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## **The Question of Land Ownership and Its Implication on the Economic Development in Ethiopia**

It can be said that Ethiopia has been created by the Abyssinian King Menelik II at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; he was the only African leader to participate in the scramble for Africa with European states. The only difference is he expanded his territory to the countries of his southern neighboring nations and colonized them (Bulcha 1988:34). According to historically documented facts compared with other colonial conquests the Abyssinian colonization was the worst brutal occupation according to people killed and sold in slavery (Abbas 1995:1-21). After the occupation the land and peoples of the new colonial territory were divided among the Abyssinians. The new colonial landless subjects were forced to farm the land of the new landlords. These landless people were forced to handover up to 75% of their agriculture products to the landlords. That is why these people struggled to regain their stolen land for many decades. The slogan “Land to the tillers” of the student movement starting from the very beginning was secretly arranged by the Oromo President of the paper stamp of Haile Sellasie Parliament and his fellow, Oromo Chairman of the University Students Union, Baro Tumsa (Lata 1999:192). As Horowitz wrote about the 1974 Revolution “in Ethiopia, a major effect of a land reform was to take land from Amhara and distribute it to the Galla, and for a time the revolution is suspected of being a Galla plot ” (Horowitz 1985:8). The revolution was gradually high jacked from the colonized nations by Abyssinian military elite. The result of the revolution was the land reform of 1975 which destroyed colonial landlords; the military government nationalized their property, but refused to distribute it for the landless people (Lefort 1983:89-90). The state became the only landlord in the country. The military government projected to destroy the Oromo national movement by settling seven million Abyssinians on the Oromo territory and moving the Oromo people to new villages to control them (Melba 1988:105-8). The collective struggle of oppressed peoples again destroyed the brutal military government in 1991. The contemporary government formed and led by the Tigrean Liberation Front (TPLF) monopolized military, political, ideological and economic power in the country (Young 1996:105). This group is collaborating with new super-class of the world (Rothkopf 2008) selling only the land of colonized people. The paper discusses the land ownership under three regimes of Ethiopian government and tries to answer

the question “Why Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries of the world whereas it has the biggest water resource, fertile land and manpower?”

## **Introduction**

### ***The creation of the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Abyssinian King Menelik II***

In the history of colonialism, the strong states first of all expanded their territories by war of conquest to their neighboring states. The colonization of overseas countries was the last type of this alien rule.

Colonialism existed in the history of the human kind for a very long time. Historical sociologist Michael Mann documents in his four volume book “The Sources of Social Power” the creation of the first empire in the recorded world history which is Sargon of Akkad in Near East. Sargon became the first personality to build empire. Sargon conquered city-states of Sumer in about 2310 B.C., and became the first “empire” recorded in history. His Akkadian dynasty ruled and enlarged the Mesopotamian Empire for almost two centuries (Mann 2007:131-34).

The American scholar on colonialism Ronald J. Horvath, who taught at the then Haile Sellasie I University in Finfine (Addis Ababa) (1963-65) and had done a field research in the Empire adds theoretical bases for the argument of the existence of colonialism in all civilizations. He criticizes scholars of Humanity studies, because of the lack of general definition of colonialism in the cross-cultural perspective and gives his own definition based on historical facts from different parts of the world. Horvath correctly argues that colonialism is not only characteristics of particular civilization (Western Civilization), and to consider it as peculiar features of particular civilization is “simply to ignore the full range of reality... every major and minor civilization has sought to extend its borders and its influence, and Colonialism is not to be equated by only with the civilized (cultures having cities and literate population); pre-civilized people too, have colonized” (Horvath 1972:3). Colonialism is a form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over territory and / behavior of other individuals or groups. There exist two basic types of domination: inter-group and intra-group domination.

Inter-group domination refers to the domination process in culturally heterogeneous society when the people of one culture dominate the people(s) of different culture, whereas intra-group domination concerns the situation in which one group of the same culture

dominates the other groups (for example, class political domination of one group by other group from the same cultural space).

In the Ethiopian Imperial state there can be found both types of domination. The domination of the Abyssinian government over the colonized peoples like Oromo, Afar, Somali, Sidama, and other nations is the inter-group domination. At the same time, within the Abyssinian society there exist the intra-domination of the ruling political elite against the other defeated group (which is the history of Abyssinian statehood between Amhara and Tigrai elite).

Before we go directly to the discussion on Ethiopian state formation taking advice from French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville “Without comparisons to make, the mind does not know how to proceed” (Almond & Powell 1992:3), comparison is fundamental to all human thought and the methodological core of the scientific method. In the same line with Tocqueville the great American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset also points out the importance of comparison “an observer who knows only one country knows no countries. Without comparison, there is no way of knowing whether particular practice or behavior is unique to the society in question or common to many”. (Fukuyama 2011:18). My argument is that colonialism is very old in the human history which “predates capitalism, playing an important role in imperial expansion during antiquity” (Boswell 1989:182). Colonialism is the direct and formal political acquisition of states or territories in the periphery; it is but one form of Imperialism (Etherington 1984). Colonization establishes a hierarchal organization that has monopolistic privileges over peripheral land, labor, production or trade. It destroys competition in export and import trade.

To substantiate our argument of colonialism as global phenomenon which existed in many parts of the world used by different nations to dominate other nations we bring only very few examples from Africa, Asia and Europe of how the first states colonized their neighbors. To start from our own continent: the first colonization occurred in West Africa when the Moroccan Sultan won a tremendous victory in the battle of Al-Ksar al-Kabir against the oversea invading power of Portuguese army in 1578, which the historians have called “one of the decisive battles of the world ” (Davison 1965:81). The defeat of the Portuguese army in the hand of Morocco ended for many years the idea of the European conquest of North Africa. The victory of Morocco on its northern neighbor encouraged it to turn its interest to southward area of Western Africa to capture the source of wealth of the territory. The sultan Mulay of Morocco sent his army where “half of these arquebus-carriers were Spanish Muslims and the other half Christian renegades – Portuguese and Spanish prisoners

who had agreed to serve in the Moroccan armies and accept Islam, rather than suffer death or long imprisonment.”(Ibid). The army with cannons, horse men armed with the arquebus and cavalry equipped with long spears conquered the famous Songhay Empire in 1591. This conquering army devastated the center of commerce and education of West African cities Timbuktu and Gao. From these cities and from other parts of the kingdom they looted valuable wealth and took it back to Marrakesh, where fine palaces were afterwards built on the profits of this piratical war. This invading army of Morocco destroyed one of the richest states in West Africa at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In Europe, Ireland is a good example where the expansion of England to this neighboring country starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and finalized by Oliver Cromwell occupation of the Ireland had made it practically the first English colony (1649-1653) (Honzák &Pečenka 1998:119); anyhow, the Irish people did not accept being the colony and fought a very long struggle to their independence. During this brutal war of conquest up to a third of Ireland’s pre-war population was dead or in exile. Almost all lands owned by Irish Catholics were confiscated and given to the British settlers (Hroch & collective 2005:131). After almost three hundred years of colonial rule, the long struggle brought independence to Irish people in 1921 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Ireland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Ireland))

The Asians also colonized their neighbors: for example, Korea was under Japan colonial rule from 1910 to the end of WWII when with the help of the USA the colonial power was expelled and Korea gained its independence.

The first European colony established outside the continent is Ceuta, colonized by Portugal in 1415. The colonial process of Western European states took many centuries to conquest numerous parts of the world, finally at the infamous Berlin conference held since 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1884 to 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1885 (Boahen 1994:33) when it was agreed how to divide Africa between themselves. These negotiations were known as “scramble for Africa” (Oliver & Atmore 1967:111). In this scramble for Africa all African territories became the colonies of Portugal, France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Germany except two states, which were considered as only independent states (Abyssinia and Liberia). I consider Liberia as colony of American-Africans who occupied and ruled the territory from 1847-1980. As Fenner Brockway put it “Liberia was never constitutionally a colony, but it owed its inception and maintenance to Americans and has remained an American neo-colonial state, Jehudi Ashmun, a white American who can be termed the founder of Liberia. He gave it a government and a frame of laws and initiated commerce overseas” (Brockway 1973:384).

All this shows that colonialism is not a result of only some exceptional civilizations, it was existing in all civilizations of humanity and it is colored blind alien rule.

### ***Abyssinian conquest and colonial rule***

This part of the continent was in conflict between the Abyssinian kingdom and different nations of Cushitic language family for many centuries. We cannot determine when this conflict was started because of lack of documented data but what we are sure is that the first mentioned name of “Somali” appeared in an Abyssinian hymn celebrating the victories of the Abyssinian king Negus Yeshaq (1414-29) against the state of Ifat (which later became state of Adal) (Lewis1955:13). From this time on much historical literature are available on the conflict between Abyssinia and two main nations of Cushitic people (Oromo and Somali). The great violent conflict between Abyssinian kingdom and the Adal state based in ancient city of Harar was the 16<sup>th</sup> century offensive war against the repeated devastating wars by Abyssinian army in lowlands of different subgroups of Somali people (Henze 2001:83-86). The offensive war was led by the Sultan of Adal Imam Ahmad bin Ibrahim al-Gazi between 1529 and 1543.

The interference of European state – Portugal – in the Horn of Africa’s conflict also started in this conflict. Starting from 1493, the Portuguese King’s Joao II messenger Pero da Covilhão was an influential advisor of the Abyssinian imperial household. King Lebna Dengel asked the Portuguese government for military support. The Abyssinian King gained support of modern armament and soldiers from Portugal, a major sea power of the time in the Indian Ocean. The “400 Portuguese, well-armed musketeers under Christovão da Gama, vasco, landed in Massawa on 10 February 1541. They brought great quantities of arms, including canons, gunpowder, and other supplies and were accompanied by nearly 150 craftsmen, gunsmiths and slaves” (Henze 2001:88). The foreign power participation in the war forced the Adal Sultan to look for help from the Ottoman Turk representative in Yemen: he received 900 well armed reinforcements. The conflict between Somali nation and Abyssinia starting from the first part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century did not end with victory of one group. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Menelik II in the worst brutal conquest and colonization process in African colonial history captured part of the Somali land and included it into his new colonial territory (Abdi 2007: 21-24).

Various Ethiopian governments went many times to war with Somali state because of Ogaden Somali. The known wars took place during the Haile Sellasie reign in 1964, during the Mengistu military government the worst devastating war was that of 1977-78 (Laitin and

Samatar 1987); the contemporary government led by Tigrian power elite gradually helping one faction against the other Somali power hunger groups realized direct occupation in 2006-2009 sending 40,000 soldiers in which 16,000 Somalis were killed by this occupation alien army. There are many researches done on the Ethiopian war criminal acts in Somalia by international organizations and individual experts on the region; I shall quote some examples to show the action of Ethiopian army in Somalia. One of the organizations intensively working on the violation of human rights is the Human Rights Watch concludes in its research of 2007: "Ethiopian forces failed to take all feasible precautions to avoid incidental loss of civilian life and property, such as by failing to verify that targets were military objectives. Ethiopian commanders and troops used both means of warfare (firing inherently indiscriminate "Katyusha" rockets in urban areas) and methods of warfare (using mortars and other indirect weapons without guidance in urban areas) that violated International humanitarian law. They routinely and repeatedly fired rockets, mortars, and artillery in a manner that did not discriminate between civilians and military objectives or that caused civilian loss that exceeded the expected military gain. The use of area bombardments in populated areas and failure to cancel attacks once the harm to civilians became known is evidence of criminal intent necessary to demonstrate the commission of war crimes. The Ethiopian forces also appeared to conduct deliberate attacks on civilians, particularly attacks on hospitals. They committed pillages and looting for civilian property, including medical equipments from hospitals" (HRW 2007:9). This war of occupation made the worst human agony in Somalia in which 3.5 million Somalis were faced external emergency assistance.

The people who faced this humanitarian catastrophe represented more than 40 percent of the population of south-central Somalia region and they did not receive emergency need, because of brutal conflict in the region (HRW 2008:78). As a very many years observer of the conflict in Somalia wrote about humanitarian workers in Somalia "But the one thing that is certain are the casualty rates among the aid providers which currently earn Somalia as the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarian workers" (Menkhaus 2008:5). The endless violent conflict in Somalia made Kenya the host of largest refugees in the world. The longest bloody conquest war was against the Oromo nation (the second largest nation after Hausa of West Africa), which took place from 1872 to 1899 (Bulcha 1988:34). This conquest war reduced the population of Oromo nation from 10 million to 5 million people (de Salviac 2005); half of the nation's people (Bulatovich 2002:12) were killed, captured in the battle and sold to slavery by King Menelik – the Butcher of Oromo. Other neighboring nations of Oromo also faced holocaust in the hand of Menelik predatory army, such as

Kaficho kingdom 67 % of its people, Gimira nation 80 % and Maji 90 % were killed or sold to slavery (Pankhurst 1968:111, Bulcha 2002:72). According to the Abyssinian monk historian Bahrey (1593), the Abyssinian expansionist war against Oromo goes back starting from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During that time both warring parties had similar armaments, though the Oromo protected their territory from their enemy. The writer starts his infamous book with hatred against Oromo nation as a group of people who were created to kill other people. In his words “I have begun to write the history of Galla in order to make known the number of their tribes, their readiness to kill people, and brutality of their manner” (Bahrey 1967:111). This line of thinking against Oromo nation starting from this author until contemporary Abyssinian writers (Gerbee 1993) and their European collaborators continues until today (Ullendorff 1960:76).

### ***Slavery under Abyssinian colonialism***

Traditional society's political system is the reflection of their culture which they developed through the process of long way of development. Oromo people's Gadaa system was a democratic system in which political leaders in all hierarchy of administration were elected according to male suffrage since ancient time until the colonial ruler prohibited it when Oromo lost its sovereignty (Legesse 1973, 2000).

Plowden who was in south western Oromo country in 1840's and British diplomat in Abyssinia, visited the Gibe kingdoms before colonization and tells us his eye witness about all, what he observed in the Oromo society in these words: „Owing to the republican system ... an Oromo is well off in the world, and has a sufficient of food, clothing, meat and other luxuries, ploughs his own ground, reaps his own corn, guards his own cattle at pasture, and cleaves his own trees for firewood ... slaves are never sold, and are treated as ordinary servants” (Melba 1988: 65) .

Plowden, W.C. saw slaves as normal servants in this trade center of Horn of Africa, but it seems to be very rare having slaves as servants also in other parts of Oromo country especially in the east and southern Oromo country. Depending on Margery Perham's survey which was first published in 1948, she writes: „In Harar province as a whole, the Galla (Oromo) population was not slave owners” (Perham 1969: 222). But later when Abyssinians colonized the region, the Amhara soldiers who occupied the province on behalf of the colonial government owned many slaves and it was considered that even after the prohibition of slave-dealing a certain amount of traffic went on underground to supply their needs (Ibid).

The subjugated people under Abyssinian colonial yoke faced many harsh notorious actions, mainly the Maji and Kaffa people – southern neighbors of the Oromo nation. Slave raiding and lucrative slave trade brought great amount of wealth. Since the Amhara colonization until the invasion of Italy (1936-1941) slave trade reached a climax of profit depopulating the region. „Eye-witnesses at Maji and at other places near Sudan border stated that whole areas of the country had been completely devastated and that the remains of villages overgrown with bush could still be seen” (Perham 1969: 220). The chance of the Oromo people was not different from other sister neighboring nations, who had fallen under the Abyssinian subjugation: they were sold as slaves in the market, given as a wedding gift, during marriage between royal families, as domestic slaves and male as eunuchs. At one time Menelik and Taitu owned a large estate of 70,000 slaves. The Oromo people tried all alternatives to protect themselves from this horrendous, barbaric act against them. Some fled to the forest, whereas some took refuge in British Sudan, Kenya and British Somalia to escape slavery.

„The first exodus of refugees fled Oromo land in the late 1880’s following the incorporation of Oromia into the Abyssinian Empire. Able bodied men left their wives and children, opting to live under British colonialism in surrounding countries rather than fall victims to a nihilistic policies of land-hungry Emperor” (quoted by Bulcha 1988:41). Remaining Oromo in many different parts of Oromo country locally organized themselves and resisted by armed struggle. Slavery, the coming of famine stricken Amhara – Tigre people to the south during 1888 – 1892 Abyssinian great famine, gabbar system, anti-colonial war against invaders reduced the population of Oromo to half compared to pre-colonial period. The Russian officer Lt. Alexander Bulatovich who was in Illu Abba Bor in 1896 as guest of Menelik wrote this verdict: „Ten to twelve years ago this countryside was completely settled, and of course, there wasn’t a piece of good land left uncultivated. But cattle disease led to famine and destruction of the population during the subjugation of the region has half depopulated it. Riding through, every minute you come across straight lines of ... cactus among the overgrowth, indicating former property boundaries of the former fence of a farmstead. Now the territory all around is completely overgrown with bushes ... Rarely, you can come upon a Galla (Oromo) settlement ... On November 16 we ... spent the night at the home of a Galla. The family consisted of the host (the father of whom was killed by Abyssinians during the subjugation), his mother and two wives. One of the wives was exceptionally beautiful. The host himself, apparently, reconciled with his fate, but his mother looked on Abyssinians (escorting Bulatovich) with fear and anger and sat by fire all night



long.“ (Bulatovich 2000:12). The population of Oromo people estimated between 1850 and 1870 to be about ten million people, later in 1900 the same author, Martial de Salviac, the French historian reported that the population reduced only to five million people (Melba 1988:66). If it was left out within the period of this time the population of this nation would be doubled. Depopulation of the colonized peoples was common in Oromo neighboring nations, for example Abyssinians reduced the population of Kaffa from 1.5 million to 20,000, of Burgi from 200,000 to 15,000, of Gimira from 110,000 to 10,000. In Maji in 1920 the figures collected showed that the number of taxpayers was estimated to be in the neighborhood of 30,000; it had been reduced by 1935 to 780 taxpayers representing the population of 3,000 or 4,000 (Perham 1969:220). The Kaffa kingdom existed as strong state starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Huntingford1955:104, Markakis 1974: 58) and other recent historian argues that the kingdom has its roots far in the Medieval period (Woldemariam 2010:107). During the Menelik conquest war and raiding the people to be sold as slaves the inhabitants of former strong kingdom of Kaffa suffered extremely: “raiding automatically declined the population having been, almost exterminated” (Pankhurst 1968:111). In 1938 the population of Bonga, the capital of the Kaffa kingdom, was 3,000 out of which about only 200 were Kaffa (Huntingford 1955:105). Alas! Cushitic and Nilotic peoples became like goods, which can be exported and their numbers reduced dramatically. Is this not holocaust? When the European ‘big powers’ divided the African continent among themselves, one of their official slogans was to abolish slavery from Africa, whereas their local partner – Abyssinia, in some area introduced slavery and in other areas expanded it as well as the slave trade in a very wide manner like what Portuguese had done in opposite side of African continent starting from 1484 in Angola. When Ethiopia applied to the League of Nations in 1919, her application was rejected because of her lack of ability to fulfill the obligations as a member-state abolishing slavery. Three years later the opposition of her was continued not to accept to the League of Nations and “When the British Minister had asked the Regent if he would accept aid from the League of Nations in suppressing slavery he had given a negative reply”<sup>18</sup>. Teferi Mekonen was regent from 1916 to 1930; in 1916, he overthrew Lij Iyasu and became Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930 to 12.9.1974. Unfortunately, in September 1923, with all objections Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations. Haile Sellasie was a prime mover of slavery from inside of the scene.

When in 1932 the British anti-slavery society sent envoy to Ethiopia, Haile Sellasie joked at the envoy and according to his aim “he would abolish slavery altogether within a period of fifteen or at most twenty years” (Perham 1969:227). He wanted to say from 1947 to

1952. In colonized regions slave traders were Amhara armed settlers and the governors appointed by Haile Sellasie, especially his kin relatives. For example, in Maji and the neighboring provinces, Gimira and Gurafarda, under Dejazmach Taye, Emperor's banished kinsman, there were centers for slave trade (Perham 1969:229). During 1930's until Italian invasion Haile Sellasie was in polarized situation on the problem of slavery: if he wanted to destroy this barbaric system depending on the demand of the League of Nations, his Amhara kinsmen and his strong right hand, the Orthodox Church, would be the loser. "The Church in which priests and monks were considerable slave-owners appears to have been almost solidly against change in this direction" (Ibid 229). The League of Nations sent a delegation to observe if the basic principles in the abolition of slave trade were respected in Ethiopia as member-state. When the delegation returned from Ethiopia and read its report at the meeting of heads of states, they were ashamed of Haile Sellasie, of the way how he handled the peoples in his Empire. Let us quote few lines from the verdict:

"The inhabitants of the conquered country are registered in families by the Abyssinian chiefs, and every family of Abyssinians settled in the country there is assigned one or more families of conquered as Gabbars. The Gabbar family is obliged to support the Abyssinian family; it gives that family its own lands, build and maintain the hut in which he lives, cultivates the fields, grazes the cattle, and carries out every kind of work and performs all possible services of the Abyssinian family. All this is done without any remuneration, merely in token of the perpetual servitude resulting from the defeat sustained thirty years ago" (League of Nations report C. 240, M. 171, VII. P. 41, 1935).

The situation in 1930's had not become better; it was the worst period in the colonial era for Oromo and the other peoples as one author puts it. By the 1920's and 1930's it was perhaps the most notorious oppressive Gabbar system within the Ethiopian Empire. The individual Gabbar was initially similar in a very general way to the serf in Eastern Europe, but by the 1930's some districts were reduced virtually to producing slaves, and only after World War II there was a change to a tenant system (Garretson 1986:199). The slave system was abolished when Italy colonized Ethiopia in 1936 – 1941, freeing all slaves in which Amhara armed settlers became equals with their former slaves and Gabbar. During Italian colonial period the backbone of Amhara armed settlers system was destroyed, all languages have become equal and they learned that there is more powerful state which beat Amhara colonial state within short period.

### ***The land ownership under Abyssinian colonial rule***

The war of colonization brought the Oromo nation and other southern peoples under the rule of Abyssinian imperial government in which Menelik moved his capital from the mountainous rocky area of Menz to the center of Oromo country to the town of Finfine in 1887 changing its name to Amharic Addis Ababa (Thomson 1975: 11)

The land of Oromo and other colonized nations was measured into Gasha (1 gasha = 40 hectares) and divided to Naftanya (lit. gun-carrier, i.e., armed settler), Amhara who came as soldiers, priests, colonial governors, irregular fighters and others. In the years 1888 –1892 northern Abyssinia was in great famine and cholera and its inhabitants migrated to save their life in the south – in the land which is known as basket of bread of the Horn of Africa. The division of the land and who, what, how many would get depended on their position in the role of conquest or service they give as functionaries of the colonial government. This confiscation of the land belonging to the colonized people and its distribution for Amhara was known as **Gabbar system**.

The Gabbar system was built on an extensive confiscation of land from indigenous peoples who were distributed among the Abyssinian royal families, the state, and the Abyssinian nobility, the Orthodox Church, officers and soldiers who participated in the conquest and settled in the annexed territories (Bulcha 1988:42). Additionally, the policy of state was to motivate the Amhara to migrate to the south – the land of wealthy to settle in order to have strong hold in the colonized areas. The Orthodox clergy came with their Arks to build their churches in the place of Oromo ritual shrines and destroying Mosques (e.g. in Harar city) by the forced labor of subjugated nations including traditional believers and Muslims. The colonial government introduced the Balabbat system in which the land was divided into three parts, the author of the topic tells us „Immediately after the conquest, the northern rulers divided the southern lands into three, theoretically equal, parts according to a tradition principle known as Sisso, meaning one third. They confiscated two-third outright, leaving the last third to the indigenous population “(Markakis & Ayele 1986:33). This two-third land of colonized peoples was divided to Naftanya according to their position in the government.

A governor received 1,000 Gasha, a Fitawrari (commander of the front) 300 Gasha, a Qanyazmach (commander of the right) 150 Gasha (Melba 1980: 48), and soldiers according to their ranks „an ordinary soldier, depending on length of service received from one to three Gasha; and captain of fifty men was granted up to five Gasha; commander of one hundred received up to twenty Gasha of land (Markakis 1974:113).

The peoples of the colonized countries in such system were divided among the Abyssinian armed settlers (colonizers) and obliged to pay the major part of their products – up to seventy-five percent from their harvest – as tribute to the new landlords (Bulcha 1988:42). Each Gabbar (one who pays taxes or tributes) faced different kinds of onerous works for his new master. The Gabbar's obligations were not limited; all necessary works were ordered by the Naftanya. The Gabbar works (plough, weeding, harvesting), on the field some day in the week, builds fences, kraal for his cattle; meanwhile Gabbar's wives and children also have many duties to fulfill for wives of Naftanya such as fetching water, grinding grains, collecting fire wood, washing clothes, generally all household duties for the families of Naftanya.

Asbe Hailu who observed what is happening with Oromo people in 1927 described the burden in these graphic words:

„Three times in a year he (Gabbar) surrenders 15 quna (baskets) of ground flour to the Melkegna (Abyssinian governor) tribute in honey, and a tenth of his produce to the state. No sooner the peasant had unloaded the tribute due to the Melkegna that the latter 'congratulates' the peasant for having come just at the right time to be sent to the Melkegna's qelad (land) somewhere in the Awash from where the peasant is supposed to bring a load of tef (grain). The toil-torn peasant supplicates, pleads and laments; 'oh; sire! It is harvest time in our area and if I don't do the harvesting now, before the approaching rains, sire, I will be finished, evicted, uprooted! Oh; sire! No heeding to this pleadings and lamentations. He must go to the Qelad and collect the load of tef as the Melkegna ordered! The peasant has no choice and he submits. Cursing, like the Biblical Eyob, his birthplace, i.e., his very existence, he takes to his heels in the direction of Awash. At the qelad the inevitable happens; the Mislene (the governor's representative) engaged the peasant in the renovation of the Melkegna house on the qelad. That takes a good whole week's work. Only then does the peasant reach Addis Ababa with the load of tef. At Addis, another task, another order! Endless! The peasant now collects the whole lot of grain – the one from the Awash qelad, which he would have had grounded into flour, and the one he himself had brought in earlier – and stored them properly. While he does this he runs out of his own provisions and in the hope of keeping his belly gorgeously moves after feast places and comes back exhausted, sick and diseased.

Like a sick old dog with his head resting on a heap of animal dung the peasant passes his last torturing and agonizing days below the fence of the Melkegna's compound. When at last he dies, the Melkegna's household servants carry the body on a stick and after few scratching digs they 'bury' him in a ditch. Oh, the donkey! No problem, somebody has helped himself to it as the peasant lay dying below the fence. A lady living nearby asks a lady of the

Melkegna's household: „Sister, I saw a dead body leaving your household for burial today. Who could he possibly be? “Asks the lady from the neighborhood. “Don't mind him, sister,” reports the lady from Melkegna's household, **“he is not of human born, he is only Gabbar”** (Triulzi 1983:120-21, Donham& James 1986: II, Bulcha 1988: 43-44). The Naftanya used all means of exploitation to extract the labor of gabbars, like his property. When the Naftanya sales his land or gives as a gift for somebody the Gabbars were transferred to the new master. When the colonial governor transferred by government from one province to another province he can choose from 'his' Gabbars and take them away to other part of the Empire. A good example of such notorious act was in Mají – south of Oromo country. „When Getachew's soldiers left Mají in 1933 they took over 1,000 Mají natives with them” (Perham 1969:332) The colonialists became as a group against the colonized peoples to do whatever they like to get any advantage with the help of fire-arms and under their umbrella – imperial government. The remaining one-third of confiscated land of the colonized peoples was given to individuals from indigenous people who proved to be intermediaries between the northern governors and the southern masses, later known as Balabbats (Markakis 1974:107). These Balabbats became agonizing agents of the colonialists who applied all orders given from this alien group on their fellow people. The Balabbat system in which one-third of the land was given for the individual mediators was not universally applied: for example, in Arsi-Bale region all the land was divided among Naftanya, “the demand of one-third of the land to indigenous people and a redistribution of administrative power, both of which were adamantly opposed by the settler” (Tareke 1991:136) colonialists were some of the immediate causes of Bale liberation movement which started in 1960. On the eve of 1974 revolution, the Oromo elders in Chercher (Northern Oromo Land) concluded their status comparing it with other African colonized peoples. “Like the colonized (peoples) of Rhodesia, we rented small plots of our own lands from those who disowned us in the first place, we labored hard only to give away what we produced, the amount always determined on the basis of their personal whim; and delivered at no cost” (Tareke 1991:112).

The dehumanization in all aspects of life of the colonized peoples in the hands of settlers and their government activated political volcano in colonial territory and brought the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. The motto of Ethiopian students' struggle 'Land to the tillers!' took place in February 1965 being secretly organized by two genius Oromo political organizers. These two Oromo political leaders were Obbo Tesema Negeri, who was a president of the Haile Sellasie's rubber stamp parliament, which at that time was debating a land reform bill (it was blocked by most deputies, who were mostly absentee landlords

themselves). When the bill was opposed by this group of landlords of the colonized territory the president of the parliament communicated with the University Students Union chairman, Baro Tumsa, his fellow Oromo. Both these political leaders secretly arranged for the staging of the first ever “Land to the tiller” demonstration (Leenco 1999:191-2). Within nine years, the students struggle under this slogan and the participation of many sectors of the society eradicated the hated Haile Sellasie government. The revolution destroyed two of three pillars of the Amhara led Abyssinian hegemony – Gabbar system and monarchy, whereas the third pillar – Amharic language – *lisane nigus* (‘the king’s language’) (Donham 1986:11), language of 20% of the population (Cohen & Weintraub 1975: 23) is struggling to remain official language of the Ethiopian Empire.

### ***Land tenure under Military Government 1974-1991***

The Ethiopian Revolution was a result of almost a century lasting conflict between the Abyssinian ruling class and the colonized peoples, who became the landless serfs under the colonial rule. The first demand of the students and progressive groups in the army was to give back the land to its original owners in the colonial territory. Landownership in the main land of Abyssinia was/is kinship holding known as *rist* in Amhara area and *risti* in Tigrian region. These forms of land holding “are found mainly in the northern provinces of Eritrea, Tigre, Begemder, Gojjam, and some parts of Shoa and Wollo. These regions comprise the heart land of the Amhara and the well spring of their culture. Still, not more than 20 or 25 percent of the Ethiopian population live under the Amhara kinship tenure” (Cohen & Weintraub 1975:31). Because of such ownership in the mainland of Abyssinia, there is no demand of ‘Land to the tiller!’. As Horowitz wrote about the 1974 Revolution, “in Ethiopia, a major effect of a land reform was to take land from Amhara and distribute it to the Galla, and for a time the revolution is suspected of being a Galla plot”(Horowitz 1985:8). Oromo as the largest nation, whose land was confiscated during the colonization, played a major role to take back their own land. Under Haile Sellasie authoritarian government, forming political party was forbidden according to his constitution. As the consequence there was no organized political organization which could lead the peoples’ revolt against the oppressive regime. In this political vacuum the army came in to lead the revolution. Representatives from military divisions formed Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia and officially took over the state power on the 12. 9. 1974. That day Haile Sellasie was removed from power and taken to house arrest and from that day he was not seen again. When Haile Sellasie was removed from power the colonized people started expelling settler landlords and taking back their stolen

lands. In Oromo land the father of Oromo national movement General Tadesse Biru and his colleagues started to distribute lands to peasants. The military government was shocked on the events going on in the colonial territory and formed land reform committee in which the leading Oromo young intellectuals in the Ministry of Land Reform like Obbo Zagaye Asfaw and Obbo Abiyu Galata played a key role in preparation of land reform. The land reform was accepted by radical wing of the Derg (Amharic – Committee) Military Government which declared the reform as Proclamation No.31 published on 4 May 1975. The reason of nationalization and the goals of the reform are listed in its preamble as follows:

- "Whereas, in countries like Ethiopia where the economy is agricultural, a person's right, honor, status and standard of living is determined by his relation to the land;
- Whereas several thousands of gasha (one gasha= 40hectars) of land have been grabbed from the masses by an insignificant number of feudal lords and their families as a result of which the Ethiopian masses have been forced to live under condition of serfdom;
- Whereas, it is essential to fundamentally alter the existing agrarian relations so that the Ethiopian peasants ... may be liberated from age-old feudal oppression, injustice, poverty, disease, and in order to lay the basis upon which all Ethiopians may henceforth live in equality, freedom, and fraternity;
- Whereas, the development of Ethiopia of the future can be assured not by permitting the exploitation of the many by the few as is now the case, but only by instituting basic change in agrarian relations which would lay the basis upon which, through work by cooperation, the development of one becomes the development of all" (Negarit Gazet, 29 April 1975).

If this decree was fully applied it can transform land holding relation aimed above all to give right and status to peasants, to establish a society based on equality, liberty and fraternity and lay at least the foundations for the development of the empire. Another observer of Ethiopian politics for many decades comments on the land reform declaration as "the measure which, far more than any other, established the revolutionary credentials of the Ethiopian regime was, rather, the nationalization of rural land which followed in March 1975" (Clapham 1988:47). The Abyssinian politics has two faces like their poetry known as "wax and gold" studied and published by Donald Levine (1965), in which one is superficial "wax" meaning and a hidden "golden" one. In the land reform proclamation, it was declared that 'all rural land shall be collective property of the Ethiopian people' but the Military government refused to divide the land to the tillers and state became the only land owner in the Empire. The Military Government gradually changed its outer face and brought plan how to grab the lands of the colonized peoples to settle millions of Abyssinians mainly on the Oromo land

“during famine crisis in Ethiopia the military government settled between 1.5 million and 2million Ethiopians in Oromia” (Jalata 1993:142). The other government’s plan was to remove the colonized peoples from their original hamlets and forcibly settle them to villages which would be built on both sides of high ways to control the peoples from their national liberation movements. During the rule of Military Government (from 1974 to 1991) many national movements fought to bring down this brutal government. The main liberation fronts were the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) in Eritrea with clear political program of liberating their territory from Ethiopia, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to build Oromia Republic, and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) first coming with the program of building Tigray republic later changed to rule Ethiopia. The disappearance of Socialist system in the Eastern Europe dried up military, financial and diplomatic support for Military Government of Ethiopia. Different nations increased their support for their national liberations fronts and the Western countries selectively supported EPLF and TPLF. The Military Government finally collapsed in May 1991. The military muscle and external support determined the outcome of the future of formation of government in Ethiopia. The EPLF, which fought from 1961 to May 1991 to expel Ethiopian army from Eritrean territory reached its dream and became the government of the territory. TPLF captured the Capital City Finfine (Addis Ababa), the center of the Oromo land, and ruled the Empire from May 28, 1991 to July 5, 1991 as organization coming from only 6% of the population. The conference organized by TPLF was held from 1 to 5 July, 1991 in which many political organizations participated hoping to solve peacefully chronic violent political conflict in the Empire. At the end of the conference the TPLF government went through cosmetic change taking some political organizations into its government giving them some technical ministerial post. The TPLF government which has some independent political organization representative ended within one year when in July 1992 it ended its activities. Starting from 1992, Ethiopia is a one party state ruled by power elite from a nation which is only 6% of 82 million peoples of the Empire state (Tronvoll 2011:121-136).

The contemporary land grab in Oromia, Gambela and Benishangul Gumuz represents the continuity of the Abyssinian colonial policy to dictate the life of the peoples of the regions. Meles Zenawi, the authoritarian ruler of the Empire, clearly said that the lands which are given to the foreign companies are tribal lands in lowland areas, not land in highlands. Everybody, who knows Ethiopian politics, knows that highland is known as Abyssinian homeland where Amhara and Tigrians are living (Markakis 1974:74). The selling of farm



lands of the colonized peoples will bring more humiliation and great number of people moving as refugees, which can become a source of regional instability.

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