

## History of Gojjam Agaws: Struggle for autonomy and identity (1300 to 1936)

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the historical trajectory of the Gojjam Agaw people, an ancient ethnic group in Ethiopia, emphasizing their struggle to maintain autonomy and cultural identity amidst state centralization and Christianization efforts during the medieval period. The objective is to illuminate the challenges faced by the Agaw in preserving their distinct heritage in the context of external pressures. To achieve this, a comprehensive methodology was employed, utilizing both primary and secondary sources gathered from the researcher's senior essay, MA thesis, and dissertation focused on Gojjam Agaw history. The analysis includes historical accounts of the 14th-century attempts by Amde-Tsion to conquer the Agaw and highlights the intensified threats following the establishment of Gonder as the Ethiopian state's capital in the 17th century. Results indicate that from the reign of Susneyos (1607-1632) to Iyasu the Great (1682-1706), the Gonderine kings engaged in persistent military campaigns that led to the integration of the Gojjam Agaw into the expanding Christian state. Despite their eventual subjugation, the Agaw continued to contribute economically to Gonder, supplying vital resources such as cattle and agricultural products. In conclusion, this paper enhances the understanding of ethnic identities in Ethiopia, illustrating how the Gojjam Agaw retained elements of their identity despite historical challenges. It serves as a foundational resource for future ethnographic research in Ethiopia, contributing to a broader comprehension of cultural resilience.*

**Keywords:** Gojjam, Agaw, Awi, Christianization

### Introduction

The Agaw people are one of the ancient peoples of Ethiopia who played a significant role in the development of civilization and state-building. During the Aksumite period, the dominant populations in larger parts of the Ethiopian plateau were the Agaw.<sup>1</sup> The Agaws were the basis upon whom the Aksumite civilization was constructed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Indicopleustes Cosmas, *The Christian Topography*, Trans.E.O Winstedt (London: Cambridge University Press, 1909), P. 337

<sup>2</sup>Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 130—132

To incorporate this dominant population, successive Aksumite rulers began to expand southwards. One of the means of incorporation was Christianization of the non-Christian Agaw-speaking people who inhabited most of the plateau of northern Ethiopia. This southward movement of the state was intensified in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium A.D. This led to a protracted struggle with the indigenous people of the plateau.<sup>3</sup>

Aksumite expansion to territories inhabited by the Agaws, to the districts of Abergele, Selwa and Bora. In the sixth century, the center of Agaw resistance shifted to the most inaccessible region of Wag and Lasta.<sup>4</sup> Active expansion of Christianity into the interior of the Axumite Kingdom began in the sixth century, especially during the reign of King Kaleb.<sup>5</sup> According to Tadesse Tamrat, “it is also apparent that within his own Kingdom, his [Kaleb’s] reign was marked by major progress in the spread of the Christian religion among the Agaw tribes of what are today the districts of Wag and Lasta”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Agaws were involved in constant wars with the Aksumite state over expansion and Christianization.<sup>7</sup> This continuous pressure of the Aksumite state against the non-Christian Agaws might have forced them to migrate to Gojjam.<sup>8</sup>

The motive behind Kaleb’s southward expansion was not only religious and political but also economical. In the sixth century, the Agaws were expanding as far as north of *Choke* Mountain in Gojjam from their territory of the upper Tekeze Valley and the Simen mountain regions. It was due to this fact that King Kaleb assigned the Agaw governors as protectors of the long-distance trade route.<sup>9</sup> The long-distance caravan route passed through the territories west of Lake Tana to Sassu. At the beginning of the sixth century, the western frontiers of the Agaw people extended towards the region of Lake Tana and the source of the Blue Nile.<sup>10</sup> Charles Beke also notes that during the medieval period, the western part of Gojjam up to the source of the Blue

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<sup>3</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of Traditional Polity* (London: Oxford University press, 1974), pp.13-14

<sup>4</sup>Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and state in Ethiopia: 1250-1527* (London: Clarendon University press, 1972), p.28

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p.25

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup>Markakis, p.14

<sup>8</sup>Tadesse, *Church and State*, p.28

<sup>9</sup>Tadesse “Ethiopia in Miniature: The Peopling of Gojjam,” Papers the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies Vol.1 (Michigan University, September 1994), p. 956

<sup>10</sup>Tadesse, *Church and State*, p.26

Nile was occupied by the Agaws.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Trimingham maintains that during the medieval period, the Agaws lived not only in Agaw Mider and Metekel, but also in other districts of Gojjam and Gonder provinces.<sup>12</sup>

The assignment of Agaws as protectors of the long-distance caravan route might have allowed the Agaws of Lasta to know the richness of Gojjam in wild game and natural resources. It was this knowledge of Gojjam that attracted Agaws from Lasta. Before the migration and occupation of Agaw Mider and the surrounding areas by the Agaw, the area was inhabited by the ancestors of Gumuz ‘tribes’.<sup>13</sup>

When the political and economic power of Aksum began to decline beginning from the eighth century A.D. onwards, political power shifted to the Agaws of Wag and Lasta around the tenth century. The Zagwe dynasty was said to have extended its influence to the regions of Lake Tana. Many of the monastic centers of Lake Tana were established during the Zagwe period. But when political power was transferred to the ‘Solomonic Dynasty’ in the thirteenth century, the political center of the state shifted to Shewa. Thus, there was no direct pressure from the central state upon the Agaws of Gojjam.<sup>14</sup> It was Amde Tsion (1314 - 1344) who first attempted to incorporate the Agaws of Gojjam. However, his attempt was not persistent. Massive pressure to incorporate Agaws of Gojjam came when the political center of the state shifted from Shewa to Gonder.<sup>15</sup>

The Gojjam Agaw lost their autonomy after nearly a hundred years of resistance against the combined military and religious campaigns of the Christian kingdom. Well-organized campaign against the Gojjam Agaw started during the reign of Sertse-Dengel and continued throughout the Gondarine period and the Era of Princes. The Gojjam Agaws completely lost their autonomy in the late nineteenth century when Ras Adal Tessema united the three regions of Gojjam. These long wars of conquest and Christianization destroyed the people's language, culture, and Agaw identity in

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<sup>11</sup>Charles T. Beke, “Being a Continuation of Routes in That Country” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol.14 (44), p.10

<sup>12</sup>Spencer J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp.26-29

<sup>13</sup>Tadesse, *church and state*, pp.26-27; Tayé Reta, “Gojjam Governorate General” in *Ethiopian Geographical Journal*, Vol.1, No.1 (1963), p. 49

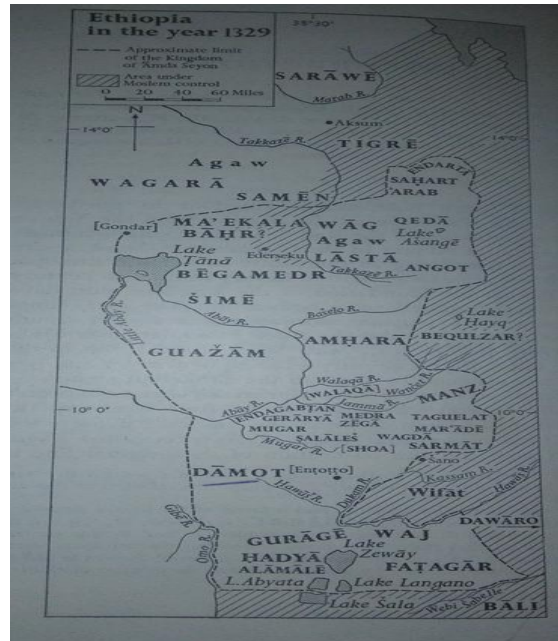
<sup>14</sup>Gétu Ambayé, “A Short History the Monastery of Welete Petros, 1901—1974,” B.A Essay (Addis Ababa University, June 1999), pp.2—3

<sup>15</sup>Tadesse Tamrat, “The Process of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Agaw,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol.29, No. 1(1988), pp. 12—13

large parts of Gojjam. However, the regions of Agaw Mider and Metekel sustained their identity with great sacrifice.

### **Significance and methodology of the study**

Exploring the history of the Gojjam Agaw enhances the understanding of future researchers, administrators and the community about the legacy of the Gojjam Agaws, the outcoming adversities of the community that led to the current socio-politico-economic situations in the region. Nevertheless, the history of the Gojjam Agaws with respect to their movements to retain their civilization, state building, retaining identity and autonomy was not documented. Thus, the major objective of this paper was to explore how Agaw's retained their identity in Gojjam survived despite the long-destructive wars of the Christian state and its agents. Data for this study was gathered from primary and secondary sources during my fieldwork for MA and dissertation research in 1998, 2016, and 2017. Oral data were intensively collected from different districts of Agaw Mider and Metekel, or the present Awi Nationality Administration. Written documents were also collected from different districts of these regions during the fieldwork period and from various libraries and archive centers in Addis Ababa and the archive center of Debre-Markos University. These data were critically verified and analyzed to organize this article. The study employed a qualitative methodological approach that provided an in-depth understanding of the people's struggle to maintain their identity.



**Figure 1. Location Agaw People in 14th Century**

Source: *The Glorious Victories of Amde Tsion*, p.2; NB. The area to the west of the broken border line was inhabited by non-Christianized Agaw people.

## The Struggle of Gojjam Agaws to Sustain their Autonomy and Identity

### Agaw settlements in Gojjam

The Agaws were dwellers of the north and north-central Ethiopian plateau before the rise of the Aksumite civilization. With the rise of Aksumites, the relation between Agaws and Aksumites was limited to commercial relations.<sup>16</sup> Cosmas stated Agaws as a “native race spread over the Abyssinian Plateau both east and west of Lake Tana.”<sup>17</sup> The Aksumite kingdom incorporated parts of the Gonder and Lake Tana region during the sixth century A.D. Since then Aksumite kings particularly King Kaleb (514—542) made agreements with Agaw governors to safeguard gold-trade route to sassu. There was the Agaw kingdom in northwestern Gojjam during this

<sup>16</sup> N. K. Saxena, *Ethiopia through the ages* (London: B. K. Saxena M.A. and Mand Kishore Saxena, B.Sc., 1968), p. 52

<sup>17</sup> Cosmas Indicopleutes, *The Christian Topography* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1897), p.52

period.<sup>18</sup> Thus, using Agaw governors as middlemen, Aksumite rulers sent special agents to bargain the gold. These agents were accompanied by traders who took along with them oxen, salt bars, and iron to the gold bartering area. Natives came to the specific exchange place in Sassu with gold. The traders exchanged meat, salt, and iron with gold silently in the absence of language communication because both groups spoke different languages. In the sketch map of Cosmas's long-distance trade, the place name 'Ziegam' was indicated.<sup>19</sup> This place is found in the southern part of Metekel. However, Wainwright attempted to relate Sassu with Fazogli which is unrealistic. Fazogli is found beyond Abay and is too far from Agaw-occupied territories. There was very vast lowland and impassable Gumuz territories between the Agaw inhabited region and Fazogli. As Taddesse Tamrat indicated, Sassue was a distortion of a district named *Sasse* in Metekel which is located to the west of Sigadi, the former capital of Agaw chiefs in Metekel, and predominantly inhabited by the Gumuz communities where Agaws also lived as their neighbors.<sup>20</sup> 'Sassu' also indicates the possessive form of Sasse in Agaw language to say that the original possessors of gold were the Sasse people.

The Seventeenth century Portuguese missionary in Ethiopia, Manuel De Almeida, stated Agaw inhabitation in Gojjam bordered Ballous [Gumuz] and Gongas [Shinasha]. According to him, Agaws occupied ten to twelve districts in Western Gojjam.<sup>21</sup>

### **Kingdom of Gojjam Agaw and struggle to sustain its autonomy**

The Gojjam Agaws, a proud and resilient people, have maintained their autonomy for centuries, with historical sources pointing to their independent existence long before the 13th century. However, the 13th century marked the beginning of a fierce struggle as the Christian rulers of Ethiopia, first under the Zagwe dynasty and later under the "Solomonic" line, sought to expand their influence into the Agaw heartlands of Gojjam, located south of the sacred Lake Tsana. Their primary weapon in this campaign was the spread of Christianity - a religion that the Agaws fiercely resisted. King Lalibela, one of the most iconic rulers of the Zagwe dynasty (r. 1185–1225), is

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<sup>18</sup> L. P. Kirwan, "The Christian Topography and the Kingdom of Aksum" in *Social Science Miscellanea* 3, p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> G. A. Wainwright, "Cosmas and the Gold Trade" in *Man* Vol.42, No. 30 (May–June, 1942), pp. 52–53; see also *Christian Topography*, p.52

<sup>20</sup> Taddesse tamrat, "Early Trends of Feudal Superimposition on Gummuz Society in Western Gojjam" in International Symposium on History and Ethnography in Ethiopian Studies (November 18–25, 1982), p.3

<sup>21</sup> Manoel De Almeida, *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593–1646*, C. F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (trans.) (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), p. 16.

often remembered for his ambitious attempts to extend the Christian realm. It is said that Lalibela personally ordered his nephew to crush an Agaw rebellion in Gojjam. For a brief period, the Agaws were subdued, with Lalibela's allies even being settled in Gojjam to strengthen the Christian presence. Yet, despite these efforts, the Agaws' defiance remained a thorn in the side of the Christian kingdom. Lalibela is additionally said to have settled his allies in Gojjam during his contention with Ruler Harbe (r.ca.1160- - ca.1185)<sup>22</sup>. Lalibela's victory was fleeting, and the Agaw leaders' resistance continued to echo through the land. By the early 14th century, the Agaw kingdom of Gojjam, under the leadership of Jan Kemir (r. ca. 1300–1324) stood firm against Christian encroachment. Jan Kemir was publicly denounced as a "sere-qemis" - an enemy of God - by the Christian clergy around Lake Tsana."<sup>23</sup> This religious condemnation underscored the bitter conflict between the Agaws' traditional beliefs and the Christian missionary efforts. Agaw society, with its belief in a sky-god named Deban and various local spirits like the soul of Abawi or Ghion, remained deeply resistant to the foreign faith. One remarkable episode of this resistance unfolded when Yafqirenne-Egzi, a Christian priest from the Tsana-Qirkos monastery, sought to proselytize the Agaw population in the district of Beda, located south of Lake Tsana. The local Agaws, determined to protect their beliefs, forcefully expelled him. They were not merely defending their land - they were protecting their identity and culture from an external religious imposition.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the Christian rulers did not relent. In 1316/7, Made-Tsion, the first "Solomonic" king to challenge the Agaws directly, launched an offensive against Gojjam. He managed a brief military victory, seizing the Agaw political center at Amedamit, but his conquest was short-lived. The Agaws, familiar with their land and the ways of warfare, quickly reclaimed their independence. Christianity had not yet rooted itself in Gojjam. In the mid-14th century, a fresh challenge emerged. Abba ZeYohannis, a priest and the founder of the Kebran monastery, ventured into Gojjam to spread the Christian faith. His mission was short-circuited by the Agaw king, Jan Chuhay, who captured the priest. Only after Jan Chuhay's death did the "Solomonic" king Amde-Tsion send troops to free Abba ZeYohannis, killing Jan Chuhay in the process. Yet, despite these Christian victories,

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<sup>22</sup> Geremew Eskezia, "A History of Yelmana Densa District, 1901-1974", (History MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, September 2015), p.8

<sup>23</sup> Taddesse Tamra, "Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527," (Dissertation in History, University of London, February 1968), p.373, see citation number 2

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374



the Agaws remained staunchly opposed to the spread of Christianity throughout the region. For centuries, the influence of Christianity over Gojjam remained minimal.<sup>25</sup>

From the 13th to the 17th centuries, the Agaws continued to dominate the region south of Lake Tsana, especially in areas such as the Amedamit-Gonji region of modern-day Yilmana-Densa. Amedamit-Gonji area of Yilmana-Densa was significant Agaw-Political center.<sup>26</sup> Despite constant pressure from the Christian rulers to the east, the Agaws maintained their political and cultural autonomy. However, by the 16th century, the eastern portions of Gojjam began to fall under Christian influence, and the Agaw leaders, realizing the shifting political realities, began to adopt Christian names. Notably, during the reign of Emperor Ba'ede Maryam (r. 1468–1478), the Agaw king Anbesa Dawit took the Christian name "son of the lion." Later, during the rule of Lebne Dengel, other Agaw kings like Sertse-Maryam and Tekle-Tsion would also adopt Christian names, signaling a slow but undeniable shift in the political landscape.<sup>27</sup>

The most significant turning point came in the early 17th century when Gondar became the capital of the Christian Ethiopian Empire. Under Emperor Susenyos, a new wave of Christian expansion swept through Gojjam. Susenyos' reign was marked by large-scale land redistribution, as he sought to strengthen his rule by granting land to loyal followers - primarily Christian soldiers, royal family members, and the Church. In a decisive move, Susenyos exiled the Agaws from their ancestral lands south of Lake Tsana, redistributing these lands to new settlers, particularly Oromo groups who had supported his rise to power. These Oromo clans, such as the Mecha, Qeiro, and Basso, were settled in key districts like Damot, Banja, and Belaya, effectively displacing the Agaw population and reshaping the region's demographics. Susenyos' popular land award was his land award to Oromo fighters who assisted him with ascending to power. He settled his devotees as *chewa* regiments with guilt-land awards in Damot, Banja, Belaya, and Bajena (Lay Armacheho). Particularly, Susenyos settled the Mecha, Qeiro, Basso, and other Oromo clan members in the locale toward the south and southwest of Lake Tsana. He likewise settled Worreteisha Oromo in Ganj, north of present-day Debre Mewi. The other popular land award of Susenyos was his award made in 1627 in the district of Sekela to his half-brother, *Ras*

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<sup>25</sup> Geremew, p.8; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, (Oxford: the Claredon Press, 1972), pp.195-196.

<sup>26</sup> Geremew, p.6

<sup>27</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, "Ethiopia in Miniature: The Peopling of Gojjam," *Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol.1, (Michigan State University, 1994), p.957; Geremew. P.10



Se'ele Kirstos, and in Debre Mewi region in localities like Meskel-Hatse, Lij Ambera, Tsimas, Kebsa (presently, Jib Asra), Qulchi and Shalgna, and Begemider. These land grants were made by displacing the original inhabitants of the area who were mostly Agaws who opposed church and state expansion into their administrative regions.<sup>28</sup>

Since the establishment of the Gonderine kingdom, Christian kings launched a series of attacks against Agaws living around Lake Tana region and its surroundings. The Gojjam Agaw settlement area extended from Dengleber in the northwestern part of Lake Tana region to Bure in the southern part of Gojjam. Because of constant war with Christian kings, Agaws were forced to evacuate from the lowland parts of Lake Tana. The vacant space created because of the war was soon filled by colonies of Djawi Oromo so that the districts of Maitcha [Mecha], Aroosi[Arusi], Woinadega [Wondaye], Goutto [Gutta], and Yilmana—Densa were established because of these Djawi Oromo settlements during the reign of Susenyos.<sup>29</sup> The Emperor settled these Oromos to assist his forces in the war that was going on in the regions of Gojjam and Gonder during his reign.<sup>30</sup> The king was in a constant war with rebels that broke due to his decree of Catholicism as the state religion in Ethiopia and territories that opposed the expansion of Christianity like Agaws of Gojjam and Gonder.<sup>31</sup>

The nature of the physical environment in the interior parts of Agaw Mider enabled Agaws to defend themselves from the enemy. Their environment was covered with dense forest and had many caves that were used to hide their families, and in some areas even accommodate their animals. During the time of warfare with their enemies, Agaws entrenched themselves within a dense bamboo forest. To pursue them inside the forest was a great risk for the enemy. They were armed with bows and arrows, large shields made of buffalo skin and short spears locally known as *Kafeta*.<sup>32</sup>

Until the mid of the seventeenth century, many of the Gojjam Agaws were traditionalists who believed in a single creator of heaven, whom they called *Deban*—literally meaning the sky-god. They also worshipped in river streams and certain types

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<sup>28</sup> Bairu Tafla. *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Shawa*. (Stuttgart: Steiner-verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1987), pp. 280-281; Geremew, p. 18

<sup>29</sup> James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, Vol. 3, p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> Almeida, *Some Records of Ethiopia*, p. 54

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Bruce, Vol.3, p. 257.

of trees where they sacrificed cows and offered cow milk and butter. They buried dead bodies inside forests placing hydromel and cups around the head of the dead body.<sup>33</sup>

Jerome Lobo describes sacrifice ceremonies held by Agaws of Gojjam around Gish-Abay stream in Sekela as follows:

*On the top of this mountain is a little hill which idolatrous Agaws have in great veneration. Their priest calls them together at this place once a year; and having sacrificed a cow, throws the head into one of the springs of the Nile; after which ceremony, everyone sacrifices a cow or more according to their different degrees of wealth or devotion. The bones of these cows have already formed two mountains of considerable height which afford sufficient proof that these nations have always paid their adorations to this famous river.<sup>34</sup>*

Gojjam Agaws had no centralized administration before their Christianization and incorporation into the central state. Strong pressure to Christianize and incorporate Agaws started during the reign of Susenyos (1607 - 1632) and continued until the reign of Iyasu the Great (1682 - 1706). Each district stood independent and administered itself through powerful and worthy chiefs. They were brave in warfare and successfully defended their territories for hundreds of years from Christian Emperors and their neighbors in the west, Gumuz and Shinasha.<sup>35</sup> Conti Rossini stated the struggle of Gojjam Agaws to maintain their identity and territory from their neighbors and Christian Emperors as follows:

*They have no king, nor any lord to govern them; each district stands on its own, and ruled by those who are most powerful and worthy. They are of a dusky color, less black, however, than the Abyssinians, of good features, Valiant in warfare so long as they have not to seek out their enemy far from their land and contending themselves with defense. So, they have defended themselves for hundreds of years against their neighbors on the west and even against the power of the Emperor, never up to now having paid any tribute. The truth is that the imperial captains and troops have often invaded their country, and taken great booty of cattle, horses, and mares, but have also often retired with forces decimated and great losses of many and good men.<sup>36</sup>*

More organized campaign against Agaws of Gojjam started during the reign of Susenyos (1607 - 1632). The Agaws inhabited in Mountainous parts of Gojjam that were covered with dense forest. Susenyos's religious mission in 1628 was to baptize thousands of Agaws around the source of Blue Nile.<sup>37</sup> The movement in the dense bamboo forest was a great challenge for the forces of Susenyos. The Portuguese

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*; C. F. Clay, The Royal Chronicles of Abyssinia, 1769—1840 (London: Cambridge University Press, digitalized in 2007), pp. 513—514.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> Royal Chronicle, p. 515.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, the translation of detailed description of Conti Rossini on Gojjam Agaws is given in the Royal Chronicle Appendix 'E'

<sup>37</sup>Clay, Royal Chronicle, p.514.

missionaries who were moving with Susenyos's forces stated the movement in the forest as a 'labyrinth' so that it was impossible to break through the jungle. During the war, the Emperor's forces constructed roads by clearing forests by cutting down larger trees. However, this was done through great risk from Agaws who were entrenched inside the forest and armed with bows and arrows, and spears.<sup>38</sup>

Clearing forests during war was a tradition in Ethiopia. Whenever chiefs waged war against other chiefs or in the process of conquering another group of people 'trees were cut down ruthlessly and burnt down with sad waste.'<sup>39</sup> The pressure on the Agaws of Gojjam from the Christian kingdom became intense after the wars of Ahmad Gragn. Serse Dengil (1563 - 1597) and Susenyos (1607 - 1632) invaded occasionally Agaw territories in Gojjam. However, Fasilades (1632 - 1667) and his son Yohannes (1667 - 1682) became more determined to integrate Agaw Mider and Metekel into the kingdom of Gonder. Both rulers of Gonder made repeated campaigns that covered the remotest corners of Agaw Mider. Fasilades faced the stiffest resistance from Agaws of Ankasha that forced him to wage repeated campaigns in 1646, 1650, and 1661 where the forces of the king looted a huge number of cattle and enslaved many children and women.<sup>40</sup> This war of conquest on Agaw Mider and Metekel reached its climax during the reign of Yohannes who conquered every Agaw country. These wars devastated not only human life and properties but natural environment. For instance, in 1669 Yohannes summoned all conquered Agaw tribes from territories of Sikut, Sekela, Qizhe [Gish], Dangla, Kawkwra, Chara, Timhwa, Achefer, and Anbessa Gamma and ordered the people to cut down trees and opened up roads to make accessible all Agaw land for the soldiers of the king. During the reign of King Yohannes, all Agaws of AgawMider became Christians and still referred to him as *tsadiku* (Saint) Yohannes.<sup>41</sup> Christianization of Agaws was carried through force so that the people believed not from their hearts. To express grievances on what Gonderine kings did during the process of Christianization, an Agaw when he went to church said to have exclaimed as follows:

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> E.A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia* (Oosterhout: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1966), p. 132

<sup>40</sup> Taddesse Tamrat, "Process of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of Agaw" in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 29, No.1 (1988), pp. 13—14

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.* p. 14

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*Let all past grievances of the church on Agaws be kept  
in heartbut good morning Church.*

Though the physical features of Agaw Mider and Metekel are generally plain, there are some mountain peaks that were usually used to announce the alarm of the enemy. When people heard the alarm, they retired with their flocks to mountains and caves where Agaws frequently used natural fortresses during the time of enemy incursions into their localities. Mountain plains and caves were the natural fortresses.<sup>43</sup>

Zigem, a district habited by Agaws in the southern part of Metekel, remained a rebellion against the Christian kingdom of Gonder to the last years of Iyasu I or Iyasu the Great. Iyasu and his predecessors made repeated military campaigns, but they could not subdue the people of this region. The reason was the environmental advantage for the local people. This region has considerably maintained ridges at the center of the district that divided the area roughly into two, which was used as a strategic position to control the advance of any enemy movement.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the area was covered with brushwood, full of stiff bamboo, very thorny acacia, and several dwarf shrub kinds that interspersed with *Kantuffa*, which grew thick and in abundance. The paths through this environment were known only to the local communities. It cost severe risk for the enemy to move through it because local rebels had already ambushed upon the first alarm. When the local people heard the first alarm, they drove their cattle to the mountaintops and lodged their wives and children in the caves. There were even large cavities that were used to hide cattle around the mountaintops.<sup>45</sup> After such preparation, men went down to the lowest parts into the dense thickets to launch an attack on the advancing enemy. The enemy became easy prey to the local people while marauding in the unknown physical environment. However, in May 1689, Iyasu the Great launched a surprise attack against Zeegam where he found unprepared local people and their cattle in the plain fields. He destroyed the people indiscriminately enslaved many children and women,

<sup>42</sup>Teferi Getahun, "Analysis of Awngi Proverbs" M. A. Thesis in Literature (Addis Ababa University, May 2000), p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, Vol. 2, p. 431.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

and looted thousands of cattle so that Zeegam finally fell under the control of the Christian Kingdom.<sup>46</sup>

After incorporation and Christianization, the Agaws of Gojjam paid their tribute to cattle. The rate of taxation was a cow in ten every three years. Each individual Agaw possessed thousands of cattle so paying one cattle out of ten was inconsiderable for them.<sup>47</sup> However, items of tribute became diverse during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gonderine kings imposed on districts of Agaw Midir and Metekel different kinds of tributes based on the kind of wealth available in these districts. For instance, Sekela, Dangila, Kwakura, and Azena were paying tribute in honey. Honey was collected mostly from natural forests that were abundant in the region at the time. Trapping bees using beehives for honey production was very limited or unknown by that time. The district of Banja was paying in gold and honey whereas Zigem and Metekel were paying tribute in gold.<sup>48</sup> Macoot (sheep), butter, and slaves were not items for tribute payment rather these items were preserved for gifts to the king and great men of the time. Besides the tribute, Agaw had to present one thousand *dabra* of honey every year. *Dabra* was a large earthen vessel that contains the weight of sixty pounds.<sup>49</sup>

According to Bruce's observation, though Agaws fought a long war with Christian rulers and there were multifaceted devastations, their province was still the richest in Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup> This rich resource made Agaw Mider a bone contention between rulers of Gonder and Damot expansionist that lie the east of it. In 1769, Damot forces under the leadership of Fasil Waregna, launched the largest attack on Agaw Mider. A bloody battle took place at Banja where seven Agaw chiefs like Ayamico, Nanna Georgis, Zeegam Georgies, and four other chiefs who had great influence in the region and had close ties with the Gonderine ruling family were slain at the battlefield. *Ras* Michael's force from Gonder reached Banja after the total defeat of Agaws.<sup>51</sup>

Before the eighteenth century, Gojjam Agaws were the more powerful ethnic group that could raise more than four thousand cavalry forces at a time and a large number

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 448—449.; see also Bruce, Vol.3, pp. 735—736

<sup>47</sup> Jerome Lobo, p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, Third edition, Vol. 5* (Edinburgh: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1790), 402.; Bruce, Vol.3, p.739. Kidanemariam Demlew and Melaku Mengist, "Awi Hizb Achir Tarik" or Short history of the Awi People (Injibara, Tahsas 1988 E. C), p. 43, a manuscript available in Injibara Public Library;

<sup>49</sup> Bruce, Vol.3, p.739.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 258

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp.373—374, 734—735

of infantry. However, several unsuccessful battles and continuous conflicts with expanding Oromos diminished their strength.<sup>52</sup> “The wealth of Agaws was greater than their power” where rulers at Gonder and neighboring regions depended on cattle, honey, butter, wheat, hides, wax, and several such articles. More than a thousand and five hundred pack animals loaded with commodities moved to Gonder town on every market day. Rulers wanted to integrate Agaws not for military power or share power but rather to maximize tribute generated from their region.<sup>53</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the newly Amharized Damot people became a serious threat to the identity of Gojjam Agaws. They wage constant war to control Agaw Mider. Damots began claiming as far as Injibara as their territory. As a result, a protracted conflict took place between the Agaws of Gojjam and Damots.<sup>54</sup> This conflict continued throughout the Era of Princes when Gojjam was divided into three regions: Gojjam Proper, Damot, and Agaw Medir, each with its own competing local lord. Throughout the course of the war of the period, rulers at Gonder provided support for Agaws. An intensive civil war broke out in Gojjam with the death of *Talaku Ras Hailu* in 1795, the founder of the ruling house of Gojjam.<sup>55</sup>

The lord of Agaws during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was known as *Dejjazmatch* Elias. He was repeatedly fighting with *Dejjazmatch* Zewdie, the lord of Damot. Around 1808/9 Dejjach Zewdie’s force with the help of the Oromo cavalry force defeated *Dejjach* Elias and controlled Agaw Mider.<sup>56</sup> However, Ras Gugsu, the Guardian of King of Kings at Gondar, arrived soon with his force and captured Dejjach Zewdie. Following his victory over Zewdie, Gugsu appointed *Azazh* Negiedu as a new lord of Agaws. After some ten years of respite, Damots continued their fighting on Agaw Mider with the accession of Goshu Zewdie over Damot around 1823. Goshu continued fighting with *Azazh* Negiedu and his successor *Azazh* Wossen Tessema. However, as of the 1840s, Goshu entered into a power struggle with his son Dejjach Birru so his attempt to conquer Agaw Mider was left behind.<sup>57</sup> Another lord of Gojjam proper, Tedla Gwalu, also attempted to conquer Agaw Mider as of early 1860s. Agaw chief Mersha Negiedu was fighting with Tedla and he demanded support from Emperor Tewodros.

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<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p.735

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 736.

<sup>54</sup> Ayenew Fenta, “A History of the Awi People” Senior Essay in History ( Addis Ababa, Kotebe College of Teachers Education, May 1998), p. 24; Chekol Tessema, “Ye Ethiopia Tarik” (Manuscript reserved in Awi Zone Department of Information and Culture), p. 12

<sup>55</sup> Fentahun Berhane, “Gojjam, 1800—1855” B.A Thesis ( H. S. I. U, May 1973), p.4

<sup>56</sup>Ayenew, p.27.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

As a result, in 1863, a bloody battle took place in Injibara at a place called Ba'ata between the forces of Tedla and the combined forces of Agaw under Mersha and Emperor Tewodros'. Tedla's force was severely routed and Tedla fled to Jeballa Amba.<sup>58</sup> After Tedla's defeat, another Damot Chief named *Fitawrari Dori* became lord of Damot and began invading Agaw Mider. During this time Emperor Tewodros repeatedly campaigned to Damot to punish invaders of Agaw Mider. It was at this time that Emperor Tewodros reportedly said:

አርሜ ከትኩቹ መንጥፊ ስመጣ  
አገር ክፉ አያጣም ዶሮ [ዶሮ] የሚሉት ወጣ።<sup>59</sup>  
*When I came back uprooting and clearing  
A country never be free from evil that  
an evil man named Dori appears again.*

As above mentioned, destruction of environment or clearing, looting resources of rebel localities or regions was the tradition of Ethiopian rulers. The wars that were waged against Agaw Mider and Metekel from the reign of Susenyos to the rise of Ras Adal Tessema which lasted for more than two hundred sixty years destroyed natural resources of the region and significantly changed the environment of the region. Dense forests were cleared and opened up for military movement. People lost their rich cattle wealth to repeated lootings of royal and other invading forces.

While Tewodros was fighting in Damot, a British man named Henry Blanc visited Agaw Mider and presented social and economic conditions in Agaw Mider during the reign of Tewodros. Blanc states that Agaw Mider was the prosperous region where cattle grazing in the boundless meadows was abundant. Agaws inhabited the region beyond the Kilti River in Achefer to the south and southwest. These people were brave horsemen. Their military skill and braveness enabled the Agaws of Gojjam to maintain and protect their identity and fathers' land from successive wars of Amhara.<sup>60</sup> The region was favored by nature and abounded by horses and cattle. Agaw Mider also fortunately did not entertain the displeasure of Tewodros. However, he was too cunning to exploit the rich resources of the region that had been preserved

<sup>58</sup> Bizualem Berhane, "Adal Abba Tenna: Negus of Gojjam and of Kaffa, 1850—1901, B. A. Thesis in History (H.S. I. U., May 1971), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Ayenew, p. 28

<sup>60</sup> Henry Blanc, "from Metemma to Damot, along the Western Shores of the Tana Sea, and Dr. Blanc's narrative of his Captivity" in Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1868—1869), pp. 42—43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1799445>.



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for years by this “valiant” race. According to Blanc, Amharas treated Agaws as “rude and unchristian”. Though there were churches in their villages at heart they were still pagan. Blanc negates this view as Agaws were more handsome and true followers of Jesus than “self-worshipped Abyssinians.”<sup>61</sup>

The three regions of Gojjam were brought under one administration when Ras Adal Tessema came to power in 1874. He defeated all regional lords of Gojjam and became unchallenged ruler of Gojjam. He united all traditional administrative units of Gojjam: Gojjam Proper, Damot, and Agaw Mider.<sup>62</sup> In 1881, Emperor Yohannes crowned Ras Adal Tessema with a new name *Negus* Tekle Haimanot as king of Gojjam and Kaffa by the ceremony held at Debre Tabor.<sup>63</sup> See the map below to understand the geographical setting of Gojjam Agaws (Awi People)

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<sup>61</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ “From Metemma to Damot, along the Western Shores of the Tana Sea” in The Journal of Royal Geographical Society of London, Vol.39 (1869), pp. 43—44

<sup>62</sup> Paul Fischer, “Gojjam’s Political History, 1881—1932” in History Miscellanea 18 (January 29, 1975), pp. 6—7

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

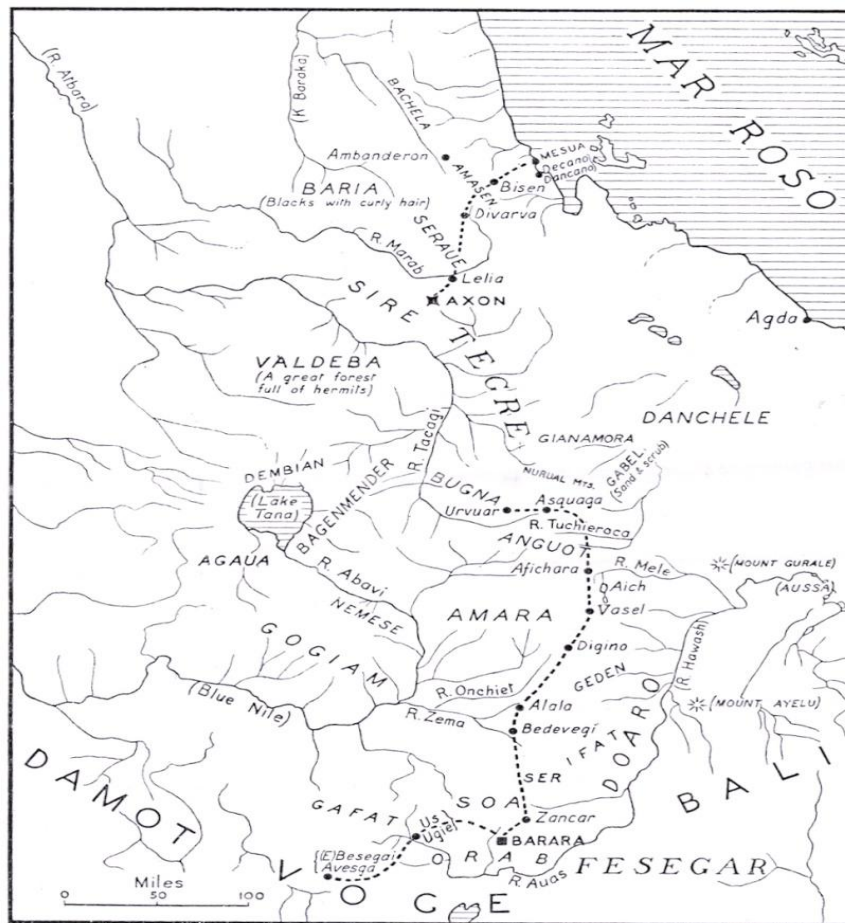


Figure 2. Geographical Setting of Gojjam Agaws (Awi People) to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Source: *Ethiopian Itineraries*, edited by Crawford, p.95

### Gojjam Agaw from Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to 1936

Ras Adal's victory over Desta at the Battle of Ayshal opened a new period in the administrative history of Gojjam. He began administering Agaw Mider through local chiefs. In 1881 Ras Adal was promoted as *Negus* of Gojjam and Kaffa, and was renamed as *Negus* Tekle Haimanot. His territorial question over the south of Blue Nile led to conflict with the Shoan expansionist forces. In June 1882, he fought with the forces of Menelik at the Battle of Embabo over territorial expansion to the Southwest and *Negus* Tekle Haimanot lost the battle. The war was fought without the knowledge of Emperor Yohannes IV and hence the Emperor punished both Tekle Haimanot and Menelik II. As punishment, Agaw Mider was taken away from Tekle Haimanot and given to Ras Alula and Wollo was taken from Menelik and given to his

son Araya Sillassie. Agaw Mider remained under Alula, until the death of Emperor Yohannes in 1889.<sup>64</sup> During Yohannes' punitive campaign to Gojjam in 1889, Agaw Mider escaped the severe devastation that the whole of Damot and Gojjam faced because Agaw Mider was still under Alula.<sup>65</sup> After the death of Emperor Yohannes, Emperor Menelik restored Agaw Mider to King Tekele Haimanot in 1890.<sup>66</sup> Soon after the restoration of Agaw Mider, King Tekele Haimanot appointed an Awi chief known as *Azzaʼ* Anagaw Dārāso over Agaw Mider. The king also gave his daughter named Negest in marriage to *Azzaʼ* Anagaw. *Azzaj* Anagaw was also promoted to *Ras* and renamed *Ras* Mesfin Dārāso. In 1892, *Ras* Mesfin established Injibara town as his center of administration. He ruled Agaw Mider from 1892-1901 until the death of his father-in-law, King Tekele Haimanot.<sup>67</sup>

It was after 1890 that King Tekele Haimanot began to directly exercise his power in Agaw Mider. In 1898, King Tekelehaimanot was in Agaw Gemjabét on his way to Metekel and recruited some local chiefs and priests to campaign with him to Metekel. The priests carried some *tabots* from Gemjabét to install in the areas of Metekel which were going to be conquered.<sup>68</sup> The 1898 expedition of Tekele Hamanot led to the foundation of Assi Giyorgis Church in Zigām. This force proceeded to Wombära and at the center of Wombera, Tekele Haimanot founded the town Däbrä Zäyt and Däbrä Zäyt Maryam Church.<sup>69</sup> On his way back from Metekel, King Tekele Haimanot made

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<sup>64</sup>Bezualet Berhané, "Adal Abba Ṭānna: Nigus of Gojjam and of Keffa, 1850-1901" B.A Essay in History (Addis Ababa, H.S.I.U, May1971), p. 30; Abdussamād Haji Ahmad, "Trade and Politics in Gojjam, 1882-1935" M.A Thesis in History (Addis Ababa University, August 1980), p.18

<sup>65</sup>Paul Fisher, "Gojjam's PoliticalHistory, 1881—1935: A Portrait of Two Rulers" in *History Miscellanea* 18 (January29, 1975), p.28;Bairu Tafla, "Two of the last Provincial Kings of Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, IX (January, 1973),p. 32

<sup>66</sup>Alemneh Melese,"A Historical Survey of The Agaws of Gojjam to 1941" M.A Thesis in in History ( Addis Ababa University,June 2004), p. 37

<sup>67</sup>Ayenew Fenta, "A Short History of the Awi People" Senior Essay in History (Kotebe College of Teachers Education,May 1998),p.28;Alämnäh, p.37

<sup>68</sup>Tsega Endalew, *Inter-Ethnic Relations on a Frontier Metekel (Ethiopia), 1898—1991*( Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag,2006),pp.62-63; "Zikre Awi" Monthly Pamphlet of Awi Zone culture, Tourism and Information Office, Available in Injibara Public Library,p.12; Some of these local chiefs and clergy were *Qäñnazmač* Engida, *Lej* Jember Yimam, *Belata* Bisäwur and *Belata* Kassa Goshu. From the clergy: *Liqä Kahnat* Wossen Woldemaryam, *Qés Gäbäz* Mahšäntu, *Qés Gäbäz* Zäwoldä Maryam, and *Märigéta* Adegäh Zéna, *Liqä Kahnat* Adego Ayčéw and others.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

Agaw Gemjabét Maryam church a *chira gedam* (monastery) on October 15, 1898. He gave 173 *Kumelé* land from the surrounding areas to the monastery.<sup>70</sup>

Agaw Gemjabét was one of the market centers for long-distance trade during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tsega Endalāw noted that the trading expedition from Wombära followed a trade route that passed through Debre Zeyt-Moora- Zigem- Gemjabét-Bure.<sup>71</sup> Abdussamād H. Ahmad also mentioned that the market of Agaw Gemjabét had a strong connection with the slave market of Dangla. This marketplace was a center for horses, wax, and butter. The trade route that connected Gemjabét with Dangla passed through Dangla, Injibara, Kāssa, and then Agaw Gemjabét. There was also another trade route that connected Segadi market with Agaw Gemjabét. This was Thursday's market at Segadi near present day Chagni in Metekel. This market was attended by merchants from Damot, Agaw Gemjabét, and the Gumuz who brought cotton, goats, and *nug* (Niger seed) to the market and exchanged them for *amoles* (Salt bars) and other commodities.<sup>72</sup>

Between 1897 and 1899, *negus* Tekele Haymanot extended his domain up to the gold-rich lowland areas of Metekel to the West of Agaw Mider. In 1900, an extensive military expedition was launched to Metekel with the assistance of Menelik's generals. The remaining part of Metekel was incorporated into Tekele Haimanot's domain during this time.<sup>73</sup> King Tekele Haimanot is said to have empowered the Awi chiefs to collect tributes from Gumuz, Shinasha, and Oromo Communities of Metekel. Some Amhara chiefs were also assigned as inspectors of tribute collection and the trade in civets, coffee, gold, and ivory.<sup>74</sup>

After the death of King Tekele Haimanot in January 1901, Menelik gave Agaw Mider to a Shoan named *Dejazmach* Demissé.<sup>75</sup> In 1910 the governorship of Agaw Mider was transferred to *Ras* Wolde-Giyorgis Aboye.<sup>76</sup> When *Ras* Wolde-Giyorgis started to rule Agaw Mider, he is said to have ordered the whole Seven-Houses Agaw to rebuild the monastery of Gemjabét Maryam. The construction of the monastery

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<sup>70</sup>"Zekre Awi", p.12; History of Agaw Gimjabet Church; National Archive, M.H.W/Q.29.02; interview with: Tayé Berhan, Esmakom and Aba Bāzé

<sup>71</sup>Tsega, pp.77

<sup>72</sup>Abdussamād, p.31

<sup>73</sup>Fisher, p.34; Bazezew Gelaw, "A History of Chagni Town to 1974" B.A Essay in History (Addis Ababa University, December 1991), p.9

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>Abdusamād, p.45; Nega Ayrle, "Centralization Versus Regionalism in Ethiopia: The Case of Gojjam, 1932—1969" B.A Essay in Political Science (Hailesellase I University, June 1970), p.14

<sup>76</sup>Bahru, p.120; Tsega, p.87

started while *Ras Wolde Giyorgis* was administering *Agaw Mider*. But *Ras Wolde Giyorgis* died in 1918, before the completion of the building.<sup>77</sup> *Agaw Mider* was then given to *Ras Hailu* of *Gojjam* in 1920.<sup>78</sup>

In the 1920s *Ras Hailu* had good relations with the regent *Täfäri* and Empress *Zäwditu*.<sup>79</sup> When *Ras Hailu* extended his rule over *Agaw Mider* and *Metekel*, he established customs posts at *Gemjabét Maryam*, *Chagni*, *Injibara*, *Dangla*, *Addis Qedamé*, *Ismala*, and *Zägé*. Customs officials collected custom dues based on the number of pack-mules. They collected a Thaler per mule load of merchandise at each customs post.<sup>80</sup> *Ras Hailu* had also imposed *Yemedejja* tax (tax for fireplace) on long-distance merchants for the right to use the ground for baking bread.<sup>81</sup>

*Ras Hailu* began exercising unlimited power by imposing *Shumet Bejjé* (appointment in my hands). He is said to have removed all hereditary district governors of *Awi* and made new appointments. He collected appointment fees from his new appointments.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, *Ras Hailu* established large private estates in *Awoda* and *Manja* parishes which were traditionally irrigation areas. These estates were tilled and harvested by local peasants. The production was collected in his big granaries built in the surroundings of *Agaw Gimjabet*, *Awoda*, and *Manja*.<sup>83</sup> His policy of exercising *Shumet Bäjé*, excessive taxation, and expansion of his estates in *Agaw Mider* posed a threat to the *Awi* people. He was accused of illegally taking the land from the people to expand his estates. This led to strong opposition against *Ras Hailu*. The representatives of *Awi* went to *Addis Ababa* and appealed their problem to *Ras Teferi*. The representatives came back with a letter instructing *Ras Hailu* to refrain from his oppressive deeds. However, *Ras Hailu* ignored the order and continued with his policy of unlimited exploitation of peasants.<sup>84</sup> The *Awi* people continued to complain against *Ras Hailu's* rule. *Nega Ayele* has stated the struggle of *Awi* as:

*The people of Agaw Mider played the vanguard role in this respect and finally succeeded in having their region removed from the governorship of Hailu. One can safely say that the people*

<sup>77</sup>National Archive, Mersay Hazen W/Q, 29.02

<sup>78</sup>Ayenew Mamo, "Administrative History of the *Awi* to 1974" M.A Thesis in History (Addis Ababa University, 2007), p. 36

<sup>79</sup>Tadesse Bishaw, "A Short Biography of Dejjazmatch Seyum (Later *Ras Hailu*) of *Gojjam*" B.A Essay in History (H.S.I. U, May 1971), p.19

<sup>80</sup>Abdussamād, p. 47

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup>Gizachew Adamu, "A Historical Survey of Taxation in *Gojjam*: 1901—1969" B.A Essay in History (Addis Ababa, H.S.I.U, May 1971), p.4

<sup>83</sup>Interview with: *Belata Bälay* and *Almaw Adal*

<sup>84</sup>Gizachew, p.4

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*of this region contributed to the ultimate fall of Hailu for it was when he lost Agaw Midir that he engineered the escape of Lij Iyasu, an act that resulted in his exile.<sup>85</sup>*

In 1931, Emperor Haile Sellassie took away Agaw Mider from *Ras Hailu*. A year later, in 1932, *Ras Hailu* was imprisoned for his intrigue in the escape of *Lej Iyasu* from Fenché. <sup>86</sup>Following *Ras Hailu*'s imprisonment, the governorship of Gojjam was given to the Shoan, *Ras Imiru H/Sellassie*.<sup>87</sup> *Ras Imiru* avoided many of the taxes that were imposed by *Ras Hailu*. He is said to have made Agaw Mider pay its tax in honey and made Metekel pay its tax in gold from Wombära. He started the appointment of salaried officials to collect market dues and customs duties. In Ankesha, a man named *Negadras Bäwkät* was appointed as a customs official. *Ras Imiru* established the first modern school at Dangla and also introduced a weekly postal service in the same town.<sup>88</sup>

Emperor Haileselassie had appointed *Dejazmach Mesfin Gemechu* over Agaw even before the appointment of *Ras Imru* over Gojjam. *Dejazmach Mesfin* began reforming the traditional system of administration in Agaw Mider. All traditional *gult*-holders were removed from their positions and direct appointees were posted to various districts of Agaw Mider. This resulted in strong opposition from the Awi people who chased all the newly appointed district governors and also decided to fight against *Dejazmach Mesfin* himself.<sup>89</sup> Emperor Haile Sellassie sent a Shewan notable named *Qegnazmach Seyfu* to the area who tried to solve the problem through discussion with the Awi chiefs. But they could not reach an agreement. When his attempt failed, *Säyfu* deceitfully took the leading Awi chiefs to Addis Ababa ostensibly to present their problems to the emperor. Some of the chiefs selected from Ankesha and Azäna were: *Fitawrari Aynalem Fenta* and *Qegnazmach Alem Hailu* from Ankesha and *Fitawrari Ayele Noréh* from Azäna. These chiefs were forced to live in exile in Shoa where they stayed until 1935. In 1935, when fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, they were released from exile and were assigned to campaign on the northern front with the Shoan forces.<sup>90</sup> *Fitawrari Aynalem Fenta* and *Qegnazmach Aläm Hailu* were killed at the battle of Maichew. Although *Fitawrari Ayälä Noréh* was able to return safely to his

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<sup>85</sup>Nega Ayele, p.24

<sup>86</sup>Ayenew Mamo, 34; Bairu Tafla, "Two of the last Provincial Kings of Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, IX (January, 1973), p.46

<sup>87</sup>Gizachew, p.13

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.16-17

<sup>89</sup>Ayenew Mamo, p.39; Ayenew Fenta, p.30

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*



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home district, Azäna, the fascist forces captured him in 1937 together with his two sons, *Grazmach* Zewdie and *Grazmach* Berihun, and beheaded them at Dangla.<sup>91</sup>

Generally, the struggle of the Awi people for their autonomy continued after the removal of *Ras* Hailu. The Awi people challenged *Dejazmach* Mesfin Gemechu's attempt to reform traditional administration in Agaw Mider. The struggle of the people of Agaw Mider against *Dejazmach* Mesfin's reform was interrupted by the Italian invasion.

## Conclusion

The Kingdom of Gojjam Agaws represents a crucial chapter in the complex history of Ethiopia, embodying the enduring struggle of a people determined to preserve their autonomy, culture, and identity. The Agaws, with their deep historical roots in the Gojjam region, navigated a challenging landscape marked by the pressures of state centralization, the spread of Christianity, and the pervasive influence of Amharization. Their efforts to sustain autonomy were not merely acts of resistance but a profound assertion of their right to self-determination and cultural preservation. Throughout history, the Gojjam Agaws demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting to and resisting various external forces that sought to subsume their unique identity into a larger national framework. Their struggle highlights the tension between local autonomy and the centralizing initiatives of the Ethiopian state, a dynamics that has shaped much of the country's history. The legacy of the Gojjam Agaws' struggle is multifaceted. On the one hand, it underscores the challenges faced by minority groups in maintaining their distinctiveness within a unifying state. On the other hand, it serves as a powerful reminder of the rich cultural diversity that forms the bedrock of Ethiopia. In a modern context, where the nation continues to grapple with issues of identity, federalism, and regional autonomy, the history of the Gojjam Agaws offers valuable insights. It calls for a balanced approach that honors the contributions and rights of all ethnic groups, ensuring that the pursuit of national unity does not come at the expense of cultural diversity. As Ethiopia moves forward, the story of the Gojjam Agaws should inspire efforts to foster a more inclusive national narrative, one that embraces the rich tapestry of its peoples and their histories. By recognizing and learning from the struggles of the Gojjam Agaws, Ethiopia can work towards a future that values and protects the autonomy and cultural heritage of all its regions.

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<sup>91</sup>*Ibid*



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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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**Author contribution:** AF conceived the study, collected the data, and made data analysis and reporting.

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