its work before expanding its geographic coverage to the remote areas of Benishangul to the west. The explicitly stated reason given by the British team, though not convincing enough, was that the cost they incurred for labor in the areas was higher than the profit they were making.⁴⁸ It is fair to say that the reason was not convincing since they were being served by free slave labor and low-wage local workforce.⁴⁹

Taking into account the amount of gold produced in the three months, the cheap labor and free slaves they were using and their resistance to be checked by the local governors, we can say that there was a hidden reason for the termination of the gold mining. The implicit, but the more convincing reason for the termination of the mining activity seems the strict follow-up being made by the Ethiopian government on the amount of gold being mined. The British men whose co-partners were doing the same work in different British colonies in Africa seemingly never expected the daily follow-up by the local governors to measure what they were producing. One of the letters written by Gebregziabher states the issue as follow:

...ነገርግን የለት የለቱን የተሰራውን ወርቅ ማታ ማታ እየተመዘነ ይጻፍ-በላቸው።የለት የለቱንስ አይሆንም፤
የተሠራውን ወርቁን ሁሉ ከዚያው ከመኪናው አናነሳውም፤ በወር በወር ከመኪናው ጠርገን እንመዘነዋለን

⁴⁶ A Letter from *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 05, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 400-401.

⁴⁷ A Letter from *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda to Emperor Menelik II, August 07, 1909, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 401-400.

⁴⁸ A Letter from *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda to Emperor Menelik II, September 18, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 394-395.

⁴⁹ A Letter from *Dejazmach*GebregziabherMoreda to Emperor Menelik II, September 18, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 393.

አሉኝ ... ደግሞ ሌሊት ሌሊት ሲሰራ የሚያድረውን ወርቅ ማለዳ ማለዳ ተመዝኖ እየተጣፈ ካልጠበቅነው ወርቁን ይሸሽጉናል። አናገኘውም።⁵⁰ ... *However, they (the English men) refused my request to measure and record the amount of gold produced daily. The gold has to be measured in the evening and in the morning because the work is being conducted day and night. They wanted the gold to be measured monthly after staying accumulated on the truck. If we do that it will give them opportunity to hide the gold and will not be able to get it back...*

With regard to assessment and follow-up, archival materials reveal that not only local governors, but also the emperor had big interest. He needed to make critical follow-up on the amount of gold produced and the share of Ethiopia. The emperor repeatedly wrote that he had a similar position as *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher to measure the resource on a daily basis so as to avoid suspicion.⁵¹ Supervision made by Gebregziabher showed how far their suspicions seemed correct. In the first month of their production, 76 ounces of gold was reported to the Ethiopia government by the British mining team. However, as Gebregziabher reported, he recorded about 14 ounces of gold only in one day.⁵² On average, about 420 ounces of gold should be recorded at the end of the month. The reported 76 ounces of gold given by the English was extremely low and was hard to believe.⁵³

In September 1906, the Ethiopian government decided to measure the amount of gold on a daily basis in order to get its proper share.⁵⁴ Thus, it seems the British men clearly understood that Ethiopia had strong and committed administration and bureaucracy. Thus, they decided to terminate the work in the name of high cost of labor. In justifying the above reason, the

⁵⁰ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, August 08, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 401; A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, August 08, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 400.

⁵¹ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, September 18, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 394-393.

⁵² A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, September 05, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 395.

⁵³ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 06, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 60.

⁵⁴ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, July 11, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 289.

following archival information taken from a letter from Gebregziabher in September 1906, strengthens the reason given above for the termination of the operation:

...የወርቁን ነገር የለትየለቱን እየተመዘነ ጠብቆ የሚል የጃንሆይማህተም ደረሰኝ። ወደ ፈረንጅቹም የተጻፈውን ወስጆ ሠጠኋቸው። ...ደብዳቤውን የሠጠኋቸው ዕለት ዕሺ አሉኝ። ... ደግሞ ሁለት ቀን አድረው ... መኪናውን ሁሉ ከያለበት ሁሉ ነቅለው ከቤቱ አግብተው አስቀምጠ ... ።⁵⁵ ... *I received a letter from the emperor (Menelik) ordering me to measure the gold daily. I gave this letter to the Englishmen. ... On that day, they responded positively. ... After two days, however, ... the team collected and stored all machines from all places...*

There could have been additional reasons that could have contributed to the termination of the gold mining in western Ethiopia. Difficulty in getting material goods because of the remoteness of the area can be mentioned as one reason. For instance, the British who consumed cigarette faced shortages during their stay in the area. These items, during this period, were highly taxed at different customs. The central government had an exclusive authority to tax these items sending its own men to the frontier areas. Similarly, local governors of the areas were collecting payment from people who carried such goods due to the existence of overlapping of power between them and the central government. Contrary to the above overlapping interest and authority, the British men had no interest to pay tax for the cigarette and tobacco and other items they were traveling with. One instance underlined this fact: “...ይህን ትምባሆንና ሲጃራውን ሊጠብቁ የመጡት ዘበኞች...ወርቅ ከሚያወጡት ውጭች ጋር ተጣሉ። ተቀረጡ ሲሏቸው እነሱ ደግሞ አንቀርጥም አሉ...” (“...the police men who are assigned to tax cigarette and tobacco entered into conflict with the gold mining foreigners. When they asked them to pay tax, the English men refused to do so...”).⁵⁶

Moreover, beyond the above economic reasons, the hardship they faced might be another reason. They were living and working in areas that were not easily accessible. For instance, in addition to the service problems, moving from one area to another, they could not even get access to

⁵⁵ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, September 18, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No., 393.

⁵⁶ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 05, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 395-394.

vehicles to travel from their working place to Addis Ababa or to the Sudan. Explaining this case, one archival letter written to the emperor reads: “...ከዳቦሱ ወርቅ የሚሰሩ እንግሊዞች አገራችን ሄደን እንመጣለንና ከብት አወሠን ቢሉኝ አራት በቅሎ አዋስኳቸዋል...” (“The English men who are mining gold in the Dabus River (to say river valley area) asked me to give them pack animals to go to their country, thus I loaned them four mules...”).⁵⁷ In responding to this letter, emperor Menelik stressed that the local governors mainly, Gebregziabher, should provide such support, but they should also asses and record the amount of gold produced by the British men strictly.⁵⁸

In addition to the above hardships, getting manpower who could be easily trained in operating machines was difficult for the team. The Ethiopians sent from the center, as discussed previously, were not serving them well. Moreover, local governors were supplying them with slaves who had no technical background. Thus, with no doubt, we can say that the work which needed high level skill and technological operation was laid on the shoulder of the English men alone.⁵⁹In fact, Menelik had an interest to assign people who could work with them for a long period and to learn the technical skills and modern way of mining. He wrote letters to local governors to implement the above dream though it was not successful.⁶⁰Whatever the case, in the last days of September 1906, the mining team officially declared its termination.⁶¹

5. Conclusions

The existence of the British rule in the neighboring Sudan created a threat of potential expansion to the east and this, together with other factors, led to the incorporation of the Belashangul, Homoshaand Aqoldi sheikdoms into the Ethiopian empire. After the incorporation, the relationship between the British Sudan and the Ethiopian government in the western frontier of the latter was characterized by encroachment of the former. The first decade of the 20th century, moreover, witnessed population movement from Ethiopia to the British ruled Sudan due to political and social reasons. On the other hand, gold mining cooperation also started between the

⁵⁷ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, July 07, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 3, File No., 92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ A Letter from *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda to Emperor Menelik II, October 06, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No.3, 389.

⁶¹ A Letter from Emperor Menelik II to *Dejazmach* Gebregziabher Moreda, August 30, 1906, Wollega Museum, Folder No., 1, File No.3, 91.

two administrations although it was terminated mainly because of a strict follow-up and assessment by the Ethiopian government.

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