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## **Dissertation Abstract**

*Society and State in the Balé Lowlands: Interplay of Divergent Interests  
in Centre-Periphery Interrelations in South-eastern Ethiopia, 1891–1991*

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## Dissertation Abstracts

KEYFALEW TESSEMA SEMU<sup>1</sup> †, *Society and State in the Balé Lowlands: Interplay of Divergent Interests in Centre-Periphery Interrelations in South-eastern Ethiopia, 1891–1991*, PhD Dissertation in History at the College of Social Sciences of the Addis Ababa University, defended on 20 August 2020.

This dissertation investigates the interplay between society and state, as well as the social hierarchies, among the Oromo and Somali pastoralists, and minorities such as the Dube, Degine, Reer Barre, and Gheri Mero in the Bale lowlands between c.1891 and 1991. While previous studies primarily focused on the centre's efforts to maintain control over borderlands and foreign interventions, this study sheds light on the indigenous and political diversity of the fringe, its manipulation by central forces, and the complex interplay of conflicting interests. The research methodology combines secondary, archival, and oral data to mitigate these limitations.

Bale occupies a paradoxical position in centre-periphery relations as part of the outer-laying peripheries to which demoted officials or beginners to the post of governorship were sent. Furthermore, the province was tributary to the Harär governorate in a repressive administration system. This study argues against a distant view of the periphery as a homogeneous entity, but instead renders audible the role of riverine cultivators in the regional history.

The thesis has two aims: The first is to reveal the polarized interests in the interrelationships among the Oromo and Somali pastoralists in their collective relations with authorities in Addis Abäba and Mogadishu.

Since the incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian Empire in the 1880s, state-elite relations were characterized by the praxis of the Ethiopian administration and European colonial scrambles for the region, whose legacies polarized the interests of the lowlanders and changed the pattern of local interactions and their collective relation with the Ethiopian state. These dynamics stressed both cooperation and competition in centre-periphery relations by interlinking the interests of agents of the centre in the periphery and vice versa.

Secondly, the thesis contributes to filling the historical gap about the Dube and other riverine societies and their relationships with their expansive pastoralist neighbours in the hinterlands, despite their numerical disadvantage. The study

<sup>1</sup> In light of the regrettable and untimely passing of the author in a tragic accident on 20 May 2023, the editors have completed the dissertation abstract in the absence of the author.

also shows that the lowlands were loosely connected to the Bale highlands, making them peripheries of the periphery, and the region remained in perpetual violence due to its limited integration into the Ethiopian state.

The social landscape of south-eastern Ethiopia was a site of fusion and fission, leading to its continuous reconfiguration through both peaceful means such as intermarriages, adoptions, and alliances, and non-peaceful interrelations such as wars and socio-economic subjugations. These age-old dual societal processes created persistent competition among various states to control the area and diversified its social composition over time. Hence, the dialectic of competition and cooperation in state-group relations, which had its own system of checks and balances up to the late nineteenth century when power intervention changed the rules of the game, had existed.

The historical analysis begins with the incorporation of the lowlands in the empire, and from there, works onwards, chronologically. This dissertation analyses the administration of the vast lowlands from distant garrisons based in the Bale highlands, which changed the pre-existing local power relations using its agents, and was not able to deliver closer governance and justice, and as a result left the region only barely incorporated into the empire in political and socioeconomic terms. Through its viceroys on the periphery based at Goba, the imperial power transformed some local notables into *balabbats* and used them as their agents. Clans' chiefs and traditional figures who had lost power to the new overlords continued to resist the exploitative feudal rule installed in Bale since 1891 by means of various strategies, which eventually became military. Muḥammad Abbaa Ṣanqo led the first uprising in Haran-Bulluq in the late 1920s. This armed resistance was historic not only for its pioneering stance in Bale but also for its alluring of a premature defeat of Bale, whose forces retreated to the lowlands to buy time, during the war of conquest. The second conflict grew out of power struggles on the periphery that began under the leadership of Muḥammad Gadaa Qaalluu in 1935.

The Italian interlude between 1936 and 1941 had a significant impact on Bale, interrupting the half century of feudal rule and introducing administrative reforms and pro-Muslim policies. However, this relative improvement in lowland administration was but short-lived, for the restored imperial regime pursued coercive rule and reinstated the *gäbbar* system. This move, combined with maladministration, corruption, land alienation, and heavy taxation, led to public discontent and regional instability.

Despite the emergence of ethnic and religious catalysts during the colonial era, the restored regime failed to recognize the growing public grievances and pursued a policy of repression. This led to the formation of military alliances, such as the strategic alliance between Oromo and Somali pastoralists based on shared Islamic faith, pastoralism, history of repression, and lowlanders' sentiment. They waged

several wars against successive Ethiopian regimes, with some governors cooperating with them and loyalists serving the state. Riverine societies such as the Dube people also employed their traditional military and multilingual skills in these conflicts on both sides.

Somalia's intervention, sheltering, training, and arming of insurgents worsened the violent state-society relations since 1960. These resistances contributed to the 1974 and 1991 revolutions, with little change brought to the periphery. After 1991, the politicization of ethnicity led to the decline of traditional alliances among pastoralists and introduced new trends in identity-based rivalries, which were unable to pacify the Bale lowlands.

BOSHA BOMBETA, *A Historical Anthropology of Slavery and the Gābbar Servitude System in Wālaytta of Southern Ethiopia, 1894–1975*, PhD Dissertation in History at the University of Pavia, defended on 14 July 2022.

This dissertation provides a historical, anthropological study of slavery and the *gābbar* system in southern Ethiopia's Wālaytta region from 1894 to 1975. Slavery was widely practiced in the area prior to its forceful incorporation into the Ethiopian empire. We have clear evidence of slavery in Wālaytta during the Malla dynasty (thirteenth–sixteenth century). This dynasty was established by the Malla clan and became consolidated by the great fame of *kāwo* Motälämi (Motolomi). This great fame in medieval southern Ethiopia is said to have conquered many neighboring polities and expanded the Malla dynasty territory greatly. Slavery was introduced into the ancient kingdom of Wālaytta through war and territorial expansion. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Malla dynasty was replaced by what was to become known as the Təgre dynasty. Its founders were Təgray immigrants (from the Tāmben area) arriving as traders who, via marriage alliances, became members of the Malla ruling class. Their rule of Wālaytta lasted up to the late nineteenth century. The warfare and territorial expansion begun by the Malla dynasty became core policy of the Təgre dynasty for a century and a half, in which time slaves emerged in the dynasty as a separate social class.

The *gābbar* system, a peasant-lord bond ship imported and copied from the tenure system in northern Ethiopia, was a practice foreign to the people of Wālaytta. This system of serfdom was introduced after the Kingdom of Wālaytta was subdued in the 1894 conquest. Following this conquest, the *gābbar* system severely changed the social hierarchy of Wālaytta. A new class of relationships emerged between *nāfiāñña* and *gābbar* (the northern military settlers and the local peasantry) under which the conquering soldiery and nobility acquired land and tenants, the latter now required to pay taxes and tributes to their new lords. Following the conquest, slave raiding became more rampant in the region.