

POWER, CHURCH AND THE *GULT* SYSTEM IN GOJJAM, ETHIOPIA

Temesgen Gebeyehu BAYE
Bahir Dar University, Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of History
POB: 2190, Ethiopia
teme_baye@yahoo.com

Since the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, there had been an interdependence between the state and the church. Both parties benefited from this state of affairs. The Orthodox Church played as the ideological arm of the state. The king became head not only of the state, but also of the church. The church enjoyed royal protection and patronage, ranging in concrete terms like the granting of land, called the *gult* system. The *gult* system was an important economic institution and connection between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the state. The system was essentially a political and economic relations between the state, the church and the cultivators. It not only included tribute and administrative rights, but also entailed direct control over land. In the Ethiopian academics, the issue of the *gult* system has been treated and examined in its totality. There is an evident gap in our knowledge of the dynamics of the *gult* system and its ideological, administrative, political and economic implications. This paper, based on published and unpublished materials, examines the dynamics of *gult*, state and church relations intersectionally. It attempts to identify changes and continuities in the basic pattern of relations and a variety of institutional linkages. To this end, a great deal of archive collections on Gojjam Governorate General from the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency has been consulted and reviewed to add new and useful insights and understandings on relations and interests between the cultivators, the church and state. Data was presented and mainly analysed qualitatively.

Key words: church, state, *Gult* system, Gojjam, Ethiopia

Significance and Methodology of the Study

The study of *the gult* system in Ethiopia has a number of paramount importances. Due to the variation and dynamics of state-church relations in the history of the area under consideration, the study would have scholarly significance for the understanding of complex economic, ideological and

administrative relations among the main entities of the Ethiopian state. Further, this essay can be used as reference material for students and scholars of African history, in general, and Ethiopia, in particular. In such a way, it would have significance for academic research activities, general readers and to advance the frontier of our knowledge and perspective on church-state relations since the 4th century when Christianity was introduced and became a state religion of the country.

Data for this study was gathered using both primary and secondary sources. Primary data, which has constituted the principal source of information for the study, was elicited using multiple data collection methods. The study employed a qualitative methodological approach that has provided an in-depth understanding of complex historical contexts in which the research objective, to deepen our understanding of the Church, State and the *Gult* System in Gojjam (Ethiopia), is situated.

As church-state relations were complex and dynamic, the data collected through different methods have been carefully examined, cross-checked, analysed and interpreted using themes identified both from archives, literature and interviews, which was guided and captured by the objectives of the study, in order to reconstruct the *gult* system in Ethiopia. The research begins with the extensive reading relevant literature.

General Background

Taking northwest, Gojjam province, as a case in point, this essay discusses the main features of tenure, state and church relations and local dynamics during pre-revolution Ethiopia. In Gojjam, the issue of land had been sensitive, important and complex. The complexity was partly due to the history, group interests and the economic and social conditions of the people. In pre-revolution Ethiopia, before 1974, there were three main entities in the political economy of Ethiopia. These were state, *balebat*¹ and church. Historically, land was divided horizontally among the three-entities. The administrative relationships between the three entities were dependent on the dominance of one of the three entities. The three entities were not cultivators. They redistributed land to the tillers. The following picture illustrates how the three domains were interlinked.²

¹ Literary, one who has a father; indigenous. During imperial times, it used to signify or represent a local authority linking the government with local people.

² Interview with Mune Fenta, 2/5/2014, Motta; TIBEBU, T. The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896 – 1974.

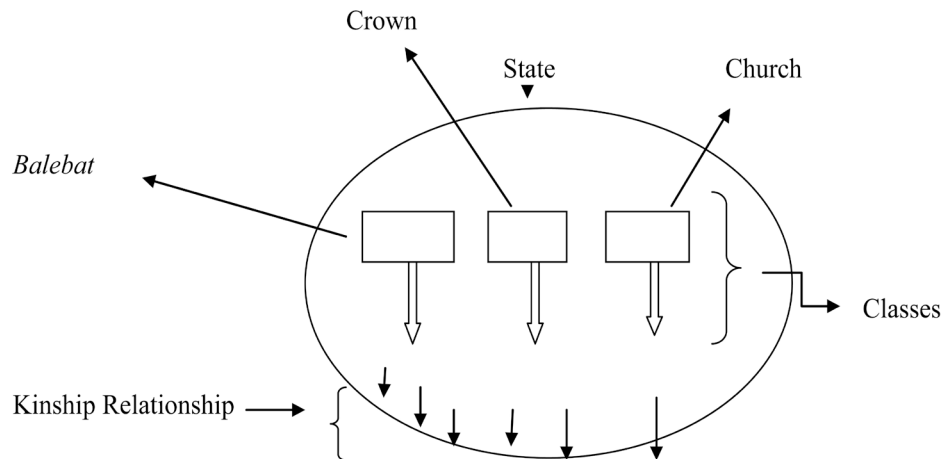


Table 1: Church, State and *Balebat* relations
Source: Field Work, 2014

As we can see from the above picture, state was the key institution. It was the main agent for the establishment of the tenure system. In this system, all land was presumed to belong to the state and hence the saying, “The king rewards, The king also expropriates.” Likewise, the church would pass land to its followers. This was a service-based use right. The church might transfer the land to individuals permanently or temporarily through different means and channels. The church and the state had strong historical connections and interdependence. Norberg has to say:

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the State have long been linked in a close alliance in which the state, in practice the Emperor, has usually been the dominant partner. The Emperors, however, gained much of their legitimacy from the consecration of the archbishop, the *Abun*. The withdrawal of Church support from an Emperor has in some cases been a decisive factor in bringing about his downfall. The position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was particularly strong in the northern provinces, where the population was mainly Christian.³

Likewise, the *balebat* would give land to his followers. The *balebat* could give land to the church or individuals. The local ruler or *balebat* was an executive

³ NORBERG, V. H. Swedes in Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, 1924 – 1952: A Study in Early Development Cooperation, p. 36.

form of the state. It functioned on behalf of the state. The ruler operated on a general principle that had become a tradition.⁴ This categorisation, based on the functional division of society, could also be seen from another perspective by dividing it into another three entities: *Bete Mengest* (house of the State or house of the Kingdom), *Bete Kehnet* (house of the clergy or house of the church) and the *gebars*⁵ (peasants who did not have a house). These three entities were categorised as the foundation of society and the system. Those who fought were organised as *Bete Mengest*; those who prayed were organised as *Bete Kehnet*; and those who tilled the land were grouped as *gebars* (tribute providers).⁶

Mostly, the three forces (sovereign, church and the *balebat*) had shaped the *rist* system to have the structure and feature during the period and the area under study. The process and the system took the form in the way to benefit those forces and groups that had the power to mold it to their advantages and wishes. The three powers had remained powerful throughout the history of the country, in general, and the study area, in particular. Until their eventual downfall in 1975, history had done nothing to eliminate such powerful groups.⁷ The system and *status quo* had provided the forces unlimited power and benefits in the tenure system and hence they worked and fought for the continuation of the *status quo*. Whenever there were external threats, those forces mobilised and made people react quickly. Among other things, they used the issue of land, religion and wife as main factors in mobilising the mass against any external attack and invasion.⁸

The Emperor had been recognized as the absolute source of power, king of kings, head of the church and the disposer of all lands under his domain. The people of Gojjam had associated their Emperor with antiquity and sacredness. The presence of a strong historical and traditional alliance between the ruling houses with Christ through the house of Solomon had given further strength and legitimacy of the *status quo*. This in turn strengthened the interdependence between the state and the church whose power and wealth had depended on land and the peasantry in one way or another.⁹ That is, the Ethiopian ruling class came to have a highly developed ideology that legitimised and reinforced its rule. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the main supporter of the central state. It preached the subject's unwavering loyalty to the sovereign. In return,

⁴ Interview with Gebeyehu Baye, 2/3/2014; MARKAKIS, J. Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Policy.

⁵ *Gebar* refers to the peasant and denoted the status of one who paid *geber* (tribute).

⁶ TIBEBU, T. The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896 – 1974.

⁷ DESTA, T. Land Tenure in Ethiopia and its Implications for Land Reform.

⁸ HOBEN, A. Family, Land and Class in Northwest Europe and Northern Highland Ethiopia. In *Proceedings of the First United States Conference of Ethiopian Studies*.

⁹ Interview with Mulatu Melse, 6/4/2014.

the church enjoyed royal protection and patronage, ranging in concrete terms from the founding of churches to the granting of land. In such a way, among other things, various land arrangements were evolved and developed. In Gojjam, for example, kinship, *semon* and *gult* tenures were the dominant tenures.¹⁰ *Rist* and *gult* were the dominant tenure systems in the province. Within each of these dominant tenure systems, we had other tenure types that had a complementary nature, but with their own particular features. Nevertheless, for this study, we focus on the *gult* system.

The *Gult* System

Gult was an administrative right over land or over a parish. The word *gult* was derived from the verb “*Guelete*” which literally means to place or to settle someone or something close to someone else; it implies the power or authority of the doer or and the recipient was named *balegult* (*gult* owner). Even though most scholars consider *gult* to be a right to land, it had also been characterised as a right to control the labour power of the peasants living on the land. *Gult* rights were temporary.¹¹ *Gult* was the system developed by the state. It can be dated. Therefore, *gult* was historical.

Despite the multiplicity of regional variations, the *gult* system was essentially the same in both the north and south. Both *rist* and *gult* could extend over the same land, but they had different origins. They were separated clearly into two different domains: *Rist* to the peasant and *gult* to the state. The following saying elucidates their difference:

The rich by his *gult*,
The poor by his *rist*.¹²

Gult rights were not inheritable or not necessarily hereditary. Since formal land ownership was vested in the state, the crown could withdraw *gult* rights at any time, although this did not happen in most cases and places. The beneficiaries of *gult* were patriots, exiles, members of the royal family and religious institutions. The Emperor could create *gult* in any part of the country merely by transferring

¹⁰ WORKU, D. Land Tenure System in Makara. In *The Economic Journal*, 1966, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 36 – 42; DESTA, T. Land Tenure in Ethiopia and its Implications for Land Reform.

¹¹ HOBEN, A. Family, Land and Class in Northwest Europe and Northern Highland Ethiopia. In *Proceedings of the First United States Conference of Ethiopian Studies*.

¹² Interview with Mulatu Melese, 13 August 2014.

his taxation right to a third party without any change in the property relations.¹³ *Gult* was usually linked to an office. The *gult* owner had a number of duties to the state such as administration, maintenance of law and order, and military services. He also had the mandate to oversee other administrative personnel in the area under his domain.¹⁴ The *gult* system also had other administrative and judicial implications. The *gult* holder was, for example, a judge, administrator and responsible for raising and leading troops at the time of war.¹⁵ In this regard, a pamphlet in the national archive states:

Gult was the right to own land without paying land tax (*geber*) thereon. *Gult* means taxed, but a delimited area of land possessed by a person of good merit or a member of the royal family, who has a right to exercise judicial power in his *gult* area. Landowners within his jurisdiction are liable to pay tax to and receive orders from him. *Gult* holders are required by the government to give services in time of war, in administering their respective zones and discharging other official duties.¹⁶

Wolde-Aregay argues, "...Gult has never been a form of land tenure. It was only a system of defraying remuneration for services out of taxes and tributes that could have been collected in kind. *Gult* rights only conferred partial usufruct rights."¹⁷ According to him, *gult* was a temporal and insecure system of appropriation of taxes and tributes as remuneration for their services. This tribute right about *gult* was not a complete usufructuary right.

In the *gult* system, we had two types of tenure: *gult* of the church and *gult* of the government.¹⁸ *Gult* rights were vested particularly in the Orthodox Church.

¹³ HOBEN, A. Ethiopian Rural Land Tenure Policy revisited. Symposium for *Reviewing Ethiopia's Socio-Economic Performance, 1991 – 1999*; AYELE, N. Centralization versus regionalism in Ethiopia: The Case of Gojjam.

¹⁴ HOBEN, A. Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent; PAUSEWANG, S. Peasant, Land and Society: A Social History of Land, Reform in Ethiopia.

¹⁵ National Archives, 34.07.7. It is a letter from the local *balebats* of Gojjam to the Imperial Ethiopian Government about the essence of *rist* and *gult* tenure systems and their connection and right to land; Interview with Asefa Belete, 6/5/2014. PANKHURST, R. State and Land in Ethiopian History. Monographs in Ethiopian Land Tenure.

¹⁶ National Archive, 34.07.7.

¹⁷ WOLDE-AREGAY, M. Land Tenure and Agricultural Productivity, 1500 – 1850. In *Proceedings of the Third Annual Seminar of the Department of History*, pp. 115 – 129.

¹⁸ Interview with Gebeyehu Baye, 18 September 2014. PAUSEWANG, S. Peasant, Land and Society: A Social History of Land, Reform in Ethiopia.

Gult given to the church and the clergy was not subjected to tribute. It was also hereditary and inalienable. Whereas government *gult* was endowed temporarily as it was contingent upon rendering services to the government. The *gult* owner had to pay tribute to the state. Otherwise, unless he committed a crime of treason against the state, he was not expelled from his *gult*.

We may also divide the *gult* system into secular and non-secular *gult*. Regarding secular *gult*, it was divided into two: *maderya gult* (livelihood *gult*) and *riste-gult*. *Maderya gult* was not given permanently. It was granted for a lifetime, while the *riste-gult*¹⁹ was hereditary. In time, in some cases, there was transformation in the nature of *gult* relation and arrangement. Some well-placed officials of the state began to be succeeded by their offspring in their official positions. As a result, *gult* became hereditary. These *gult* rights, which became hereditary, were called *riste-gult*. However, the essential nature of *gult* right remained unchanged. It was still not a land right. Rather, it is only a right to impose tribute.

Both *maderya gult* and *riste-gult* rights were granted to privileged personalities like the members of local *mekuanent*²⁰ and the clergy. The political and economic status of individuals was important not only to secure their land, but it was also important to hold secular and religious *gults*.²¹ In Gojjam, according to the report of the Ministry of Interior, *riste-gult* nor *siso-rist* (one-third) tenure system was not among the dominant tenure systems in the province.²²

The *gulte-gezh* (*gult* governor) had the right to take part of the tribute he had collected from his neighbourhood. He could collect one-fifth of the produce from the holding of each peasant called *amsho* (one-fifth). In addition, in some places, the *gult* governors were exempted from taxation and they were able to collect fees for their services in judicial duties. They were also given the right to labour services from the peasants like building of houses, fences and *hudad* (cultivation of the *gult* governor's own *rist* land) and others.²³ In some areas, *Gult* owners had purposefully established *gult* lands in different agro-climatic zones. The following couplet was an expression of a former *gult* owner in Goncha District, East Gojjam:

¹⁹ A *gult* right is a right to collect tributes transformed to hereditary right (*rist*) due to loyalty or through time.

²⁰ The high nobility as a body.

²¹ Interview with Mulatu Melese, 13 August 2014. ZEWDE, E. Land Tenure and Taxation in Machakel Woreda, 1900 – 1974.

²² National Archive, 01.07.

²³ WORKU, D. Land Tenure System in Makara. In *The Economic Journal*, 1966, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 37; WOLDE MESKEL, Mahteme-Sellase. *Zekre Neger* (Recollection of the Past Times).

Yekendach (*Dega* area) is for barley cultivation
Angot (cotton growing area) is good for cloth
Qoga (the monastery) stands for spiritual.²⁴

Siso gult was also a type of tenure system in which the government took two-thirds out of the land possessed by the *balebat*. The remaining one-third of the land was taken by the local *balebat*. The government entitled the *balebat* to retain his portion by imposing just a nominal tax on it until the land was developed. The tax, which was paid in kind, varied according to the produce of the area. The system and the rate of land tax on *siso gult* was more or less the same as for *riste-gult*. The main difference between the *siso* and *riste-gult* systems lay in their origin. While right of *siso* originated in respect of one-third of the land remaining with the *balebat*, the emperor had granted the right of *riste-gult*.²⁵ No. 70 of 1964 Land Tax Proclamation amended *riste-gult* and *siso-gult*. According to the proclamation, “all landowners who held possessions within *riste-gult* and *siso* should pay the land tax like any other Ethiopian landowners do....”²⁶ In the circular, by the Ministry of Finance, it was stated:

Under this form of tenure, the person having *riste-gult* was entitled to collect land tax from the landowners settled on the land at the rates prescribed by law, i.e., fifteen, ten and five Ethiopian dollars per *gasha* of fertile, semi-fertile and poor land, respectively, and to exercise certain judicial functions. Out of the land tax collected, he paid to the government treasury at a uniform rate of Ethiopian \$3.50 per *gasha* for all classes of land and retained the rest with him.²⁷

The bill for the abolition of *riste-gult* and *siso* was passed by parliament in the same year. The proclamation for the abolishing of *riste-gult* and *siso gult* was published in the *Negarit Gazeta*. Under this proclamation, landowners who held land within *riste-gult* or *siso gult* would pay the land tax as well as education tax and health tax direct to the government. In the case where there were no *gebars* (tenants), the *gult* owner would pay land tax at the normal rates of fifteen, ten and five Ethiopian dollars per *gasha*²⁸ of fertile, semi-fertile and

²⁴ Interview with Jenberu Bekele, 13 August 2014.

²⁵ National Archive, Land Report, 01.09. WOLDE-MESKEL, Mahteme-Sellase. The Land System of Ethiopia. In *Ethiopian Observer*, 1961, Vol. 1, No. 9, pp. 283 – 297.

²⁶ *Negarit Gazeta*, Land Tax Proclamation No. 70 of 1964.

²⁷ National Archives, 01.07. The Amharic version is not available in the folder.

²⁸ *Gasha* was a unit of land measurement. Regarding, the origin of *gasha*, Gebrewold wrote the following: *Gasha* refers a weapon made up from the hide of a hippopotamus. Its service was to defend oneself from spears because in ancient times a spear was the major weapon of attack. In addition to this, *gasha* (shield) was used as a defensive tool

poor land respectively, and not at the reduced rate of Ethiopian \$3.50 per *gasha* for all classes of land as was the case before the proclamation was issued.²⁹

In Gojjam, there were four main ways of access to the *gult* possession. The post for *gulte-gezhnet* (*gult* governorship) could be obtained through four ways: first, when the person justified that the land had passed down from his ancestry. Second, when the person had no hereditary right, but had used the land as *maderya*. Third, when the area had been under his lineage; and finally, when he brought evidence that he was a patriot, returnee or had been in government services.³⁰

The presence of complex interconnections and relations between the two tenure systems, *rist* and *gult*, might make difficult to understand the two tenure arrangements and systems. This could be seen, for example, from what Dunning, Professor of Law at Haile-Selase I University in 1960s, stated the origin of *gult* in the Dega Damot areas of Gojjam:

On occasion *gult* in Dega Damot has gone to those without roots in the area where the land for which the tribute is owed is located, but more often it has gone to people who also have *rist* rights over at least some of the land given in *gult*. This fact is of considerable consequence, for aside from strangers and members of outcast occupational groups, virtually every resident of Dega Damot has *rist* rights which might lead to *gult* rights. Since the basis for membership in the powerful local gentry is *gult*, in theory most residents of the district could become part of that gentry. This potential for social mobility is important; although it is *rist*, which allows the use of land, it has been *gult* which brings power and position.³¹

It is also difficult to exactly know the number of *gult-gezhs* and their domains. The system was flexible and accommodating for new claimants. The table below, for instance, shows the number of *gult-gezhs* in each *awrajja* (sub-province) and the area under their domain, including their annual allowance. The presence of high variations from *awrajja* to *awrajja* in the number of *gult-*

in games with horses. All these descriptions are provided to explain why land is measured in *gasha*. Land given to a soldier was named after the word *gasha* by which he defends himself.

²⁹ National Archives, Land Survey in Ethiopia, 23,3. It is a sort of booklet.

³⁰ National Archives, 05.15. ENGEDA-WORQ, Gebre-Wold. Ye-Ethiopia Meretena Geber Sem [Names of Landed Property and Taxes in Ethiopia].

³¹ DUNNING, H. C. Land Reform in Ethiopia: A Case Study in Non-Development. In *UCLA Law Review*, 1970, Vol. 18, p. 271.

gezhs shows the presence of a high variation in the nature and type of *gult* systems in the province.³²

Table 1: Number of *Gult-Gezhs*, Number of *riste-gults* and Their Annual Allowance

No	Awrajja(Sub-province)	Number of Gult-Gezhs /awrrajja	Number of <i>Riste-Gult</i> under their domain	Annual allowance/awrajja
1	Debre-Marqos	618	445	2,708
2	Bichena	117	72	7,684
3	Mota	145	128	4,774
4	Qola Dega Damot	270	122	12,551
5	Agew Meder	48	46	5,500
6	Metekel	12	12	1,009
7	Bahir Dar	113	81	2,857

Source: National Archive, 62.1.19.08. The amount of the allowance shows the sum paid at *Awrajja* level annually, not individually. The archives show the presence of more *gult-gezhs* who had appealed for an allowance for the service they were providing to the government.

During the postwar period, the power, role and position of the *gult*-holder was weakened and eventually the *gult* system and the office were abolished. There were factors. To begin with, the centralisation and modernisation process from the centre were against the power and the position of the *gult* governors. Secondly, there was a trend of decline in the military importance of the *gult gezh* (*gultegna*) in the post-1941 period. Thirdly, there was abolishment of payments in kind and service to the *gult gezh* (holder). Introduction of the monetized taxation system that was payable directly to the Ministry of Finance at district level had a grave consequence to the power and status of the *gultegna*. Before, the *gult gezh* was responsible for seeing taxes on his neighbourhood were paid; and in return, he received some portion of the money collected, but now he had no more power assessing and collecting of taxes.³³

Proclamation No 90 of 1947, for example, established a system of local judges (*atbya dagnas*) that diminished the power of the *gult gezh*. Before the proclamation, judicial powers were enjoyed by the *gult gezh* that were subject to

³² National Archives, 05.12.

³³ HOBEN, A. Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent.

financial limitation of Eth. \$25 in civil cases and Eth. \$15 in criminal cases. According to the proclamation, they were placed under the jurisdiction of the newly created office of *atbya dagna*. This helped the local judges enjoy a marked degree of power and prestige within their respective neighbourhoods. Finally, proclamation No 230 of 1966 had removed the legal authority for the existence of *gult* as a type of land tenure. The provision of proclamation 230 which would no longer permit rebates of tax money to *gult*-holders was, however, not strictly enforced in some areas, like the Gojjam province, where, according to the report of the Ministry of Finance, their assistance in enforcing tax payments was still essential.³⁴ According to Dunning:

...In Gojjam, the *gultenyas* [*gultegna*] have reportedly been made government officials in every case, and Ministry of Finance officials acknowledge that Gojjami *gultenyas* are rewarded with a proportion of the tax collected for their services in inducing the peasants to pay tax. Thus, although the formal tenure of *gult* is abolished in Gojjam, the local social, political and economic position of the former *gultenya* seems to be little affected. Where this has happened, the long-term effects within the area where the *gult* had existed may be more significant. In any event, the abolition of *gult* does represent simplification of Ethiopian systems of land tenure and taxation.³⁵

Church and the *Gult* System

Gult rights were one of the main features of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The church was the beneficiary of the *gult* system. The state as the repository of rights over land and the emperor as a dispenser of such rights granted land as *gult* to the church. Such processes and acquisition of land by churches and monasteries went back to pre-Aksumite times.³⁶ According to tradition, Emperor Menilik I, who crowned in 950 BC., upon his return from Israel, declared the land of the kingdom to be distributed to different entities. In the fourth century, King Ezana continued the tradition of granting land to Churches and Monasteries. In such a way, Ethiopian emperors had made a great deal of

³⁴ *Negarit Gazeta*, Proclamation No. 230 of 1966.

³⁵ DUNNING, H. C. Land Reform in Ethiopia: A Case Study in Non-Development. In *UCLA Law Review*, 1970, Vol. 18, pp. 271 – 307.

³⁶ COHEN, J. M., WEINTRAUB, D. Land and Peasants in Imperial Ethiopia: The Social Background to a Revolution; JOIREMAN, Sandra. Property Rights and Political Development in Ethiopia and Eritrea; PAUSEWANG, S. Peasant, Land and Society: A Social History of Land, Reform in Ethiopia.

land grant to churches and monasteries. For instance, there are evidences that St. Mary Church at Aksum and the Monastery of Debre-Damo and several other religious institutions had received a land grant from different emperors of the country. The tradition was more observed after the fall of the Zagwe Dynasty in 1270 when Emperor Yekuno-Amlak, with the help of *Abune* Tekle-Haymanot, head of the Monastery of Debre-Libanos, overthrew the last Zagwe king, Nakuto-Lab and restored the Solomonic dynasty. Yekuno-Amlak, allowed the church to have one-third of the land of the empire for the contribution it played in the restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty through St. Tekle-Haymanot. The Emperor proclaimed the land of the empire divided among three entities:

One-third to the state
One-third to the soldier
One-third to the church.³⁷

The argument was that the support of Tekle-Haymanot to the Emperor had resulted in the church to possess a third of the land of the country. This may need further investigation, though traditionally it had a strong foundation. Factually, the Ethiopian emperors were priest kings. They were both heads of the state and the church. The interdependence between the state and the church was strong that the church ownership of land seemed to have had its origin in the Emperor's right to grant land.³⁸ The right of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to enjoy large land grants was also supported by the *Fetha Negest*:

Let the king give honour to the order of the clergy.... Let him give from his wealth to each of them, according to their rank. He shall exempt them from tribute, presents, and the other things to be given to the rulers.... And let the king assign to God a part of the presents and of the spoils of war, as King David and other righteous kings did. Let him not raise his hand against priests or God's saints, so that what befell the evil kings of Israel and others may not befall him.³⁹

³⁷ National Archive, 62.1.24.20. The proverb is also common in historic Ethiopia.

³⁸ PANKHURST, R. Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800 – 1935.

³⁹ *Fetha Negest*, xvii, xxi – xxvi, xxvii. According to the tradition and philological evidence, the *Fetha Negest* (The Law of the Kings), is a creation of 16th century Ge'ez literature. The formal position of the *Fetha Negest*, as the supreme ruling law of Ethiopia is confirmed by many documents. For the first time, the *Fetha Negest* used as law goes back to the reign of Emperor Sertse-Dengel in the 16th century. The Chronicles of Emperor Susenyos, Emperor Iyasu II, Emperor Iyo'as, Emperor Tewodros II and Emperor Menilik II mention the authority of the *Fetha Negest* in civil and penal matters. In the law issued by Emperor Menilik II regarding the powers and

Still, however, we have two contradictory views and sources regarding the share and right of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on land and land taxes. According to Schwab, independent of and not controlled by the government, a huge amount of land taxes was collected by the church as church taxes. This revenue derived from land elevated the church to an economic, social and cultural power. Schwab has also to say:

Because the church pays no taxes at all to either central or provincial government (Decree No. 2 of 1942) it may keep the revenue it receives from the leasing program. In 1961 – 1962 the total rentals paid to the church were E\$1, 981, 148.9. The central government exerts no manifest pressure upon the church to allocate any of its receipts. Subtle pressure does emanate from the Imperial Palace, but the methods of pressure are kept secret.⁴⁰

On the other hand, there are no adequate sources to substantiate the tradition and the view that the church had claimed no less than a third of all the land in the kingdom. Though the church was one of the three entities of the Ethiopian state and society, it did not actually claim what amounted to a third of the land; nor was it acquired in a single massive grant as sources maintains. For example, between 1961 and 1962, nationally, the amount of land tax and tax in lieu of tithe paid to church treasuries on average was about 11 percent of the total tax of the state collected. See the table below. The 1965 Land Administration and Land Reform Report further substantiate this view:

According to tradition and foreign writers, it has been said that one third of land tax had been given to the church. This is not true. There are no sources that confirm and substantiate such view. During the times of king Menilik I and after, there had been such tradition, but it was eroded and weakened by consecutive rulers. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the source of income for the new church was obtained from individuals of respective parishes or from those who changed their *rist* land into *semon* in order to minimise tax and labour service. If we take the 1961 – 1962 statistics of the Ministry of Finance, for example, the land revenue for the state was Ethiopian \$15,383,709 while that of the church was Ethiopian \$2,000,000. This shows that the church revenue was 11.5 percent. There is no room, without the knowledge of the

duties of the Minister of Justice, it was stated that the *Fetha Negest* to be the law regulating civil and duties of the Minister.

⁴⁰ SCHWAB, P. The Tax System of Ethiopia. In *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 1970, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 77 – 88.

national treasury, for the church to have 33 percent land tax revenue. Thus, the legend has been far from reality.⁴¹

Table 2: Area and Revenue from Measured and Unmeasured Church Lands by Province, 1961 – 1962

Province	Measured Lands				Unmeasured Lands			
	Total <i>Gasha</i>	Total Land tax	Total Tax in lieu of Tithe	Average Land tax per <i>Gasha</i>	Total <i>Gasha</i>	Total Land Tax	Total tax in lieu of tithe	Average land tax per <i>Gasha</i>
Arsi	3,126	37,875	90,388	12.1	28.9	-	-	-
Bali	1,034	7,849	18,072	7.5	17.5	-	-	-
Begemder	No figure available							
Gamo Gofa	1,051	8,955	19,277	8.5	18.3	2,379	19,032	28,548
Gojjam	1,215	8,104	4,046	6.6	8.3	3,366	62,468	31,233
Harar	1,624	21,628	53,197	13.3	32.7	794	6,352	9,528
Tigre	-	-	-	-	-	No figure	76,163	312,095

Source: National Archive, 22.3.45; Lawrence and Man, 336

True, until 1975, rulers and powerful lords issued property documents in granting land to the churches and monasteries. In Gojjam most churches and all monasteries had their own lands. Those lands were given by the first founder and subsequently confirmed by the notables in the hope of getting a better life after death.⁴² These lands had different names like *semon meret* (land directly or indirectly controlled by the church), *yemesqel meret* (land of the cross) and *yeges meret* (priest's land). Proclamation No. 2 of 1942, for example, stated that *semon* land was originated and developed from the government grant to the churches.⁴³ The church in its turn provided this land to its priests and deacons in their service. Those who served the church were not required to pay land tax.

⁴¹ National Archives, 62.1.24.20.

⁴² CRUMMEY, D. Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century; CRUMMEY, D., SISHAGN, S. A Gondar Land Grant in Gojjam: The case of Qeranyo Medhane-Alem. In *Proceeding of the 11th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 241 – 258.

⁴³ *Negarit Gazeta*, Proclamation No. 2 of 1942.

They only paid education tax to the church and yet did not have the right to sell, mortgage or pass the land.⁴⁴

Although church lands were excluded from the *rist* system of inheritance, they were under the disposal of the individual who provided required services to the church. Mostly the priests possessed *semon* lands. *Semon* lands were two types in the area: *rist* or *gult*. *Gult* was the land granted by charters.⁴⁵ This included the right to collect a fixed annual tribute and payment or the power to employ labours. In this case, the land was regarded as hereditary right. In some cases, it was given to churchmen as *maderya*. The land was called *maderya meret* while the person who gets such land was *bale-maderya*.

If the descendants of the original priests became layman and wanted to remain owners of the land, they could employ a priest who would serve in the church on their behalf. In such a way, the land would become *rist* land. Both types of church lands were prevalent in Gojjam. The extent of land allotted to persons who were in the service of the churches and monasteries varied in accordance with their educational level and hierarchy: *deberta* (unordained member of the clergy), *gebez* (vicar or head of the church), *qes* (priest) and deacon.

In some cases, there was a tendency among some *rist* holders of changing holdings to *semon* land. This was because church lands were exempted from land tax and labour services.⁴⁶ Those who served in the church *gult* in place of *cheqashums* were called *blatengetas*. This was common in Churches and Monasteries like Dima, Debre-Werq, Mertulemaryam, Dembecha Mikael, and some others which had a special place and status in their respective areas. They were exempted from taxation. The poem illustrates this:

No forest in the sky,
No taxation in Dima [Gojjam].⁴⁷

Monasteries and churches had the right to collect court fees, market dues and tax in lieu of tithe from the *qefefs* (areas under their jurisdiction). Land was the main source of income for churches and monasteries and their functionaries. Dima in particular had been one of the richest monasteries and churches of the country. A number of *qefefs* of *Dima* were given at different times by Emperors.

⁴⁴ Interview with Geza Mekonen, 23 May 2014; National Archives, 18.10; LAWRENCE, J., MAN, H. S. I. A. O. Land Policy Project (Ethiopia). In *Ethiopian Observer*, 1966, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 286 – 336.

⁴⁵ HUNTINGFORD, G. W. B. The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia, trans. Monographs in Ethiopian Land Tenure.

⁴⁶ BIRHANE, F. Gojjam 1800 – 1855; ADMASU, G. A Historical Survey of Taxation in Gojjam, 1901 – 1969.

⁴⁷ Interview with Ewnetu Zeleqe, 10 May 2014.

But most of the *gults* were granted by the rulers of Gojjam like *Dejjach* Wolde-Habib, *Talaqu Ras* Hailu, Yosedeq, *Dejjach* Goshu Zewde, *Dejjach*⁴⁸ Tedla Gwalu, *Dejjach* Birru Goshu, *Negus* Tekle-Haymanot and *Ras* Hailu.

Figure 1: St. Marqos Church, Debre-Marqos. The Church had eighteen *qefefs* under its jurisdiction. The church is rich in manuscripts and other documents till today.



Source: Field work, 20 September 2012

Churches and monasteries like Debre-Elias, Mota Giyorgis and Qeranyo Medhane-Alem and others were given land in their foundation by different rulers. The land charters of Mota Giyorgis and Qeranyo Medhane-Alem churches are more or less similar with that of the Church of Qusquam in

⁴⁸ Commander of the royal Gate.

Gondar. In each charter, the principle of land division, relationships, administration and other issues have been mentioned in the manuscripts. Mengiste has the following to say:

Charters recording *gult* grants to religious institutions show nothing distinctive about the grants of land for purposes other than *teskar*.⁴⁹ Grantors viewed the transfer as for the salvation of their souls. Nevertheless, like grants for *teskar*, the patent religious purpose of grants for other purposes did not dispose of their secular underpinnings. Kings in particular sought to derive from their grants the support of the church to consolidate the royal power itself. The communities of influential monasteries caught the attention of rulers for this reason. [They] had apparently a strong connection with the local ruling.⁵⁰

Moreover, land grants to Mota Giyorgis Church by *Talaqu* Hailu I (r. 1770s – 1790s), son of Wolete-Israel and ruler of Gojjam; and to Debre-Elias by *Negus* Tekle-Heymanot in the 19th century were quoted as illustrative indicators:

Charter of Mota

In the name of the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Son, one God, during the time of Empress Mentewab, during the grandson of Emperor Bekafa, when Wolete-Israel established Mota Giyorgis by the permission of Emperor Iyoas, she has given two-thirds [of the land] for the *debtera* and one-third for the *ristegna*. The land located beyond the edge of the escarpment is given out exclusively for the *debtera* to be exploited by them as they saw fit and is immune from the intervention of the local *cheqa*. Hailu has reaffirmed the earlier grant of land found in the highlands in which the *cheqa* are forbidden to make intervention which shall remain binding and in force till the Last Judgment. Violators of the terms of the charter shall be punished by a fine of fifty ounces of gold (IES, V.36).⁵¹

People used to pay their *geber*⁵² in time so that relations between the monasteries and the *gebars*⁵³ in the respective *qefefs* were smooth. Things were

⁴⁹ Meaning: to commemorate a saint's day with a feast or to hold a commemorative feast for a dead person.

⁵⁰ MENGISTE, H. Lord, Zega and Peasant in Eastern Gojjam, 1767 – 1901, p. 75.

⁵¹ MENGISTE, H. Lord, Zega and Peasant in Eastern Gojjam, 1767 – 1901.

⁵² Land tax; also called *feregeber*. It also sometimes refers to a feast.

⁵³ Tax payer; land on which tax was paid to the state in labour or in kind.

better for the *gebars* under such monasteries and churches than under secular rulers. The amount of *geber* was decided and agreed during the entry of the peasants to the *gedam* (monastery). This saved them from being squeezed more by secular and local governors. They were better off than those who paid an unspecified amount of *geber* to secular administrators (Admasu, 1971). People who lived in religious *gults* were also free of labour services to secular governors. Secular officers were not allowed to quarter soldiers in such *gults*. Peasants were also free from hosting soldiers and giving military service for the ruler of Gojjam. They paid less court fees compared with those who were under secular administrators. Most of the taxes to such churches and monasteries were paid in *amole*, grains, cloth, butter, milk and so on.⁵⁴

Likewise, because of the nature of the tenure system, marginalised and occupational groups inhabited the immediate environs of some churches and monasteries. They had no right to access *rist* land. They entered into agreements with the churches and monasteries and tilled such lands. People like artisans and potters lived and worked in the *qefefs* of the monasteries. In such cases, the poor lived around the churches. This was, however, not a general truth to all churches and monasteries.⁵⁵

Regarding state-church relations, it was strong and continuous. Mengiste writes, "... the monarchy and the church remained closely tied to each other and the forms of government remained largely unchanged".⁵⁶ Most of the rulers of Gojjam had smooth and a peaceful relationship with most of the churches and monasteries of the region. The culture and social relation that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained largely unchanged as long as the influence of the church held steady. In most cases, relations shared common features to all churches and monasteries. For instance, it was common for the rulers to prepare lavish banquets every Sunday to churchmen. Some are remembered until today. Tedla Gwalu, for example, is remembered among many of the rural Gojjames. When he died, a certain deacon composed the following couplet:

People tell us that *Dejjach*⁵⁷ Tedla is still alive
We will, however, discover the truth by the
Absence of both the banquet and himself
On every Sunday.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Interview with Adamu Mulatu, 11 July 2014.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mulatu Melese, 12 July 2014. My personal observation also confirms the presence of such communities in a number of churches and monasteries.

⁵⁶ MENGISTE, H. Lord, Zega and Peasant in Eastern Gojjam, 1767 – 1901, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Commander of the royal Gate.

*Ras*⁵⁹ Hailu, however, was an exceptional ruler in the modern period of Gojjam who obsessed towards the property of the monastery of Dima and hence the poem:

Do you see the way my enemy stands against me,
Oh, please come to my rescue by Hailu's death!⁶⁰

Some churches and monasteries might not possess the land, but only had the right over taxes, which went to the church treasury instead of the government treasury. In this regard, the church was a landowner and at the same time, like the government, had exclusive rights on the taxes and tithes of certain lands. In the province, most of the religious *gults* belonged to a few important monasteries and churches. Monasteries and churches had a number of *qefef* (administrative and judicial rights) in addition to the appropriation of tribute. Large amounts of tribute in kind or in cash were collected from these *gults*. The money paid by the peasantry to these churches was named *yedebtera worq* (ecclesiastic gold).⁶¹

Not all churches and monasteries had equal status, influence and property. Some of them had *woreda* or *meketel gezat* (district or sub-district) status. The title of the head of such churches and monasteries was also different. Some had secular and spiritual authority in the *gults*.⁶² In spiritual matters, all were subordinated to the bishop of Gojjam. They had the right to collect the tribute, court fines and market tariff fees. Some churches were the head of all parishes and *debers* of the nearby area or district so that the head had the title of *deber aleqa*, and each of the parish churches contributed some money yearly. However, this was not uniform and applicable throughout the province. In most cases, they kept one-third of the revenue collected and sent the remaining to the *Awrajja Betekehenet* (*Awrajja* Church Office) and to the bishop of Gojjam.

In some areas, the nature of *semon* land had been changed. According to the report of the Ministry of Finance, with the gradual disappearance of knowledgeable men and elders, those who settled in church lands declared as if they had been original settlers and *ristegna*. In such a way, a number of churches lost lands under their disposal.⁶³ Proclamation No. 2 of 1942 promulgated regarding the administration system of church lands. It states "...those who own the land property of the church [*gebar, rist, fief, qelad*] in the

⁵⁸ ADMASU, G. A Historical Survey of Taxation in Gojjam, 1901 – 1969, p. 43.

⁵⁹ The highest military rank below *Ras betwoded*.

⁶⁰ ADMASU, G. A Historical Survey of Taxation in Gojjam, 1901 – 1969, p. 43.

⁶¹ National Archives, 03.01.

⁶² National Archives, 03.15.

⁶³ National Archives, 03.16.

capacity of *aleqa*, *gebez*, priest, deacon, *debtera* or holder of any other office of this nature by which the church is served, are to pay money to the church, while the land and fiefs are in their possession, according to the rate of tax assessed by the government.”⁶⁴

The 1944 land tax proclamation also made land properties and fiefs of the church to be exempted from paying tax to the government. Peasants holding *semon* land paid *asrat*, education tax and health tax to the church treasury according to the classification of land at rates prescribed for other categories of land. Later, health tax was transferred to the government treasury. In Gojjam and Gonder Governorate Generals, however, tithe and education tax were paid to the government, not to the church.⁶⁵

In 1966, the government issued another decree regarding the rules and administration of the Ethiopian *Tewahdo* Orthodox church. Article three of the decree states, “all money collected in the form of tax would be deposited for the maintenance of churches and monasteries.”⁶⁶ This decree actually used general terms “tax which is payable on land properties and fiefs”⁶⁷ of the church. Practically, however, the land tax in lieu of tithe and education tax were all credited and deposited to church funds.

Summing up, the relation between the Gojjam dynasty and the churches was essentially expressed in terms of land. Land was the main source of income for churches and monasteries and their functionaries. Except during the reign of *Ras* Hailu II, the relations were smooth and interdependent until the 1974 revolution which made a fundamental change in the tenure relation as well as in the church-state relation. The Ethiopian revolution ended the *gult* system. The land became the property of the state and the people. The state made a sharp break from the past. All properties of the church, including its buildings in towns were confiscated. With this, the long established history of interdependence of the state and church and the hegemonic power of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, which shared about 11 percent of land tax on the total of the state collected, came to an end.

Conclusion

Rist was the main, but not the only tenure in Gojjam. There was also another tenure system in which the government could control and gave to local

⁶⁴ *Negarit Gazeta*, Proclamation No. 2 of 1942.

⁶⁵ National Archives, 03.16.

⁶⁶ *Negarit Gazeta*, Proclamation No. 230 of 1966.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

governors, monasteries and churches. This was called the *gult* system. The recipient was named *balegult* or *gult-gezh*. *Gult* was the administrative right over the land or over a parish. It had also been characterised as a right to control the labour power of the peasants living on the land. Before WWII, the *gult-gezh* was responsible for seeing taxes on his neighbourhood were paid; and in return, he received some portion of the money collected. During the postwar period, however, the role and power of the *gult-gezh* declined in assessing and collecting of taxes.

Churches and monasteries were among the main beneficiary of the *gult* system. In principle, church lands were not hereditary and hence every family who possessed them tried to keep for life by educating one of their sons as a priest. Otherwise, they had to hire a priest in order to fulfill the obligation of the church services. Monasteries and churches had the right to collect court fees, market dues and tax in lieu of tithe from the areas under their jurisdiction.

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5.2. Archives

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34/07/7;
01/07;
01/09;
01/07;
23/3;
05/15;
05/12;
62/1/24/20;
18/10;
03/01;
03/15;
03/16;
03/16.

5.3. *Negarit Gazeta*

Proclamation No. 2 of 1942.
Proclamation No. 70 of 1944.
Proclamation No. 230 of 1966.