

## Gedeo During the Italian Period, the Boeti Wote Plane Incident and the Michelle Peasant Uprising (1935-1960)

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### Abstract-

The conquest of the Gedeo of Southern Ethiopia by Menelik's forces in 1895, along with the subsequent domination by northerners, led to a series of socio-political and economic crises in Gedeo land. This situation ultimately led to the Michele peasant rebellion of the 1960s, although it was briefly interrupted by Italian occupation. Even after Ethiopia's liberation in 1941, the Italian influence remains strong in Gedeo despite its brief presence. This study revealed that the Gedeo people enjoyed greater freedom during the brief Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941 than they experienced under the long imperial rule. This research also discovered an airplane incident in the Gedeo zone in 1941 that has not been mentioned in any previous studies. The incident happened when the Dakota aircraft found in a place called Boeti Wote, which is today one of the village *kebeles* in Yirgachafe *woreda*. It was unexpected to see an airplane at the aforementioned location without making any noise or flying in the immediate liberation time in 1941. In the post liberation period the Gedeo people suffered that led to the Michelle peasant rebellion of 1960s. In General, the discussions in this article have shown that the Gedeo people experienced multiple changes since 1895. This research also identified that, of all the consequences of incorporation, land alienation had the greatest impact on the lives of the Gedeo people, who were inextricably linked to their land and environment. Therefore, although the struggle was slow and chaotic, the people responded to land alienation and other forms of exploitation in a variety of ways from the beginning of incorporation. This trend remained unchanged until the Italians entered the Gedeo land in 1935, where the peasants enjoyed relative freedom. The Italian period was brief but had a significant impact, characterized by more changes than continuities in their ruling approach and administration. Consequently, Michele's peasant uprising, though opposition started in the 1920s after the land measurement program was announced, but interrupted by Italians but resumed after liberation and culminated in the 1960s. The paper is mostly based on oral sources, such as folklore and interviews, complemented with some written materials. Regarding the plane incident, since this is the first research on the event, it solely used photographs of the remaining portion of the aircraft, oral informants including eyewitnesses, and group discussion. In General this study mainly employed historical methods to gather key primary and secondary sources on the topic. It also included an anthropological approach through group discussions to get extensive clarity on the issue.

**Keywords:** *Gedeo people, Italy, Plane Incident, land alienation, peasant uprising*

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### Introduction

Land alienation, the introduction of the *qalad* (land measurement), heavy taxation, and various forms of extortion, along with cultural and social abuse by the imperial state since its incorporation into Ethiopia at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c, were the primary causes of Gedeo people grievances. This paper provides an overview of Gedeo history from the time of Italian aggression in 1935 to the Michelle peasant uprising in 1960. It will also reveal the changes and continuities that prevailed in Gedeo during the Italian period 1935-1941 including the Boeti Wote aircraft incident. Finally, it covers the developments leading up to the 1960 Michelle uprising and its consequences. In general the paper discusses Gedeo's life following the Italian occupation and the developments that transpired from Ethiopia's liberation until the Michele peasant uprising in 1960.

It will also highlight how the peasant insurrection of 1960 challenged the feudal oppression and exploitation imposed by Haile Selassie's rule on his people, which failed to provide social and economic benefits.

This research employed a historical narrative and analysis method, examining available primary and secondary sources on the topic.

### Gedeo During the Italian Period (1935-1941)

If not for the valiant struggle that endured in those five years, Ethiopia's long history of defending itself against foreign aggression appears to have come to an end with the fascist invasion of the nation in 1935. It would have been a significant disgrace for a nation that distinguished itself as the only independent Black Country which was not colonized by any foreign forces.

The era between the Battle of Adwa in 1896 and 1935 was relatively peaceful, and Menilek had unified the empire under his rule, at least in Ethiopian modern history. On the other hand, Adwa could not be repeated in 1935. However, it did lead the European nations bordering Ethiopia, through their respective colonies, especially Britain, France, and Italy, to recognize Ethiopia's independence.

The external and internal environments of the 1935 were different from those in 1896. Externally, Italy was more organized and well-armed European army which was prepared to spare no expense in its quest to conquer and rule, but also to avenge its previous humiliation at Adwa in 1896. Internally, the protracted power struggle that had dominated Ethiopia's internal political landscape for more than two decades finally gave way to Ras Tafari Makonnen in 1930. This power struggle weakened the nation, leading to an Italian invasion five years after Ras Tafari came to power as Emperor Haile Selassie I. Second, not only was Ethiopia unprepared militarily level, but also local relationships were extremely fragmented which made defense against a major foreign aggressor more difficult.

When Fascist Italians arrived in Ethiopia in 1935, the situation in Gedeo was comparable to or even worse than the rest of the country. The *gabbar* system had caused significant divisions in the society, and the implementation of the unpopular *qalad* system of land tenure further exacerbated these polarizations. The implementation of *qalad* measurement by *Dejazmach* Balcha particularly during his third term (1917–1928) in Sidamo province caused more division as the majority of Gedeos were excluded from the process. Consequently, they experienced a growing sense of estrangement and eventually lost enthusiasm to defend the country.

This posed a challenge to local authorities in unifying the discontented factions to fight together in the south against Italy. There was also some discontent within the *neftegna* group as a result of disparities in the allotment of land. According to Birhanu, Balcha, as the major creator of the *qalad* measuring procedure, assigned the best land to his loyal warriors, the *Barued Bet* (also known as Balcha's loyal regiment), who were mostly recruited from his birthplace. Furthermore, the majority of the land made available via this procedure was handed to this organization.

Due to this and other deeply ingrained causes, the local resource allocation procedure became exceedingly unfair and contentious. Officials failed to predict the broader and long-term consequences of their action, which became obvious only after the major disaster had happened. The official had no clear strategy to rally the local people against the external assault, which was subsequently witnessed when the local people were hesitant to fight against Italy.

Ras Dasta Damt'aw (1931-1936), the ruler of Sidamo at the time, was in charge of gathering the people in the south to fight the approaching Italian troops. Ras Dasta, while marching to the southern front through Gedeo, ordered all able-bodied men to assemble at Chichu, an important marketplace on the outskirts of Dilla town. People in Gedeo, including *neftegnas* and *gabars*, gathered from all corners to Chichu, a marketplace. During his impassioned speech, Ras Dasta called on everyone who was physically able to protect their nation from the enemy's invasion, and he ordered them to accompany him to the southern front.

With no other option except to march to the front lines of battle, the majority of the *neftegna* men marched to Negele to fight the Italians at Dollo, headed by Ras Dasta Damt'aw. Despite being exploited and oppressed by the Ethiopian ruling regime in their homeland, the Gedeo initially opposed the Italian invasion. Accordingly, some Gedeo warriors joined their landlord in Dollo, fighting against the Italians as part of the Ethiopian army on the southern front. They were headed by Ras Desta Damtew, the administrator of Sidamo province at the time. It is still unknown whether the peasants followed their governor's call willingly or out of concern for potential punishment. Even Ras Desta Damtew was concerned and unhappy about the involvement of the Gedeo *gabbars* against Italy.

According to Solomon, Ras Desta was vehemently opposed to the engagement of Gedeo *gabbars* in the war against Italy and ordered the Gedeo warriors to return home from Negele. Despite the issuing of an official call to the public, Ras Desta was reportedly displeased with the Gedeo *gabars'* participation in the fight against Italy.

It is said that he allegedly have commented that "the Gedeo possessed no *qalad*, collected no tribute, and why you compelled them to battle with weapons purchased by selling their cabbages."

It seems that *Ras Desta Damtew* was influenced by various situations to take this action. First of all, having ruled Sidamo since 1931, he was aware of the difficulties that the *gabbars* were facing. Secondly, he knew that most of the *gabbars* were pressured by their *neftegnas* to go to war. But the third reason appears to have affected his decision, since there was concern that the Gedeo would shift their stance in the fight against their exploiters to Italy.

Nonetheless, several Gedeo warriors participated in the Battle of Dollo in December 1935, and some even died fighting for their nation. However, the Italians encountered little or no resistance when they arrived at Gedeo. In addition to their attacks against the prevailing severe governing structure, the Gedeo people, enticed by the Italians' presents of clothing and bread, welcomed them.

Gedeo became one of the administrative districts in the Oromo-Sidama province after the Italians partitioned Ethiopia into four provinces: Amhara, Harar, Oromo-Sidama, and Shoa. The Italian authorities recognized the traditional Gedeo leaders. This enabled the Italians to easily overcome language, cultural, and environmental barriers since they depended on indigenous authorities. To this end, the *balabats* and their assistants continued to serve as liaisons between the Gedeo people and the Italian colonial administrators.

Both oral and written sources in Gedeo indicate that throughout most of the time in the five years of the Italian occupation, the Gedeo people enjoyed relative freedom, describing it as a time of "freedom". The Italians were successful in consolidating their power by taking advantage of the existing disparities. In addition to portraying themselves as the champions against what they perceived as Amhara or Abyssinian subjugation, the Italians initiated concrete measures that garnered them with substantial backing among the indigenous population. When fascist Italy came to power, they used harsh measures to impose economic reforms because they believed that Ethiopia's obsolete agricultural system was retarding modern progress. Hence, they launched the most conspicuous and well-received reform against the prevailing agricultural system.

They identified the *gabbar* system in the south as a serious concern. They believed that *gabbar* system was an obsolete system created by the Abyssinians to oppress and exploit the southern people, and they maintained that eradicating it was a priority. The Italians worked hard to exploit any internal rifts inside Ethiopia that they believed would help them advance their goals by diminishing resistance. Therefore, ethnic and religious conflicts were given additional prominence.

The Fascist invasion army effectively profited from the population's lack of internal cohesiveness. The Italians focused their propaganda on *neftegna* systems in Gedeo and Ethiopia overall, and they also attacked traditional Ethiopian institutions. Therefore, they believed that by implementing significant changes during their reign, they would be able to realize their long-held ambition of expanding their empire.

The Italians were clever in their administration in recognizing the grievances of people against Ethiopian authority. They made several initiatives to solve their concerns, including abolishing the *neftegna-gabbar* system. The Gedeos thought that the Italians had conceded their land rights and admitted the reasons behind their grievances when they abolished the *gabbar* system. The Italians abolished the duties that the Gedeo peasants owed to the *neftegnas*, which had been imposed on them since their incorporation. In addition to being free from high taxes and labor service requirements, the Gedeo also gained the right to land. Furthermore, Italians employed the Gedeo with higher wages and allowed them to use their language, practice their religion, and maintain their indigenous institutions.

Generally, the Italians during their occupation of Gedeo (1936-1941) abolished the payment of *erbo* (a sharecropping tenancy system in which the tenant was required to pay a quarter of the harvest) to the landlords and forced payment of *asrat* (tithes) to the government. The abolition of the payment of *erbo* by the Italians gave a relatively improved economic and social conditions and relief to the peasants of Gedeo. In addition, the Italians exploited land to reward loyalists and punish opponents. The apparent target was land owned by royal family members and other significant local leaders. Additionally, the Italians were very interested in coffee production and encouraged the peasants to continue growing it in the area previously inhabited by the *neftegnas*.

Subsequently, following the Italian defeat and withdrawal, the Gedeo peasants were once again forced to pay tribute to their northern overlords. In addition to being required to pay *erbo* and *asrat*, the peasants in Gedeo

were also required to perform services in the landlords' homes. These tasks included gathering firewood, erecting fences and houses, and even tilling the land owned by the landlords.

Therefore, the Gedeo people had several reasons to praise the Italians as 'liberators' because they were freed from various hardships and afflictions. Italians also introduced various types of social services. For instance, they were the first to introduce modern health services by opening the first clinic in Dilla town. The introduction of electricity was first done by the Italians. Nevertheless, in the last years of their occupation when the Italians demanded forced labor to produce wheat around Dilla, they began to lose support among the Gedeo.

For most of their five-year occupation, the Italians had a generally positive approach toward many Gedeos as long as their interest was maintained. Likewise, the Gedeos had a mostly positive attitude toward the Italians, and contemporary Gedeo sources depict the era as a time of "freedom." This friendly relationship with the Gedeo people began to deteriorate as Fascist Italy's ambitious goal to transform Ethiopia into an agricultural center quickly failed.

Regarding this issue, Birhanu Tesfaye stated as follows:

*In Gedeo for instance, the Italians had established a cotton farm in the hot lowlands between Lake Abaya and Dilla town. The main challenge for the Italians was a lack of agricultural laborers who were willing to work in this inhospitable area. Labor was also needed for other projects such as road construction. Labor was also needed for other projects such as road construction. In the early period of the projects the Italians introduced wages to attract more laborers, but the dangerous nature of the work deterred many people. It was especially difficult for them to attract people to work in the cotton plantations which were inside territory used by the Guji as an important grazing ground for their cattle. The Guji herdsmen were mostly mobile and reluctant to perform settled agricultural work.*

This issue, among other things, marked the beginning of schism between the native Gedeo people and the Italian colonial authorities. The Italians' reliance on Gedeo peasants for labor in the cotton fields widened the split, as most Gedeos refused to work there, particularly during the peak season when there was a significant risk of malaria infestation.

After failing to address the situation, the Italians resorted to a forced labor program, compelling the majority of Gedeo to work on cotton plantations. The forced labor policy ruined the good connections that the Italians had previously established with the Gedeos in addition to failing to address the manpower deficit.

The five-year Italian occupation came to an abrupt conclusion in 1941, and views on its effects diverged. From the perspective of the government, it claims it was the liberation of the country. And thus Emperor Haile Selassie expedited a reform program that had been initiated before the conflict as a consequence. Paradoxically, the local Gedeo people viewed the end of Italian control as the end of the "years of freedom". From this perspective, independence meant for the Gedeo people the return of the *neftegna* and the restoration of a miserable pre-war life. In this case, certain *neftegna* felt more significant to them after the war since they had destroyed the enemy, whereas the Gedeos who opted not to join in combat were compelled to keep a low profile.

Consequently, based on the facts discussed so far one can argue that, despite all of the limitations, the Italian rule contributed to relative exercise of freedom by the local people as opposed to the pre-1935 oppressive ruling system in Gedeo. However, as we have previously mentioned, the ensuing dispute which especially emanated from forced labor ruined the good relationship and made the Italian legacy in Gedeo worse. On the contrary, the *neftegna* saw the Italian rule as the worst and began to reclaim their position upon independence, as did the Ethiopian monarch.

### **The Boeti Wote Plane Incident of 1933E.C**

Boeti Wote is located 38 kilometers from Dilla Town, the zonal capital, in Gedeo on the fringes of Yirgachefe *woreda*, on the main highway to Kenya. According to informants, an aircraft incident occurred in 1933 EC. This date was deliberately used as the informants mentioned 1933. It is worth noting, however, that this occurred following the Ethiopian liberation from Italy in 1941.

The incident happened when the Dakota aircraft found in a place called Boeti Wote which is today one of the village *kebeles* in Yirgachafe *woreda*. It was unexpected to see an airplane at the aforementioned location without making any noise or flying. As a result, some informants stated that seeing an airplane on the ground out

of nowhere astonished and terrified some individuals. According to informants, it was particularly shocking because most of the people had never seen an airplane up close before this incident. Consequently, there was no unanimity among informants regarding how the aircraft arrived since there was no plane crash or war in the area. Given the circumstances, it is not unexpected that the informants have different perspectives. Fortunately, the presence of eyewitness accounts resolved the issue as simple.

The other remarkable fact is that this incident was not mentioned in any research or written documents in the area or zone as a whole. Furthermore, regional or zonal tourism bureaus and heritage management professionals were in the dark concerning the event. Therefore, since this is the first research on the incident, it solely uses photographs of the remaining portion of the aircraft, oral informants including eyewitnesses, and group discussion. I have mentioned above that there was disagreement among the informants regarding the actual event. Since the plane was found, the question was not whether it had happened or not, but how. They have different opinions about what caused or led to the incident, but they do agree about the event.

In line with this, a few informants indicated that the people stopped the vehicle which came to the area caring the air craft despite the absence of asphalt, which stuck the large truck. They further stated that people came into the street and blocked the truck because they believed Italy was transporting an Ethiopian aircraft to Kenya. Three days later, the driver of the vehicle and other people from the village managed to shove the plane off the big truck, causing it to fall.

A few informants continued to believe that the aircraft was coming from Kenya. Nevertheless, this one was neither acceptable nor convincing since the front side of the vehicle was facing Kenya and continued in that way after the plane was unloaded.

However, the majority of my informants asserted that the plane was loaded onto a large truck moving from Hawassa to Nairobi in 1941, following Ethiopian liberation from Italy. They further claim that the plane crashed somewhere and that Britain was transferring it to Nairobi for repairs. When they arrived at the place under discussion, the truck became bogged in the mud due to the absence of asphalt roads heading to Nairobi at the time. After three days, the vehicle's driver and others, including locals, brought the plane down. Following that, only the driver's assistant stayed to guard the plane as the driver and others proceeded to Nairobi.

“The assistant lived with us for more than two months eating what we eat and drinking what we drink. However, the person was acting improperly and seems frustrated living there for more than two months.” As there were conflicting explanations of the incident, I have incorporated group discussions in addition to individual informants in this issue to elucidate key traits.



Source: photograph by the author's assistant, Gedeo Boeti Wote *Keble*, August 29, 2024



During the group discussion, people mentioned that this individual had been living with them for almost two months. They also stated that the man appears to be both perplexed by the unfamiliar environment and disappointed by his colleague, who has left him in the region for more than two months.

Participants in group discussions provided the following details about the person:

*He used to watch large trees and wild creatures and appeared to be surprised by our surroundings. At first, he had brought packed foods for himself. After he had completed the meal he had brought, we gave him food items and he subsequently gave us clothes. Although he appeared dissatisfied with our living arrangements and diet, he eventually began to consume enset and other local foods. However, he used to enjoy various fruits in the area. The man even preferred the naturally grown fruits that were found nearby.*

Informants stated that the individual was able to speak Amharic language and would frequently say the following, which may be interpreted negatively:

Amharic

*ይሄ ፈሬንጅ ሰውየው አማርኛ መናገር ስለምችል ሁለጊዜ እንደዚህ እያለ ይዞር ነበር። ሀበሻ ብላሽ የምትበሉት ብላሽ የምትጠጡት ብላሽ በአረንጓዴ እና ለምለም መሬት የብላሽ ኑሮ የምትኖሩ።*

Gloss

*This white man speaks Amharic and used to say:*

*Habesha rubbish, what you eat and drink is rubbish*

*You live a rubbish life in a green and rich environment.*

The informants were amazed at his constant negative remarks, despite “our efforts to provide what we had”. Furthermore, the driver's assistance showed disdain toward Ethiopia by frequently claiming that the British vanquished Italy. From this, it is reasonable to deduce that the plane and the people were from Britain, attempting to take the aircraft to Kenya when it was most likely shot down by Italians somewhere during the war. But this issue needs further investigation as it became hard to conclude regarding the place where the plane came from. As shown above, some say the plane came from Kaffa through Hawassa, which appears credible, although some others indicated other directions; this question remains unresolved because it is outside the focus of my research.

The informants unanimously confirmed that the driver returned and took his assistant with him to Kenya two months later, while the airplane was still there. According to informants, the plane was rather large, but over time, individuals, primarily young people, took many parts of its body for different uses. “Parts of it have always been taken, usually to be sold or used to make knives, utensils, or spare parts and even to sell”. As anyone can see, there is currently only a small portion which remained at the site. Despite several efforts to take parts of its body, people were fortunately unable to finish it due to its size and strength.

My informants went on to add that even though it was difficult to tell if it was a military or a civilian plane, they had heard the term “Dakota aircraft” by then. Second, *Ato Shunte*, one of the eyewitnesses, confirmed that the person who stayed for more than two months to guard the plane at the site frequently spoke of Britain's glory. Likewise, the person used to disparage Italy, and the event occurred after the Italian withdrawal, thus the plane and persons appear to be from Britain, despite informants calling them *fereenji* (the moniker used by most Ethiopians to refer to white people). Informants also revealed that the individual used to speak English and can communicate in Amharic.

The statements below from one of my informants describe the incident. He was one of the eyewitnesses who still reside in Boeti Wote *Kebele*. He described the circumstances of the plane incident at that time. He also discussed the Gedeo Zone's ecology and how agroforestry developed after incorporation, which will be covered in Chapter Four.

Amharic

ጣሊያን በ1933 ሰትሸነፍ አዉሮፕላን ወድቆ ትተዉት ሄዶ እርሱ ላይ ቆመ ቀፎ ሰቅያለዉ። ከዚህም በተጨማሪ ሰዉዬዉ ከሄደ በኋላ ዉስጥ ገብትን እንጨወት ነበር በጣም እነደሰት ነበር። እሱ እያለ ሽጉጥ ስለነበረዉ እንፈራ ነበር።

#### Gloss

*After the Italy were expelled in 1941, there was a plane left behind, which I used to hang beehives while standing on a failed plane. However, it was after the individual left since the person had a pistol which we feared.*

Unfortunately, the plane's body has virtually been looted by people, particularly the young ones. Even the remaining part has no protection and could be taken at any time. The surviving part only endured because it was robust enough to take easily; otherwise, nothing would have been found by now. See, for example, the recent photographs below taken from the place.



Source the author (Boeti Wote Kebele, Aug.29, 2024)

To conclude this section, based on the plane's remaining pieces, informants, group discussions, and my own observations, the incident occurred somewhere in Ethiopia. The majority of my informants indicated that they heard from the driver that the aircraft was coming from the Kaffa region. As a result, the aircraft might have been crashed during the last struggle of liberation from Italy, in which Britain participated.

Considering Kenya was a British colony, it appears that Britain was transporting the aircraft to Nairobi for maintenance or other reasons. One thing is certain: if the plane was normal, they could fly directly to Nairobi rather than having to transport it on the road by putting it onto a big truck. However, it remained uncertain whether the aircraft was a civilian or military plane. Yet, it is possible to note that due to circumstances beyond their control, they were unable to complete the mission, and the plane's remaining corpse has been discovered to this day.

On the other hand the aircraft had both immediate and long-term effects on the environment. Initially, according to informants, the area was severely damaged by the continuous influx of visitors coming to view the plane, resulting in a significant loss of vegetation. However, apart from the area where the plane's fuselage had fallen, the region later began to recover. Second, the location was harmed by the people in the process of taking pieces of the downed aircraft. Third the place where the plane fell to the present is devoid of vegetation, as shown in the photographs above, which indicates long-term impact.

Finally, it appears that the vehicle and the aircraft were British property, and they were taking the plane to Nairobi for repairs. Second, the plane-loaded car became bogged in the mud and was not halted by local people. One significant aspect to consider is that the location may be promoted as a tourist site and used for more historical study, which could have a good economic impact and enlighten the period more. The regional government and zonal tourism offices should consider the site before it is too late, as it might lead to the loss of all of the remaining parts of the plane.

### **The Michelle Peasant Uprising (1960)**

Despite facing a variety of political, social, and economic problems following incorporation in to the Ethiopian empire, the Gedeo people's main grievance was the loss of their ancestral land which gradually led to the Michelle Peasant Uprising in 1960. The Italians occupied the area and revoked some of the previous administrative practices, if not all, of the harsh and exploitation-based policies imposed by imperial regime. Italy, for example, recognized Gedeo's land rights and waived the imperial government's labor service obligations. This enabled the Italians gain support from the public while also granting some degree of freedom to the Gedeo people for the duration of the colonial administration era.

The defeat of the Italians and the reinstallation of Haile Selassie's authority, however, altered the situation in the region. Haile Selassie accelerated land redistribution and measuring as part of a reform initiative that had been started prior to the Italian War.

The local Gedeo people viewed the end of Italian control as the end of the "years of freedom." Ethiopia's independence from Italy meant the *neftegna* would return, and so did the miserable pre-war life for the Gedeo people. Thus, the peasants decided to struggle in order to end their miserable lives, and crises persisted in Gedeo. These disagreements and grievances accumulated over time, notably after the introduction of land measures in the 1920s, and after being frozen during the Italian era, resurfaced following the imperial restoration, eventually sparking the Gedeo peasant rebellion in 1960.

It should be noted however, crises and peasant rebellions erupted not only in Gedeo but in several parts of the country almost in the 1960s. Regarding this Tesema noted the following significant statement:

*In the 1950s and 1960s, several peasant rebellions took place in Ethiopia against the feudal regime of Emperor Hayla Sellase. There were several causes for the mounting grievances and rebellions. To mention but a few were the imperial policies, rampant corruption, human rights violations, lack of good governance as well as administrative injustices perpetrated against the peasant populations in many parts of the country in general and the marginalized ethnic groups in particular.*

Tesema's statement above accurately describes the circumstances leading up to the Michele Peasant revolt in Gedeo in 1960. Gedeo faced all of the administrative and social injustices stated by Tesema. Even worse, as previously discussed, land issue is quite critical, the resource that the Gedeo men in their culture would not even share with their female counterparts.

Therefore, from the beginning of incorporation, land became the primary source of contention between the native population, settlers, and the government. Land alienation was undertaken in a long and continuous process that began with its absorption into the imperial state in the 1890s, and opposition to it was likewise slow and continual. It particularly began under the leadership of Cimburu Shunde openly with a land measurement plan in the 1920s and culminated with the Michele peasant rebellion in 1960.

### **Reaction of the People to land Alienation and Severe Exploitation**

As we have already discussed, from the beginning of incorporation in the mid-1890s up to the Michele peasant rebellion in 1960, the Gedeo people have expressed their frustrations and reacted in different ways. The measurement and distribution of land to settlers was one of the factors that contributed to the Gedeo people's land alienation. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, peasants had complained and expressed their opposition in different ways over the measurement and allocation of their land to the settlers. On the contrary, land measurement and distribution did not stop, and even it was accelerated in Gedeo in the 1920s and early 1930s. This was largely due to the region's potential for coffee production and coffee's growing importance in the national economy.



What is remarkable is that the Gedeo peasant uprising began peacefully until becoming violent in 1960, when all hopes of a response seemed lost.

The hostility was heightened in the post-liberation period, when land grants to the nobility, government personnel, military and police officers were made. In this scenario, much of the Gedeo region was subject to *qalad* arrangements. Moreover, peasant frustrations were exacerbated in 1958 when the Haile Selassie regime reintroduced the *qalad* system to take away extra land. For the government, this meant distributing extra land to public personnel and increasing income. The Gedeo people believed the government intended to take over their land. Based on this, it appears that resource control was central to the dispute. In addition, land alienation, *erbo* payments to the *balala-rests*, and social and cultural subjection were the reasons for the Gedeo protests in 1960.

In addition, the settlers began to consider themselves as *aqni* (first settlers), who had originally made the area suitable for cultivation. Having and tracing such a history, would confirm their right to maintain control of the land in *qalad* areas of Gedeo, which had been in their possession since the 1920s. As previously indicated, social and cultural oppression by settlers has disabled the indigenous ruling chains while undermining the respect and privilege held by Gedeo local rulers and elders. Peasants were imprisoned and beaten for failing to pay *erbo*, which lowered their social standing. The Italian period was another factor since the peasants had exercised a relative freedom. As a result, despite its brief existence, the Italian legacy had long-lasting consequences, even after Ethiopia was liberated.

Peasants used numerous approaches to alter their position and make their discontent known to the authorities. Their initial tactic was a nonviolent protest against land seizure and handouts to outsiders. This seemed realistic with the formation of a court system in the area, as Gedeo people demanded justice for the problems they were experiencing. With this optimism, they decided to use the legal system to improve their predicament. Although unsuccessful, they continually appealed to the *Awraja* and *Taklay Gizat* courts via their *balabats* up to the 1950s.

Peasants were frustrated by the lack of good response from *Teklay Gizat* and *Awuraja*, so they chose six people (Gebremariam Hiro, Teko Gano, Tero Adula, Berasso Shabe, Sida Bilate, and Badessi Bashen) to represent them. These six individuals traveled to the imperial court in Addis Ababa to convey their requests, and then they engaged a lawyer, Tadesse Dilnesaw, to represent them. Nonetheless, the delegates returned to Gedeo without the optimistic outcomes they had hoped for. To make things even worse, when the delegates returned to Gedeo, five of them were imprisoned in Dilla, while Teko Gano was transported to Yirgalem jail, accused of instigating the people to revolt. This actions infuriated local clan chiefs and peasants. As a result, they lost faith in the judicial system and were obliged to turn up their opposition violently against their captors.

It should be stressed, however, that the major cause of contention between the landowning *neft'gnas* and the local Gedeos stemmed from the imposition of *qalad* in the 1920s, rather than the arrest of their representatives, and the latter served as one of the direct causes. With the prospect of peaceful options nearly unachievable, the Gedeo *hayyichchas* of Michille, Dama, and Tumticha areas prepared an organized form of opposition after 1958. All of these locations surround Dilla town, making it difficult to keep their movements or discussions confidential due to its central location.

As is usual for the Gedeo people, despite the decline of the role of local ruling channels, the people assembled at *Songo* (the Gedeo people's indigenous assembly) organized the people and made three essential decisions. First, peasants consented to keep paying government taxes. Second, they agreed to discontinue *erbo* payments and labor services demanded by *bälä-rests*. Third, they agreed not to allow assessors to their farm to estimate *erbo*.

Following this, in 1960, a long-standing tension between landlords and tenants was escalated into a violent conflict. On February 5, 1960, the violence began when a few peasants came together to collect Guja Guracha coffee in Dama before it was estimated for taxes. While the peasants were gathering coffee, the sons of Bekele arrived and set up additional *bälä-rests*, and asked them why they were harvesting coffee before it was estimated.

According to Solomon, Gebeyehu Guro, one of the peasants, retorted that they were gathering their own coffee and that it was unnecessary to wait for an estimate. In reaction, two brothers, Kebede and Tadesse Buta one of *bala-rests* sons, killed four peasants. This incident signaled the start of the Gedeo peasant rebellion in Michille, 1960. The uprising is claimed to have begun in Dama on February 5, 1960, it quickly expanded and became more serious in Michele than any place else in Gedeo. That is why it became known as the Michele War.

Although the revolt began in Dama on February 5, 1960, it lasted from February 8 to February 11, of the same year in a nearby place called Michele. Consequently, it was extremely devastating and belligerent in Michele. During these three days, peasants congregated in Michele, closing any routes leading to Michele, the major center of turmoil. Initially, the government intervened in the dispute by deploying its security forces to quell the uprising, and subsequently, it endeavored to identify a sustainable resolution to the issue. After three days of damage on human and materials, on February 11, 1960 a government team led by *Afa Negus* Eshete Gada

arrived to negotiate a settlement and bring peace to the region. This call by the government team brought the Michele war to an end.

### **Some of the Decisions Made By the Arbitration Committee**

The arbitration committee, chaired by *Afa Negus Eshete Gada*, arrived in Dilla town and immediately called for the end of the war and the compliance of the peasants. Then, on February 11, 1960, both groups (*bälä-rests* and peasants) were summoned to a reconciliation meeting in Dilla, which was warmly received by the former. Peasants, on the other hand, opposed to reconciliation by claiming that they were the ones who killed and plundered their own lands. The commission was compelled by the circumstances and decided to work with local representatives rather than directly dealing with the rebels. Accordingly, Belay Woldekidan represented the *Bälä-rests*, while the peasants were represented by Tadesse Dilnesaw, a non-Gedeo lawyer.

Finally, the arbitration committee, led by *Afa Negus Eshete Gada*, issued a conclusive remark that both opposing parties must follow. The following are some of the decisions by the arbitration committee. Accordingly, the government would pay compensation of three hundred birr for any deaths, one hundred to two hundred and fifty birr for those injured, depending on the severity of their injuries. It was also decided that two hundred birr would be given to both parties for destroyed property, regardless of its value and quantity.

Subsequently, both sides suffered consequences for fighting one another instead of utilizing the judicial system to support their positions. Here, it should be recalled that the Gedeo peasants' peaceful and legal processes were disregarded in this decision. Because, before it became violent in 1960, the Gedeo peasants used nonviolent means of protest from the beginning, dating back to the 1920s. To make matters worse, ninety Gedeo *hayyichchas* and individuals (believed to be the conflict's instigators) were fined 500 birr each, while the *bälä-rests* were fined 1000 birr each for a *gasha*.

On the other hand, 500 *gashas* of land in the Guji and Amaro regions would be allocated to Gedeo peasants, with everyone receiving one-quarter of a *gasha*. Although this decision seem to recognize the core roots of the conflict, as the land question was central to the dispute, yet rejected by peasants. It seems that in my view, the peasants opposed this decision for two main reasons. First it aims to remove the peasants from their original base which by implication maintains the status quo of the *bala-rest*. Second it will lead to conflicts with Guji and Amaro over the newly allocated land. Furthermore, one of the main causes of the dispute was not acknowledged, since peasants were ordered to continue paying *erbo* to *bälä-rests* while still providing services to the latter as required.

Finally, the decision banned any form of making demands in group, but instead commanded appeals to make individually, and they were warned to abstain from any acts of vengeance. The *Awraja* administration and police force were mandated to implement the decisions on both sides. Regarding the arbitration committee's decisions, the majority of sources drew the following conclusions. That is, the commission's decisions were targeted at sustaining the status quo of the *bala-rests* in the region while also paralyzing any potential future opposition.

Thus, it is not surprising that the Gedeo peasants rejected the decisions, whereas the *Bälä-rests* did so because it mainly went to their advantage. The peasants first protested against the punishment imposed on their *hayyichchas*, and then they requested that their land be returned to them in their own villages rather than being relocated to Guji and Amaro. But the decision was not overturned by any means rather the government strengthen its security in the area so did the *bala-rests*.

### **Why Was the Peasant Rebellion in Gedeo not Popular as It was in Other Regions?**

According to Birhanu, the Mechelle War (*yamechele t'orinet*), which began as a nonviolent campaign by tenants in the Mechele district, was significantly lower in magnitude than many other peasant uprisings that occurred in Ethiopia during this period (Tigray, Bale, and Gojjam). Unlike its counterparts, the Mechele uprising was constrained to a certain geographic area and was crushed in a couple of days.

Several explanations may be given as to why the Michelle revolt in Gedeo was short-lived. The fact is that the Michelle war did not impact either the imperial government's land policy or the landowners' position and their treatment of the tenants. To list some of the circumstances that caused Michelle's rebellion to be contained in a couple of days were the following. First, the rebels made little or no effort to garner support from other parts of Gedeo. The uprising took place in a limited areas (mostly Michelle and, to a lesser degree, Dama) and involved few peasants. To the opposite, other parts of Gedeo, where the tenancy was equally difficult, remained apathetic and showed no signs of uprising. No attempt was made to mobilize support in other regions of Gedeo, where situations were comparable or even worse. It also lacks centralized leadership and weapons that their counterparts enjoyed.

Another critical flaw in the rebellion was that the site of the uprising was not tactically advantageous. The location of Michelle does not explain why a peasant rebellion would have erupted in an area where it is difficult to conceal the activity. The place is tactically unsuitable for a revolt since it is close to Dilla town, where government authority was centered. Hence, as Michelle was so close to the center, the rebels were unable to conceal their activities. It is also unclear why the rebellion was only restricted to Michelle, given that the tenancy circumstances were almost similar throughout Gedeo. However, McClellan maintained that the Gedeos' lack of mass mobilization against the settlers was mostly owing to the latter's superiority in firearms.

McClellan may be correct partially, but it is difficult to conclude that the superiority of firearms was the sole cause. Because the people did not revolt, even in an area where the *Bala-rests'* influence was weak. For example, one of my informants from Kara *Kebele* in Yirgachefe informed me that there was no insurrection in this location; we were simply getting information of revolt information from Michelle. However, because few *neftegnas* lived here, their land was not significantly harmed or taken away. Second, the *bala-rests'* military equipment did not determine the outcome of the rebellion until the central government interfered. Lastly, one may argue that if they had been superior with firearms, they could have put down the Michelle uprising before the central authority intervened that brought the conflict to end.

Lapiso's argument, on the other hand, shows that the Gedeo farmers obtained firearms as a result of increased coffee prices, which motivated peasants to mount a revolt in the 1960s. Lapiso and McClellan's arguments contradict one other; the former claimed that the peasants had a military weapon advantage, while the latter maintained that the settlers owned superior weaponry. Nevertheless, my conclusion is that weapon dominance may have been one of several factors influencing the course and outcome of the rebellion, rather than the only one. It would be more accurate to state that, while other components existed, the primary element tends to have been a lack of centralized leadership. Overall, a combination of factors prevented the uprising from gaining traction in other regions of Gedeo, and it was promptly quelled in three days, with minimal fallout on either side.

### Some Consequences of Gedeo Peasant Uprising

Although, this uprising was one of the serious challenges of the peasantry from the south against the imperial rule since its restoration in 1941, it did not force the government to change its policy towards the local people. It did not affect the position of landowners or provide solutions for the Gedeo people either. This did not mean that the uprising was without any consequence. It could, therefore, be stated that, though it was not as robust as it was in other places of the country, the Michelle peasant rebellion had a number of effects. As previously mentioned, the peasant rebellion in Gedeo had both long-term and immediate causes. The long-term roots traced back to the early years of the incorporation, and in particular to the introduction of the unpopular *qalad* measurement and the distribution of land by the state.

It is hard to find any conflict in history that did not cause impact, notwithstanding differences in the severity of the fighting and the destruction. In the same vein, in Michelle's peasant rebellion, both sides suffered human casualties and material damage. These include the destruction of houses, stores, coffee fields, and *enstes*, as well as small-scale fires that burned houses and trees, all of which have a long-term impact on the environment. Apart from the devastation inflicted by the landowners and government security forces, hooligans from neighboring Dilla town also plundered and destroyed villages that were not even involved in the revolt. Peasants suffered terribly and arbitrarily in certain areas, particularly in places where the unrest was high.

In addition to the environmental impact, the uprising caused significant coffee reduction because it occurred around harvest season. Gathering coffee before estimate resulted in the deaths of four peasants, sparking the uprising that crippled the coffee business. This terrorized others whether to collect coffee before estimation or not. Due to the violence, coffee was either harvested too late or before it was fully mature, creating further challenges for the self-sustaining Gedeo economy.

In addition, peasants were hesitant to maintain the fertility of the land, especially since the introduction of *qalad* measurements in the 1920s. They rather emphasized on addressing their landlords' needs than sustaining long-term protective land use. Due to this, the Gedeo land degraded over time, jeopardizing the indigenous environmental protection.

Precisely, therefore, the Gedeo peasants benefited nothing from the uprising as they continued paying taxes to the government and *erbo* to the *bälä-rests*. They also continued giving labor services to the *bala-rests*. They were unable to change the already established and highly oppressive *neftegna-gebbar* system or retrieve their lost land following incorporation. Their low social and cultural status as well as land alienation persisted until the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution.

Finally, it could be argued that the Michelle peasant uprising in Gedeo was the culminations of the grievances of the people since its incorporation in 1895 to 1960. Michelle became a spiritual gathering spot and patriotic center

to the Gedeo people, as well as the location of the first peasant rebellion in 1960, in the South. Regardless of the outcome, the Michelle area is still viewed by the Gedeo people as a symbol of their bravery and identity to this day. This might be witnessed in the present day, where Michelle is honored through songs, squares, and other public and private entities bearing its name.

In the post-1960 period, the state did not introduce any reform in Gedeo that benefited peasants nor did the people make any major resistance until the 1974 Revolution except by opposing the implementation of the 1968 land assessment scheme. The response of the feudal government was unequivocal. It suppressed all the uprisings by force of arms in which many lives were lost.

## Conclusion

The discussions in this article have shown that the Gedeo people experienced multiple changes since its incorporation in the Ethiopian Empire in 1895. The conquest of Gedeo by Menelik's forces in 1895 and the subsequent domination of the northerners resulted in the prevalence of a series of socio-political and economic crises in Gedeo land and culminated in the Michele peasant rebellion of 1960s.

Based on the reasons raised thus far, it is feasible to infer that, of all the consequences of incorporation, land alienation had the greatest impact on the lives of the Gedeo people, who were inextricably linked to their land and environment. Therefore, although the struggle was slow and chaotic, the people responded to land alienation and other forms of exploitation in a variety of ways from the beginning of incorporation. This trend remained unchanged until the Italians entered the Gedeo land in 1935, where the peasants enjoyed relative freedom. The Italian period was brief but had a significant impact, characterized by more changes than continuities in their ruling approach and administration. Even after Ethiopia's liberation in 1941, the Italian influence remains strong in Gedeo despite their brief presence. This study revealed that the Gedeo people enjoyed greater freedom during the brief Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941 than they experienced under the long imperial rule. This research also discovered an airplane incident in the Gedeo zone in 1941 that has not been mentioned in any previous studies. The incident happened when the Dakota aircraft found in a place called Boeti Wote which is today one of the village kebeles in Yirgachafe *woreda*. It was unexpected to see an airplane at the aforementioned location without making any noise or flying in the immediate liberation time in 1941. In the post liberation period the Gedeo people suffered that led to the Michelle peasant rebellion of 1960s.

Therefore, after the imperial rule was restored, the terrible living of the Gedeo people resumed on one side, while the struggle persisted into the 1960s on the other. The Michelle uprising was a significant challenge posed by the southern peasantry against Haile Selassie I's imperial rule since his restoration in 1941. However, it did not compel the regime to alter its policies towards the local population, change the status of landowners, or offer any solutions for the Gedeo people.

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