

A History of Modern Incarceration in Ethiopia: The Case of Agew Midir Awrajja* Prison, 1942-1974

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Abstract

This study explores the development of modern penitentiary systems in Agew Midir Awrajja, Ethiopia, between 1942 and 1974. Drawing from archival documents, interviews, and secondary sources, study traces the evolution of punishment from traditional methods to a structured system centered on confinement and rehabilitation, shaped by both global penal practices and local dynamics. The establishment of the Agew Midir Awrajja prison advanced administrative control, yet it faced formidable challenges such as typhus outbreaks and limited financial resources that hindered efforts to ensure adequate health, sanitation, and rehabilitation. Prisoners, many of whom were subjected to penal labor, became an unseen force in the development of Dangela town's infrastructure. By the 1950s, a series of reforms brought tangible improvements like better food supplies, medical care, and efforts toward rehabilitation though the specter of overcrowding remained. At its core, the prison system of Agew Midir Awrajja tells a story of ambition and adversity, of a nation seeking progress while grappling with the weight of its own limitations.

Key words: evolution of punishment, penal labor, rehabilitation, prisoners, overcrowding

Introduction

The concepts of crime and punishment have been integral to cultural practices in every society throughout human history. Nonetheless, the definition of what constitutes a 'crime' and the corresponding penalties have varied significantly. This variation has occurred across different societies and historical periods (Goffman, 1961:24). For much of Western history, punitive measures were predominantly characterized by capital and corporal punishment rather than the modern concept of incarceration. Prior to the Modern Age, most societies employed public executions as a deterrent. Imprisonment served merely as a temporary measure to prevent escape until the sentence was carried out.

Although imprisonment has always existed, its role has evolved considerably over time, transitioning from a punitive measure previously characterized by suffering and lack of purpose to contemporary forms of incarceration characterized by deprivation of liberty and modern penal institutions (Rubin, 2019:2).

Ethiopia stands out among African nations for its longstanding indigenous practices of imprisonment, which date back centuries. Early Ethiopian prisons were typically located on mountain summits, fortified with robust gates that made escape nearly impossible. Pre-Christian rulers of the Agews in Gojjam, for example, confined rebellious opponents or political and religious adversaries on these. Before the establishment of modern prison institutions in Agew Midir, various traditional methods of retribution were used for similar purposes (Tadesse, 1988:2-18; Shimelis, 2018: 105-118).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses an underexplored area of Ethiopian history, highlighting the intersections of colonial influence, modernization, and indigenous penal practices. Examining the history of the Agew Midir Awrajja prison enhances our understanding of how Ethiopia's socio-political transformations shaped its prison systems. Furthermore, it provides historical insights into current debates on penal reform, specifically regarding health, resource allocation, and prisoner management, thereby contributing to broader discussions on the evolution of incarceration systems in Ethiopia.

Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, involving a meticulous analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Relevant published and unpublished materials have been reviewed, cross-checked, and reinterpreted. Additionally, interviews were conducted with former detainees, wardens, and other individuals who have served in various positions at the Agew Midir Awrajja prison. The oral testimonies gathered were critically assessed.

Data Sources

The study incorporates both primary and secondary data sources, including Archival materials, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document

analysis, and other relevant data. The suitability of these data collection methods is discussed below.

Key Informant Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted to gather the necessary data for this study. The researcher engaged in face-to-face interviews, leveraging proximity and familiarity with the specific issues at hand.

Document Review and analysis

The researcher examined relevant literature on the early history of punishments and the evolution of modern prisons in Ethiopia, with a specific focus on Agew Midir Awraja. A diverse range of documents including letters, reports, newspapers, articles, research papers, and other manuscripts were reviewed from the Dangela Woreda, Awi Zone Culture-Tourism Office, and the Debre Marqos University Archival Center, hereafter referred to as DMUAC. To ensure the reliability of findings, these written sources were corroborated with oral testimonies. The data were analyzed through thematic interpretation, comparative analysis, and contextual description to extract meanings, perspectives, and historical viewpoints.

The Ethiopian Context

The history of incarceration in Ethiopia is closely intertwined with the country's political, social, and cultural dynamics, reflecting the complexities of its history. In ancient times, Ethiopia was fragmented, lacking a unified central authority. Regional leaders exercised de facto control, each employing different methods for dealing with criminals. This historical context provides a crucial framework for understanding the early prisons of Ethiopia (Tesfaye, 2011: 99). There is no documentary or credible evidence pinpointing the exact period when imprisonment in cells was established in Ethiopia. This is due to limited historical sources and the lack of extensive academic discourse on the subject. However, sporadic evidence indicates their existence over time and across regions. For example, archaeological findings at Matara, a pre-Aksumite cultural center, revealed skeletons of prisoners still shackled in underground oubliettes. This discovery suggests that the practice of incarcerating individuals in cells existed in Ethiopia as early as the pre-Aksumite period (Stuart, 2005: 45).

Historically, prisons in Ethiopia were often located on mountaintops, known as **ambas** lit. “mountain top”, or in other inaccessible locations to ensure prisoners could not escape. Both emperors and regional rulers banished or confined their most dangerous or unruly opponents and political enemies to these remote areas. These locations were typically reserved for individuals considered to be the most dangerous or threatening to the reigning kings. Thus, the royal prison system served as a means to address the challenges faced by the Solomonic rulers throughout their history. Notable Royal prisons included *Debre Damo* during the Aksumite period, *Amba Gishen* in the medieval period, *Amba Wehni* in the Gondarine period, and *Meqdala*, *Ankober* and *Grawwa* (in *Garamullatta*) in of the modern period (Ayele, et al., 2023: 70-93, Tesfaye, 2011: 99).

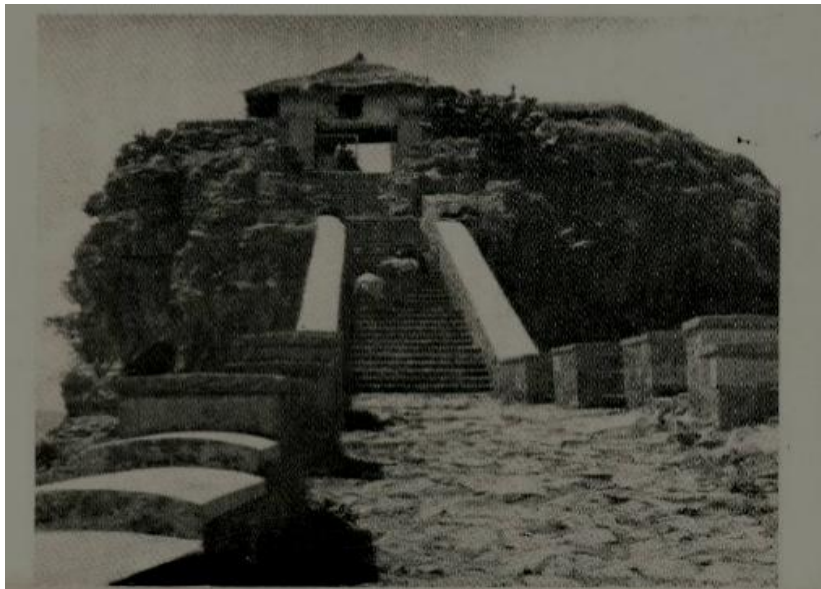


Fig.1. The royal prison of Amba-Gishen, established during the reign of King Widim Ra'ad (1299-1314)

However, most lawbreakers in Ethiopia were often punished through methods other than imprisonment. Foreign travelers and visitors, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, observed that prisons were rare and primarily used for political rivals, before the Italian invasion. Offenders, whether before or after trial, were customarily put into irons or stocks or chained to plaintiffs (Alexander,

2000: 117). Overall, throughout Ethiopia's medieval and early modern periods, imprisonment remained a tool for authority and control employed by successive monarchs and rulers.

In the early 20th century, however, Ethiopia underwent substantial political and social transformations. As a result, a new regime of incarceration, distinct from the earlier amba prisons and personalized enchainment, began to take shape. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, the prison system expanded with the establishment of more formalized structures and institutions for incarceration. Several factors contributed to these changes, best understood within the context of transformations in the Ethiopian political economy (Haile Selassie, 1937:52). Initially, the modernizing Ethiopian state assumed greater control over the prosecution and management of criminality. The 1931 Constitution redefined Ethiopian identity, citizenship, and associated rights and responsibilities, adopting a modernist and nationalistic perspective. As a result, the central government and its administrative structures were tasked with ensuring uniform protection and enforcement of these rights and duties across the country. Gradually, centrally administered courts, police, jails, and prisons took on exclusive responsibility for law enforcement and maintaining order (Mahtama-Sellase, 1970: 767-771). Additionally, this period witnessed the rise of an elite perspective that began to move away from traditional punitive methods towards a focus on confinement and rehabilitation. Significant penal reforms, influenced by European models, were introduced in Ethiopia following Ras Teferi (later Emperor Haile Selassie I)'s European tour in 1924 (Haile Selassie, 1937:52).

These reforms were akin to those implemented in Europe and America a century earlier and were only beginning to influence colonial Africa at that time (Foucault, 1977:215). No wonder then that years later Haile Selassie I (r. 1930-74) was to retrospectively mention the fact that he was able to end the widespread practice of amputating hands and feet as punishment as one of the great acts before he came to power (Haile Selassie, 1937: 47).

Although the exact number and conditions of prisons in post-Menelik Ethiopia remain uncertain, Emperor Haile Selassie noted that prior to 1932, the facilities

used to confine prisoners were unsanitary and detrimental to health. Haile Selassie stated:

“ወንጀለኞች የሚታሠሩበት ቤት ለጤና የማይስማማ ንጹሕነት የሌለው ነበር። ከ1925 ዓመተ ምሕረት ወዲህ ግን ለጤና የሚስማማ የመታጠቢያና የመታከሚያ ፡ የንባብና የጽሕፈት፡ የእጅ ሥራ ትምህርት ያለበት ቤት በልዩ ገንዘባችን አሠርተን ሰጥተናል። በእግር ብረትና በሰንሰለት መታሰራቸውም ቀርቶ በዘበኛ እንዲጠበቁ አድርገናል።” (Haile Selassie, 1937: 52)

The prison housing the criminals was characterized by unsanitary and unhealthy. However, since 1925 E.C (1932 GC), significant improvements have been made using dedicated funds to construct a new prison facility. This upgraded facility includes essential amenities such as a clinic, educational facilities, and vocational training programs. Rather than employing chains and shackles to prevent escape, permanent guards have been assigned to oversee the inmates.

Thus, 1932 marked a significant turning point in the history of Ethiopian prisons. During this period, the emperor initiated the construction of a new prison in Addis Ababa, designed according to modern standards to replace existing facilities, which were widely regarded, including by the emperor himself, as unsanitary and inadequate. Additionally, another modern prison, known as Aqaqi Prison, was constructed and opened on 24 September 1935. This facility featured contemporary design elements, including well-lit and spacious cells, adequate sanitation, a large yard, a library, and a workshop. Notably, the government provided full boarding for prisoners, a novel approach in Ethiopian prison practice. Aqaqi Prison emerged as a model institution, reflecting a shift towards viewing prisons as rehabilitative rather than merely punitive (Haile Selassie, 1937:47). However, the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian War and the subsequent Italian occupation of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941 hindered the government's ability to extend these reforms across all provinces (Christine, 1946: 85).

The preceding discussion provides valuable context for understanding the history of the prison in Agew Midir Awrajja. Influenced by both local and national factors, the institution has experienced a gradual and challenging evolution from its establishment at the time of liberation up to 1974.

Establishment and Growth of Prison in Agew Midir Awrajja

Historical records indicate that imprisonment in Agew Midir has origins dating back to the medieval period. According to Tadesse Tamrat, before the introduction of Christianity in Agew Midir, local Agew chiefs practiced the

confinement of their most dangerous and rebellious adversaries, as well as political and religious enemies, on mountaintops. The most notable of these was Mount Amadamit, a high mountain range located approximately 32 miles south of Lake Tana. This site is recognized as the location where Monk Zeyohannes, was imprisoned by the Agew ruler Jan-Čuhay. Monk Zeyohannes had been detained for his efforts to convert the pre-Christian Agäws living south of Lake Tana to Orthodox Christianity. Tadesse affirms the matter:

“The founder of island monastery of Kebran in Lake Tana, Zeyohannes, is said to have come into conflict with the Agaw when he started preaching on the southern shore of the lake. They arrested Zeyohannes and detained him on Mount Amadamit in central Gojjam, until Christian troops were sent to the area and had him released. The ruler of Agaw, Jan Chuhay, lost his life in the hostilities” (Tadesse Tamrat, 1988: 5-18, 1968: 384).

Prior to the advent of modern forms of imprisonment, punitive measures among the Agews of Gojjam predominantly included methods such as strangulation, boiling alive, application of hot iron, mutilation, and exile. Public humiliation or shaming was also a prevalent practice. Imprisonment in cells as a punitive measure was not incorporated into the judicial system of Agew Midir Awrajja until the region fell to the Fascist forces commanded by Colonel Torelli in 1936. (Kebede Tesemma, 1962: 125).

Therefore, Italian occupation ushered a new stage in the birth of modern prison in Agew Midir Awrajja. While the people were trying to maintain their independence, Italian colonial influence led to the introduction of modern prison system, referred to as “carcere” by the Italians. The onset of this system began in 1936 when the Fascist forces occupied the region and established garrison centers in Dangela, Fagita (now known as Addis Kidam), and Injibara (Kebede Tesemma, 1962:125; Christine Sanford, 1946: 109). This shift from traditional forms of punishment to a structured prison system represented a fundamental change in the penal practices of the Awrajja, reflecting the broader imposition of Italian colonial authority and its institutional frameworks.

Dangela served as the Italian command center, where part of the former British consular office was repurposed into a prison to isolate and punish those who resisted Fascist policies. The patriotic Agews who fought against the Italians

alongside leaders such as Dejjazmach Mengesha Jembere, Lij Däjjazmach Abere Yimam, and Dejjazmach Ayalew Mekonen faced severe confinement and were coerced into providing cheap labor. In this penal labor system, prisoners were forced to work for a nominal compensation of 1.50 Italian lire per day (Alemayehu, 2012: 63, Shimelis, 2018: 29, Interviewee 01).

Unlike Italian prisons at their home, which were underpinned by principles of social consensus and aimed at rehabilitating delinquent citizens, the prison established in Agew Midir Awrajja were primarily designed to reinforce Italian (white) authority through political oppression. The facility was characterized by chaotic and unsanitary with no individualized punishment. Ethiopians were perceived by the Italians as a homogenous, and as a result, they were confined in large, overcrowded cells. In these conditions, female prisoners were particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence perpetrated by both male guards and fellow inmates. The prison, colloquially known as Kerchellie- derived from the Italian word "carcere" for prison-signified the onset of systematic physical confinement. This facility was notably small, with a maximum capacity of only 30 to 40 inmates at any given time (Interviewee 02).

Following the end of Italian rule, a municipal police force was established in Dangela, the political center of Agew Midir Awrajja, in 1942. Concurrently, the Kerchellie, or prison, continued to function in its previous capacity under the Ethiopian government. The initiatives to centralize and supervise the country's prison system, which had begun before the war, were now fully realized. By 1942, along with 56 other prisons across the country, the Agew Midir Awrajja prison came under the direct jurisdiction of the Prison Department of the Ministry of Interior in Addis Ababa, through the central provincial prison office located in Debre Markos (*Negarit Gazetta* 01, Shimelis, 2018: 104).

Due to the increasing inmate population and the deterioration of the existing facility, the prison underwent reconstruction in 1948. This renovation resulted in the institutional separation of the prison from the police station (DMUAC Archive 01). The rise in the number of prisoners was linked to administrative reforms in the awrajja, particularly following the appointment of Däjjazmach Kebede Tesemma as Governorate General of Gojjam. His appointment led to significant

changes in the taxation system, aimed at ensuring that tax revenues would adequately cover the salaries of government officials. In August 1946, he convened elders and government officials from the province of Gojjam in Debre Markos, urging them to support the new tax assessment and classification policy (Shimelis, 2018: 70)

Inmates in Agew Midir Awraja Prison

Dejjazmach Kebede Tesemma's reforms encountered substantial resistance throughout the province, particularly in Agäw Médér. This opposition intensified defiance, leading to increased imprisonment rates. The unrest also provided a favorable context for dissenting figures like Däjjazmach Abere Yimam of Mecha, who incited the peasants of Mecha, Achefer, Gutta, Banja, and Kuakura to reject the new demands. Abere Yimam and his supporters became known as Shiftas (bandits) and attacked Dangela on April 8, 1950, an event referred to historically as *Miyazia Salasa Elqit* (meaning "April Thirty Carnage"), which resulted in numerous fatalities among the town's residents (Ayenew Fenta, 2010:54-56). The conflict had significant repercussions for the prison system in the Awraja. The insurgent peasants subsequently stormed the Agew Midir Awraja Penitentiary in Dangela, freeing imprisoned officials and other detainees. Many of these released inmates took the opportunity to join the rebel forces (DMUAC Archive 02).

In the early years, prison facility lacked modern amenities, with detainees typically housed in makeshift structures. Inmates were confined in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, characterized by inadequate food provisions, poor hygiene, and minimal clothing or other necessities. Detainees were expected to provide their own basic essentials, such as mattresses, bedding, and clothing. The cells in which they were kept were dusty, poorly ventilated, and infested with vermin (Interviewee 02). The prison walls were not sealed, facilitating the proliferation of vermin. Consequently, prisoners were exposed to various disease vectors, including bed bugs, lice, jiggers, and fleas, which led to outbreaks of typhus fever, locally referred to as *täsbo bäšta*. The prison lacked essential medical supplies, such as pyrethrum or DDT, and was deficient in food and clothing. As a result, more than twenty prisoners succumbed to typhus fever in 1952 (DMUAC Archive 02).

Food Supply

The historical documentation on early food supply at the Agew Midir Awrajjja penitentiary is limited, but the information obtained from interviews tells that, from the inception of the modern prison system in Agew Midir, the government provided food to inmates, though inadequately. According to these accounts, the food provisions were far from sufficient compared to contemporary standards. The government reportedly used the scarcity of food as a form of covert punishment, intending to exert psychological pressure on prisoners to foster a dislike for incarceration and deter recidivism. In practice, prisoners were allotted only one piece of enjera (Ethiopian bread) per day (Interviewee 03). Consequently, the conditions concerning food supplies were particularly dire in 1952. The total monthly food budget for the prisoners was merely 105 Birr, an amount insufficient to meet their nutritional needs. As a result, inmates were provided with half of their daily enjera at lunch and the other half at dinner (DMUAC Archive 02).

The year 1956 marked a significant turning point in the history of the Agew Midir Penitentiary. During this period, the government introduced an administrative reform in the Gojjam province, which had a profound impact on both the territorial boundaries and human resources of Agew Midir Awrajjja. Specifically, regions such as Mecha, Achefer, and Yilmana Densa were separated from Agew Midir Awrajjja and incorporated into the newly established Bahir Dar Awrajjja. As a result of this administrative restructuring, the inmate population at the Agew Midir Penitentiary declined considerably, as prisoners from the detached regions were transferred to correctional facilities within the newly formed Bahir Dar Awrajjja. Agew Midir Awrajjja played a crucial role in facilitating this relocation process, with the total cost of transporting the prisoners amounting to 65 ETB (DMUAC Archive 03).

From the years 1942-1956, the penitentiary housed the majority of the prisoners who came from these newly detached regions, especially from Achefer mostly in connection to the rebellion agitated by Abere Yimam. Therefore, the reform brought a positive effect on the overall prison condition. According to my informants, the relocation was not only to the prisoners but also to prison personnel. Likewise, the members of the staff who came from those newly

detached weredas' were transferred to Bahir Dar. For example; the inmate population at Agew Midir Awrajja was significantly reduced from 629 in 1952 to just 34 by August 1958 (DMUAC Archive 03; Interviewee 04).

In a three-month report, the secretary general of Agew Midir, Ayehu Jembere, indicated that the government allocated a monthly food budget of 120 ETB for the inmates. This amount was sufficient to meet the dietary needs of the reduced inmate population, though it remained inadequate compared to provisions for prisoners in other provinces. In addition to this the inmates were getting extra supplies from outside relatives and families (DMUAC Archive 03).

According to the final report dated 4 *Pagumé*¹ 1958, the monthly food budget remained unchanged. Each of the inmates was nourishing one *enjera* per day with two ladles of stew. By the end of the year, the total number of inmates was 34. The report detailed the following breakdown of offenses: five for murder, one for sexual assault, one for witchcraft, seventeen for theft, two for banditry, one for trespassing on others' land, one for arson, three for assault, and three for slave trading, with the remaining inmates awaiting trial (DMUAC Archive 03).

Records indicate that the quantity and quality of food at the penitentiary improved over time. By 1961, a contractor named Ato Berie Mekonen provided enhanced food provisions. Ato Berie supplied each prisoner with 900 grams of *enjera* and one dipper of stew daily for 20 cents, ensuring that the food was adequate. Consequently, the sufficiency of the food led some fined offenders to request judges to drop fines in favor of imprisonment, which reportedly influenced government expenditure (DMUAC Archive 02). The following commentary gives us a clear view of how prison management has improved since 1960's:

“... ጤናቸውን ሐኪም እየጠበቃቸው፣ ስለምግባቸውም አንድ እሥረኛ በቀን በ20 ሣንቲም እየተከፈለው 900 ግራም እንጀራና አንድ ጭልፋ ወጥ ስለሚያገኝ ከቀድሞ አስተዳዳሪቸው የተሻለ ሆኖ ሲገኝ በወጪው በኩል ትንሽ ከፍተኛ ግምት ያሳያል። ምክኒያቱም በፍርድ ቤት በኩል ፍርድ ሲሰጥ ይህን ያህል ብር ብትከፍል ትፈታለህ ባትከፍል ይህን ያህል ወር ወይም ዘመን ትታሠራለህ ተብሎ ስለሚፈረድ የወህኒ ቤቱን ምቹትና ከዚህም ሌላ ምግብ በኩል በቅርብ ዘመን የሚረዳ መሆኑን በመገንዘብ መታሠርን እየመርጡ ጊዜውን በእሥራት በመፈፀሙ ምክኒያት ከገቢው ወጪው መበርከቱን ያሳያል።” (DMUAC Archive 02)

¹ the 13th month in Ethiopian calendar

--- a nurse is looking after their health; and about their food, a prisoner is being paid 20 cents per day and gets 900 grams of bread and a hawk of stew when it turns out to be better than their former administration, with little higher estimates on the spending. The reason is that when the court gives a sentence if you pay money, you will be released; If you do not pay, you will be imprisoned for this number of months or years, he chooses to be imprisoned because he realizes the comfort of prison and also that his close relatives will help him with food.

Another important improvement in the dietary conditions of inmates occurred following May 1963, when Ato Meles Wädaje assumed the food supply contract from Ato Berie. According to his grandson, Ato Abay Deribew, the tender for prison food supply during that period was announced in Däbrä Marqos, the administrative center of Gojjam province. Consequently, Meles Wädaje won the tender, began supplying food to Agew Midir penitentiary in May 1963, and continued this service until the fall of the Imperial Regime in 1974 (Interviewee 05).

Health Conditions

Historically, there was a recurrent occurrence of disease in Agew Midir penitentiary. As stated before, the early prison conditions Dangelä was relentless where the prisoners were confined in cramped and dirty accommodations with insufficient food allocations, inadequate hygiene, treatment, and other amenities. Under such circumstances, the disease that was communicable from one inmate to the other is inevitable. Testimonies suggest that, during the 1940s and 1950s, the practice of concealing excrement by digging a hole was not prevalent. Instead, individuals living near the prison area would defecate in the surrounding fields, posing significant health risks to the prison population. Furthermore, when individuals were incarcerated, they were required to bring their personal clothing and mattresses, which often resembled animal pelts. This practice increased the likelihood of introducing disease vectors, such as louse, bedbugs, fleas, and other vermin, into the prison (Interviewee 04).

As a consequence of the conditions previously described, the Agew Midir Penitentiary experienced a severe and fatal epidemic in the 1950s. This outbreak, locally referred to as ሳኻ ሲቪ (saḳa sivi) or የተስቦ በሸታ (yä täsibo bāšita, lit. “typhus fever”), had devastating consequences for the prison population. This outbreak led to a significant loss of life among the inmate population. Specifically, in 1952,

more than twenty prisoners died from *ye tesibo beshita*, largely due to delays in the delivery of critical medical supplies, including DDT, vaccinations, and other necessary protective equipment. Archival records reflect this situation as follows:

“---- በህክምናም በኩል ዲዲት፣ የተሰበ መከላከያ መርፌ ቱፎ በየአይነቱ በየጊዜው ስለማይላክላቸው በዚህ በሺታ ምክኒያት ባለፍነው ዓመት (ማለት) በ፲፱፻፵፬ ዓ.ም 20 ሐያ በላይ እስረኞች ሞተዋል።” (DMUAC Archive 02).

Regarding medical treatment, DDT and anti-typhus injections (tuffo) were not regularly provided to the prisoners. Consequently, by the end of the year, specifically in 1944 E.C., more than twenty prisoners died from this disease.

Thus, in the 1950s, a major challenge confronting the Agew Midir penitentiary and the wider Gojjam province was the budgetary limitation for medical supplies essential for adequate treatment and maintenance of inmate health. For example, in 1953, the monthly budget allocated for medical supplies across Gojjam province was only 500 ETB. This amount was insufficient to meet the medical needs of the entire province. Consequently, this had a detrimental impact on the quality of medical care available to inmates, leading to numerous fatalities over time. The prison administrator of the Gojjam province expressed strong dissatisfaction with the government's funding, arguing that the budget was inadequate even for the broader population of Gojjam, let alone for the specific needs of the Debre Marqos prison (DMUAC Archive 01).

Before 1956, only prisoners who could afford their own medical treatment were able to receive care, while those unable to pay either died or recovered naturally. However, starting in 1956, the imperial government introduced a policy providing free medical treatment for prisoners in the Ethiopian Empire who could not afford to pay. On October 26, 1956, the government issued a circular to all health centers in the provinces of imperial Ethiopia, announcing the provision of free treatment for indigent prisoners. This policy was implemented based on testimony from a prison warden who reported that sick prisoners lacked the financial means for medical treatment and possessed neither movable nor immovable assets (DMUAC Archive 01).

The government's new regulation to provide free medical treatment for impoverished and vulnerable prisoners had an unintended financial impact on state resources. This occurred because some prison officials misused their

authority, extending free medical care to all prisoners, including those who were financially capable. Upon discovering this misuse, the government issued a warning to prison officials, instructing them to properly verify the financial status of prisoners before granting free medical treatment, ensuring that it was only provided to those genuinely in need (DMUAC Archive 01).

After 1958, prisoners at the Agew Midir penitentiary were provided medical treatment every eight days, significantly reducing the previous health risks. As a result, only one prisoner, Ayen Defersha, succumbed to typhus fever on April 27, 1958, among the 30 prisoners that year. When prisoners died from such an illness, their body was subjected to a medical examination to determine the circumstances of their (DMUAC Archive 01). Additionally, according to another source from DMUAC, in 1970, inmates who could not afford medical treatment continued to receive free care, as verified by prison administrators. If a prisoner who had died was deemed wealthy, their relatives were required to pay 25 ETB for the examination of the body; however, if the deceased was poor, the examination was conducted free of charge. Typically, the bodies were sent to Debre Markos Hospital for examination (DMUAC Archive 01).

Prison Personnel and Separation of Sexes in the Prison

Separation of detainees of different sexes is a relatively recent development in Ethiopia, aimed at enhancing the safety and security of individuals deprived of their liberty and improving prison management. The 1957 Penal Code was the first legal framework in Ethiopia to mandate that male and female prisoners be housed in separate facilities or distinct sections of the same facility, prohibiting any interaction between prisoners of different sexes (Penal Code: 1957). This legislative change had two notable effects in Gojjam Province and specifically within Agaw Meder Awrajja. Firstly, it created new employment opportunities for female prison staff. In response, Gojjam Province hired sixteen qualified female prison guards. Of these, four were assigned to Debre Marqos Prison, while the remaining twelve were distributed across the six Awrajjas of Gojjam Province, with two guards assigned to each (DMUAC Archive 04). The table below provides further details:

Table 1: Recruitment of Female Wardens in Gojjam Province (1959)

Name	Placement
Emet Kasaye Beyene	Debre Markos Prison
Emet Lezaye Taye	Debre Markos Prison
Emet Etenesh Aychew	Debre Markos Prison
Emet Asressie Habtemaryam	Debre Markos Prison
Emet Zemam Zeleke	Qola Däga Damot Prison
Emet Etubé Asres	Qola Däga Damot Prison
Emebet Mamite Zeleke	Agew Midir Prison
Emebet Alamu Tegegne	Agew Midir Prison
Emet Wubayehu Ayana	Metekel Prison
Emet Semegn Tesemma	Metekel Prison
Emet Lawaysh Emeru	Bahir Dar Prison
Emet Alemitu Laykun	Bahir Dar Prison
Emet Alemitu Endalew	Moṭa Prison
Emet Melesech Alemayehu	Moṭa Prison
Emet Yetemegn Kebede	Bichena Prison
Emet Emäbét Lämmä	Bichena Prison

Source: DMUAC Folder No. 213 File No. መ/ወ-2

Among them, Emet Mamité Zeleke and Alemush Tegegne were assigned to Agew Midir Awrajja. These wardens played a pioneering role in ensuring the safety and security of female inmates. In 1954, Alemush Tegegne was transferred to Bichena Awrajja, and was replaced by Lawaysh Emeru, who was transferred from Bahir Dar Awrajja Agew Midir. By 1964, Mamité Zeleke and Lawaysh Emeru, having served as female warders for an extended period, left their positions for unspecified reasons. Following their departure, Asressie Habtemaryam, who had been a female warder at Debre Marqos Prison since 1959, and Tenaye Esubalew were assigned to Agew Midir Awrajja, starting on August 8, 1964, and November 8, 1964, respectively. In 1964, Agew Midir Awrajja had a total of fifteen staff members across various ranks and responsibilities. The personnel included Bogale Swagegnehu and several other guards, each earning salaries of 55 birr per month with additional allowances accordingly. Female wardens, including Asressie Habtemariam and Tenaye Esubalew, were also part of workforce, reflecting the institutional emphasis on gender segregated prison management (DMUAC Archive 04).

Secondly, there was a pressing need to construct additional cells. Between 1960 and 1964, prisons throughout Gojjam Province expanded their facilities with new rooms of varying sizes, numbers, and costs. The construction projects were

overseen by the prison administrators (wardens) who initiated, completed, and inaugurated these additions. On November 6, 1964, Bogole Sewagnehu, the warden of Agew Midir Awrajja prison, inaugurated a new three-room wooden facility. (DMUAC Archive 05). According to sources, the construction of this prison was carried out by both prisoners and local laborers. The funding for the construction came from the revenue generated by the prison industry, which has been accumulating from the labor of the inmates since its inception (DMUAC Archive 06).

Spiritual and Moral Education in the Prison: A Means to Break the Cycle of Recidivism

There is no common agreement among scholars and politicians in the area of what the purpose of prisons should be. Some advocate for punitive measures for those who violate the law, whereas others contend that detention should offer opportunities for personal development to help individuals reintegrate as productive citizens. As Tesfay observes: As Tesfay states:

“Over the years, there has been a lively debate, which is still going on, about the purposes of punishment and therefore imprisonment. While some commentators argue that it should be used only to punish criminals, others believe that it must be to prevent the commission of another crime by that criminal through incapacitating him. Others again insist that the main purpose of imprisonment is to deter individuals who are in prison from committing further crimes after they are released, as well as others who might be inclined to commit a crime. Another and perhaps the most widely accepted perspective is that people are sent to prison to be reformed or rehabilitated.” (Tesfaye Tadesse, 2011:174).

In this context, Kadiri and Haliso argue that prisons should serve a dual purpose: not only to confine individuals who have violated societal norms but also to facilitate their reform into better citizens (Kadiri and Haliso, 2022: 173-182). Similarly, Quan Kofi and Zawada advocate for the inclusion of educational programs within prisons as a fundamental element of rehabilitation (Quan Kofi and Zawada, 2022: 73-81).

Many scholars concur those rehabilitative measures, such as education, are crucial for the reintegration of inmates. Among various educational approaches, Solomon Belay contends that spiritual and moral education is particularly effective in fostering a law-abiding society. He argues that spiritual and moral education has long been central to Ethiopian culture, positively influencing

individual, familial, communal, and institutional life for millennia (Solomon Belay, 2012: 194). During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, spiritual and moral education extended beyond religious institutions and schools. In the 1960s, priests, particularly those known as abenefs (spiritual father for inmates), were recruited to provide literacy instruction in Amharic and moral education in prisons throughout Gojjam Province (DMUAC Archive 02).

On September 27, 1964, the Gojjam Province government sent a formal request to the director of prisons, seeking approval to recruit spiritual fathers, to provide spiritual education to inmates across the province's penitentiaries. The proposed compensation for these positions was five ETB per month. A month later, on October 25, 1964, the director of prisons, Chanyalew Täšomä, approved the request, permitting the recruitment of the priests at the specified salary, which would be funded through the 'prison industry' until a formal budget was allocated by the central government. The director subsequently outlined the specific duties to be assigned to the employed priests:

“የተዋህዶ ሃይማኖትን እስረኞች አውቀው እንዲገኙ ማድረግ፣
 ሀገርና ንጉሥን የመውደድ ትምህርት መስጠት፣
 በቀለም ትምህርት ማንባብና መጻፍና ማሰልጠን፣
 ታዛዥትና ታማኝነት በእሥረኞች መካከል በከፍተኛ ደረጃ እንዲገኝ ማስተማር፣
 በእነ ነፍስነት ኑዛዜ መቀበልና የንስሐ ጸሎት ማስተማር፡፡” (DMUAC Archive 02)
*To make inmates aware of Orthodox Tewahido faith,
 Instruct to love their country and the King,
 Teach reading and writing,
 Teach obedience and loyalty among inmates at a greater level,
 ccept the confession and teach the penance prayer.*

According to Abba Asaye, the religious instruction provided to prisoners every Sunday aimed to encourage them to amend their immoral behavior, abandon their criminal activities, and become law-abiding and God-fearing citizens. This initiative was intended to aid their successful reintegration into society and help break the cycle of crime. The program continued until the fall of the regime (Interviewee 06).

In addition, a program known as Adult Basic Education was implemented in Agew Midir Awrajja in 1968. Girmaw reports that selected students from Dangela and Gemjabet schools conducted educational campaigns in rural areas of the

Awrajja from 1968 to 1970. These educators, referred to as Beherawi Yefidäl Serawit (national army of alphabets), were paid a monthly salary of 10 birr (Girmaw Getahun, 2019, p. 58). In Agew Midir penitentiary, prisoners also benefited from this program. Asaye Anteneh, a Yefidäl Serawit and current informant, was the first to provide adult basic education in the prison from 1968, focusing on reading and writing in Amharic, mathematical numerals, and basic arithmetic operations. Instruction was conducted weekly, usually on Sundays, under a Shola tree (*Syzygium calophyllifolium*) still standing inside the prison (Interviewee 06).

Finally, the communist regime under Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariyam took power in 1974. Haile Selassie, the founder of modern prison system, was finally taken off to prison in the backseat of a Volkswagen and imprisoned in his palace, which Mengistu referred “*Marefyä Kifil*”, lit. “Resting room” (Mengistu Haile Mariyam, 2004: 163-164).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of imprisonment in Ethiopia is closely linked to the nation’s political, social, and cultural contexts. Historically, Ethiopian prisons were commonly situated on mountaintops or other remote areas. Different regional rulers exercised de facto authority, each employing their own methods for handling criminal offenders.

The Italian occupation of 1936 marked the beginning of a modern prison system in Agew Midir Awrajja, which the Italians referred to as “carcere.” After the liberation, the Imperial regime focused on centralizing administrative control and maintaining civil order by establishing police stations across the country, including in Agew Midir Awrajja. The establishment of modern Ethiopian police stations can be traced back to 1942, when a law created a department within the Imperial Ministry of Interior, leading to the founding of the police station in Dangela. Alongside the town police force, a prison was also established in Agew Midir Awrajja shortly after the liberation. Initially, the prison consisted of a small, makeshift enclosure within the police station, which often faced overcrowding as the inmate population grew. This overcrowding led to unsanitary conditions,

which contributed to the spread of the deadly communicable disease known as tesbo beshita, resulting in numerous inmate deaths over time.

The prison was deficient in essential rehabilitative resources, including workshops, educational facilities, classrooms, and a library, and provided no opportunities for inmates to engage in activities beyond basic manual labor. This limitation significantly impaired its rehabilitative effectiveness. These shortcomings in the prison reflect the wider challenges faced in the broader effort to develop and maintain a modern and efficient prison management system in Ethiopia during the reign of Haile Selassie.

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Author Contributions: AC conceptualized the study, conducted the data collection, performed the data analysis, and contributed to the interpretation and reporting of the findings.

Declaration

I declared that this study is my own work and sources as well as materials used for the reconstruction of this work have been dully acknowledged.

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Interviewees

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- Interviewee 04. Interview with: Ato Atnafu Kasa, Abba Asaye Anteneh, and Abba Maru Tarekegn, Interviewed on 10/2/2022
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