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 This paper, based on published and unpublished materials, examines the dynamics of gult, state and church relations intersectionally.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, balebat¹ 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.
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

form of the state. It functioned on behalf of the state. The ruler operated on a
general principle that had become a tradition. 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 (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).

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. 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.

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. 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).
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
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. 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. 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.

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.

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

12 Interview with Mulatu Melese, 13 August 2014.
his taxation right to a third party without any change in the property relations.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 administrating their respective zones and discharging other official duties.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{18} Gult rights were vested particularly in the Orthodox Church.

\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{16} National Archive, 34.07.7.
\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Gebeeyehu 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 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 mekuament 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. 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.

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. 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.
22 National Archive, 01.07.
Yekendach (Dega area) is for barley cultivation
Angot (cotton growing area) is good for cloth
Qoga (the monastery) stands for spiritual.  

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. 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…” 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.

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 of fertile, semi-fertile and poor land.

---

24 Interview with Jenberu Bekele, 13 August 2014.
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.  

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.

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.

It is also difficult to exactly know the number of gult-gezs and their domains. The system was flexible and accommodating for new claimants. The table below, for instance, shows the number of gult-gezs 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-
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

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

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-gezh 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 athya 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 gulenyas [gultegna] have reportedly been made government officials in every case, and Ministry of Finance officials acknowledge that Gojjami gulenyas 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 gulena 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.
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.  

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. 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.

---

37 National Archive, 62.1.24.20. The proverb is also common in historic Ethiopia.
39 *Fetha Negest*, xvii, xxii – 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Measured Lands</th>
<th>Unmeasured Lands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Gasha</td>
<td>Total Land Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arsi</td>
<td>3,126</td>
<td>37,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>1,034</td>
<td>7,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begemder</td>
<td>No figure</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamo Gofa</td>
<td>1,051</td>
<td>8,955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gojjam</td>
<td>1,215</td>
<td>8,104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harar</td>
<td>1,624</td>
<td>21,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigre</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
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: debtera (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.

47 Interview with Ewnetu Zeleqe, 10 May 2014.

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 Dejjach57 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.
57 Commander of the royal Gate.
Ras 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!

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).

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. 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 dever 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 Avrajja Betkehenet (Avrajja 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. 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 The highest military rank below Ras betwoded.
61 National Archives, 03.01.
62 National Archives, 03.15.
63 National Archives, 03.16.
capacity of alega, 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.”

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.

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.” This decree actually used general terms “tax which is payable on land properties and fiefs” 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.
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.

REFERENCES

Published and Unpublished Materials


### 5.2. Archives

I have consulted the following box and file numbers from the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency, Addis Ababa:

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.