

Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia

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Editors' note. An earlier version of this article was the winner of the African Studies Association's prize for the best paper presented by a graduate student at its 2007 annual meeting.

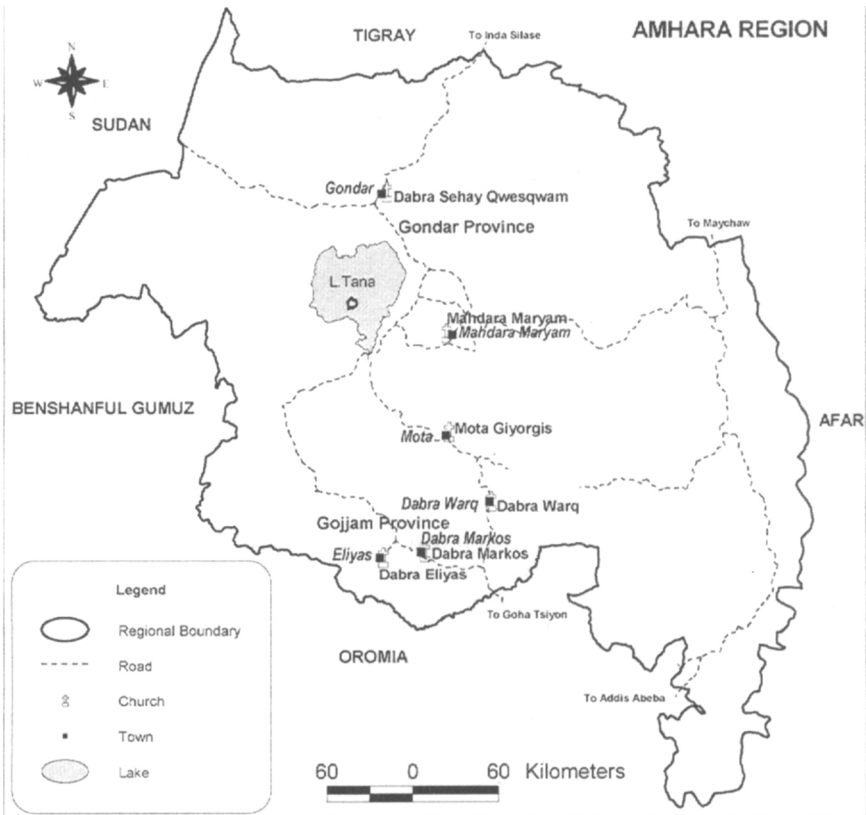
Abstract: The historiographic question that this article asks is: How can historians uncover actual social and economic practices without imposing anachronistic standards and terminologies on the available evidence? The analysis focuses on the relationship between landlords and *zégoch*—a hitherto unrecognized and socially subservient class of peasants—in the context of social, economic, and cultural realities in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ethiopia. The thesis is that during this period the Ethiopian ruling classes gained their power and income primarily from ownership of *rim* land—a form of private property—and the labor of *zégoch*.

Historiographical Issues

In studies of the Ethiopian land system, most historians have argued that large sections of Ethiopian society were organized around two forms of land tenure, the technical terms for which are *rist*—the hereditary and “usufructuary” land right of the peasants—and *gult*—a unit of land held by social elites as fiefs from the king and lords, usually to honor or to compensate for administrative and military services. Inherent in these concepts are categories of social and economic relations organized in terms of the elites' limited right to the land owned by the peasantry (Hoben 1973; Crummey 2000). In the course of conducting research on landholding in Ethiopia, however, I and other scholars have discovered material that demands a re-

African Studies Review, Volume 52, Number 3 (December 2009), pp. 89–106

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Maps showing the areas of study courtesy of Ato Tessema, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Addis Ababa University

thinking of this conventional interpretation of the Ethiopian land system and, by extension, the social structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ethiopia. In particular, the study of land charters justifies the need to formulate new analytical units and concepts for the study of Ethiopian society and its property system by recontextualizing the agrarian literature in terms of the categories of *rim*—a form of private property—and *zéga* (pl. *zégoch*)—a socially subservient class of peasants.¹ In proposing the significance of these two categories, I argue for a major rereading of the social and agrarian history of Ethiopia.

Although scholars of Ethiopia have recently become interested in the *rim* form of property (e.g., Bausi et al. 2001), studies on Ethiopian landholding still seem constrained by the power of orthodox ideas and the predisposition of historians toward old categories and concepts. The significance of *zégoch*, for example, has not received adequate attention, and my interpretation of *rim* departs significantly from other models. Hence the first and central goal of this paper is to demonstrate that the social institution of *zégenät* (i.e., the *zégoch* condition of servitude) that was long recognized as prevalent in the province of Gojjam replicated a similar institution in other parts of Ethiopia, especially the province of Gondär in the northwest (see Mengistie 2004). The second purpose is to reflect on the land tenure traditions of northern Ethiopia, especially Gondär, based on a close analysis of the charter and land register of the church of Qwesqam.

Unfortunately, in many ways the limited sources that we have about *rim* and *zéga* open more questions than they answer. Since it is impossible to determine the geographic scope of *rim* and *zéga* outside of the Amharic-speaking provinces of Gojjam and Gondär, the spatial unit of analysis here is northwestern Ethiopia only, where these categories make their appearance primarily in legal records. The sources under discussion also suffer from another kind of serious limitation. Although they offer us valuable insights about social categories extending from royalty to the humblest *zégoch*, they are decidedly biased toward the elites because of the relative obscurity of the *zégoch* in terms of their lived social experiences. This means that the ways in which social and legal institutions affected the lives of *zégoch* can hardly be known from the available data. These limitations, however, do not detract from the importance of the sources on which this article draws and the evidence they provide for reassessing previous accounts of the social and economic structures of Ethiopia.

While emphasizing the specificity of the Ethiopian experience, I would like to place the material on its historic property system within a larger theoretical and conceptual framework. Land tenure documents have vital methodological relevance to the study of precolonial African states and societies and their underling social development, and they are a significant source of information about the Sudanic belt of the continent. Unfortunately, few scholars have privileged land tenure as their primary analytical unit, although an important exception to this dearth of literature is a

recently published collection of papers on the land systems of precolonial African states edited by Donald Crummey and colleagues (*Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa*, 2005). A main argument of the book is that precolonial states in Sudanic Africa (defined as the broad geographical sweep extending between 10° and 15° north of the equator, including Ethiopia) were anchored in agricultural production and deeply concerned with land matters (see Crummey 2005:2,5–7; Ewald 2005; Kapteijns & Spaulding 2005).

The broad comparative and theoretical framework adopted by the book represents a refreshing methodological departure from, and a challenge to, the traditional colonial and anthropological literature which downplays the utility of the concept of land tenure on the grounds that land in Africa was virtually free, that precolonial African states did not have a strong material base in land, and that they derived their revenue basically from long-distance trade and raids.² In *Land, Literacy and the State*, Kapteijns and Spaulding (2005:21–34) challenge the assumptions about the function of long-distance trade (primarily based on the exploitation of slave labor), and suggest a radical reconceptualization of these societies as basically agrarian. Crummey et al. (2005), moreover, present a challenge to previous literature on African land systems which portrays Ethiopia's agrarian system as distinct from the broader African pattern. Indeed, many scholars note that in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars studying the African past either presented aspects of the history of Ethiopia as a variant of the African experience or else left Ethiopia out of their analysis completely. For instance, the existence of a political class of warriors and clergy who derived their livelihood and social power from the appropriation of peasant produce, a land tenure system that sanctioned individual holding, and the tradition of a strong political kingdom deeply involved in land matters were all put forward as an exception to African norms.

It is important to point out, further, that the historiography of precolonial Africa still contains some flawed assumptions. Many scholars have not yet sufficiently consulted or recognized the importance in general of empirical materials related to land from the Sudanic belt of precolonial Africa—particularly from the former Sultanates of Dar Fur, Kanem-Bornu, and Sinnar. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the British historian H. R. Palmer (1936) was the first scholar to translate and publish primary documents—including some illuminating land charters—collected from Kanem-Bornu. In doing so, Palmer foreshadowed the later and similar works of R. S. O'Fahey et al. (1983) on Dar Fur and Jay Spaulding and M. I. Abu Salim on Sinnar (1989). Notwithstanding some important differences, the charters from Dar Fur, Kanem-Bornu, and Sinnar demonstrate the existence of a distinct social order strikingly similar to that of eighteenth-century Gondarine Ethiopia.

A typical land charter dated 1471 from Kanem-Bornu, for example, provides insights into a system whose basic principles had once been ap-

plied over a large social and geographical terrain. After describing lands granted by the contemporary Sultan Ali for the support of a Muslim lawyer and scholar—Ahmed ibn Abdul Kuwata—and for his descendants after his death, the charter prescribes that “there shall be no *jiza’*a [an Arabic term conventionally written as *jizya*, meaning tax] on these lands; nor obligations of entertaining chiefs by night or day, nor shall there be upon them any call for work for the Sultan nor contribution for the Sultan’s treasure of imposts. None of the Chiefs, or Captains, or Emirs, shall enter their lands” (Palmer 1936:21). This charter reveals that the Sultan willingly forfeited his diverse prerogatives in favor of the grantees. Governors and military commanders were instructed to keep away from the land of the new holder and prohibited from entering it in any official capacity. Beneficiaries of a land grant such as this were at liberty to manage their estates as they saw fit and enjoyed extensive rights over their land, almost to the complete exclusion of the state in the manner of its exploitation. Individual landholding, therefore, far from being a rare phenomenon, was common in precolonial Sudanic Africa. Charters from Gondarine Ethiopia contain almost identical information.

The Ethiopian land system in particular is not yet fully understood in terms of its complexity and variety. For instance, there has been general agreement among historians that the “fief-holding” right of the social elites extended over certain pieces of land that peasants held as their hereditary property (*gult*), and that the elites could not infringe upon the peasants’ rights (*rist*). Therefore, according to this argument, Ethiopia’s social and political fabric was based not on the ruling classes’ ownership of land, but on the imposition of tributary rights upon a property-holding peasantry.³ In fact, this is incorrect; various sources, some of which we will examine below, state explicitly that the social elites derived their wealth essentially from ownership of rim land and control over the labor of the *zéga* class. In this way, reexamining the material on the categories of rim and *zéga* tells us a great deal not only about the practices and norms of landholding, but also about the social relationships among different classes of society.

In analyzing the material on the land system of northern Ethiopia, I have used a distinct “idea of property” developed by the historian Susan Reynolds (1994) to inform the questions that I ask of the evidence. Kapteijns and Spaulding (2005) point out that until recently, historians have grounded their analysis of Ethiopia’s agrarian history in “feudal” terms derived primarily from European concepts and frames of reference that sought to link the ruling classes to the subject peasantry through a process of social and economic exploitation (Crummey 1980; Cohen 1974:665–72; Gamst 1970: 373–92). But in a remarkable study that reinterprets the evidence from medieval Europe and the historiography of European “feudal society,” Reynolds writes that the vaunted concepts of “fief” and “feudal property” are at loggerheads not only with a sound understanding of the property systems of non-Western societies, but also with the property systems of precapital-

ist Europe itself. Reynolds's work has many closely related theses, but the most important one for my purpose is that the models of "fief"—which is conventionally contrasted with notions of ownership—and "feudalism" have been constructed on deeply flawed foundation of thirteenth-century legal discourse produced by professional lawyers. As an alternative, Reynolds proposes that a general "idea of property" based on a carefully identified "check-list both of liabilities or obligations and the rights or claims of property" has much more methodological relevance than a constraining paradigm of "feudal property" derived from the historical experience of the European Middle Ages. Among other advantages, such a general "idea of property"—which is not "culture-bound" and is broad enough "for comparisons between different societies"—gives full allowance to the intricacies and fluidities of institutions of exploitation, production, and governance in precapitalist societies (1994:5–6,55–57).

In the Ethiopian context, Reynolds's proposition has particular methodological utility, since it allows us to depart from a theory of "feudal property" that views property in precapitalist societies as typically restricted and dependent.

Rim and Zéga: Two Useful Social and Property Analytical Categories

As noted above, the complexities of Ethiopia's historic tenure system and related social life have until now been obscured by misleading concepts and terms borrowed from European history. According to archival sources, it is clear that there existed a hitherto unrecognized class of peasants in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ethiopia, represented by the Amharic term *zégoch*, which has a de facto meaning of "serfs." The existence of this class is documented in land charters, in administrative manuals for religious institutions, and in other sources. Although the *zégoch* are mentioned in passing in an early seventeenth-century chronicle, the origin and evolution of rim and *zégenät* are mysterious and extremely difficult to trace (see Mengistie 2004). Before the eighteenth century, sources referring to these terms—particularly to rim—are absolutely lacking. References to rim and *zégä* start to appear in early eighteenth-century charters and documents relating to private property transactions originating from Gojjam and Gondär, and references in legal documents multiply in the nineteenth century. There is no doubt that further research is needed to document and explicate how rim and *zéga* evolved. There is clear evidence, however, that rim and *zéga* constituted the two important contributions of the Gondärine period (lasting roughly from 1632 to the 1770) to the landholding terminology. A diversity of sources also attests to the existence of these institutions over a fairly wide area. Gojjam was comparatively peripheral to Gondär, the capital and the main center of power in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century in Ethiopia, and yet Gondär documents testify fully to their

existence. For example, in the land register (or *māzgāb*) of the Qwesqwan church in Gondär we find the term *zéga* juxtaposed with a variety of other categories, all suggesting a web of socioeconomic relationships linking diverse groups (Crummey & Sishagne 1991, 1993). The *zégoch* are also mentioned in a nineteenth-century land measurement and distribution document originating from the district of Bācho in the province of Shāwa (Wolde-Mariam 1995:111–13). The form of landed property with which the *zégoch* are principally associated in these documents is *rim*, which involved ownership rights in the modern sense of the term and constituted the basis for the political and social power of the Ethiopian ruling classes during these periods. It is apparent from the documents that with the introduction and growing prevalence of *rim*, there was a shortage of labor for the elite to work their land and that they found the solution to the problem in the institution of *zégenät*.

Before analyzing the Gondär *māzgāb*, it would be instructive to start with a discussion of the linguistic and dictionary definition of the terms *zéga* and/or *zégenät*. There is a high degree of commonality of meaning shared by the Semitic-speaking communities of Ethiopia, such as Amhara, Guragé, and Tigreans, in their definitions. In the earliest Amharic dictionary written by Antoine d’Abbadie in 1881, the term *zéga* is defined as “a dependent, subject, and poor person.” An individual in a condition of *zégenät*—“*etat de zega*”—is understood by d’Abbadie as one in condition of abject poverty, in servitude or socioeconomic dependency. The Gurageñña and Tigreñña dictionaries agree precisely with the “servitude” and “poverty” understandings of the Amharic definition, and the term continued to be employed to describe poor people with servile status down to the twentieth century (see D’Abbadie 1881:722, 726; Gutt 1997:704–5; Leslau 1979:703,718; Gäbrä-Egziabher 1948–49:667; Täklä-Wäld 1970:479).⁴ Yet the social conditions of the *zégoch* seem to have varied from time to time and from place to place. In some sources the *zégoch* are portrayed as more akin to serfs than slaves—that is, landless and subordinate individuals working on the land of lords but nevertheless able to leave of their own free will; in others they are more similar to slaves than serfs. Nevertheless, it is clear that *zégenät* was understood primarily as a form of servitude and that the *zégoch* represented a class of highly impoverished people with a lack of social rights. In some of the documents that I will discuss below the *zégoch* are portrayed specifically as the property of their overlords. One of the most informative sources is a document that records the resolution of a serious quarrel involving high dignitaries in 1758 in Gondär. Shumet Sishagne, who originally translated the document, rendered the term *zégoch* as “tenants,” “slaves,” or “citizens” with a qualifying mark of (?) placed in front of the translated words. I have not followed Sishagne, but rather have left the term *zégoch* in the original document. For the sake of clarity I have also translated into English some Amharic terms that Sishagne left in their original form.

Gondär Court Record, 1758

When . . . Gälawdéwos[,] was dying he gave the [right and the office of] *aläqenät* [meaning leadership] to [his daughter] Wäyzäro Wälätä-Rufa'el, . . . Eshäté's wife. [The *aläqenät* land and all the benefits and rights that go with it] was divided subsequently [among descendants of Gälawdéwos,] with two-thirds [going] to Eshäté and one-third to . . . Bätru. After this was divided up Bätru entered into the house of Asayo [Eshäté's servant], [claiming a right] over the two-thirds share of the *aläqenät* land, and wrought havoc [,] taking away 55 ounces of gold from him. The loss in honey, grain and cattle was very great. . . . They [i.e., those who sat in judgment over this case] said, "since . . . Bätru had violated [the former arrangement regarding the division of the *aläqenät* land], let him pay 50 ounces [of gold] as compensation to . . . Eshäté." . . . There were three *zégoch* [Asayo, Atné and Yämano] who had not been shared earlier [among Bätru and Eshäté]. Asayo and Atné were given by lot to . . . Eshäté, and Yämano was given by lot to . . . Bätru. They apportioned the [three *zégoch*] in such a manner. They [the judges] said: "Let the land in the locality of Sofya-Méda with the building on it . . . [the office and rights of] *aläqenät*, . . . [and all] the land at Gondär be for Eshäté."⁵

This quarrel arose from a conflicting claim over the property of the deceased Gälawdéwos, who was born into a prominent Ethiopian noble family in the early eighteenth century. The family of Gälawdéwos was closely associated with the upper-class institution called *aläqenät*, a system of inheritance devised by the nobility to mitigate the disintegration of family property and that entitled one family member to inherit a portion of the property that was not subject to division (Crummey 1988:315–28; 2000:114–18). In the excerpt above we read about a dispute between members of an aristocratic family, Bätru and Eshäté, over *zégoch*, land, and office. Bätru had resorted to violence, breaking the earlier terms of the settlement with Eshäté.

The context in which the *zégoch* are mentioned is a bit unclear. Nevertheless, the word *zégoch* undoubtedly refers to individuals formerly held in servitude by Gälawdéwos and who were being assigned to different heirs, with one of them, named Yämano, going to Bätru and the remaining two, named Asayo and Atné, becoming the *zégoch* of Eshäté. The "court" also decided that the lands, together with a building in a locality called Sofya-Méda in Gondär, should become the property of Eshäté. The fact that the three individuals were associated with land indicates that they were essentially farmhands rather than domestic servants. The tone of the document also suggests that the three *zégoch* were treated as "objects" and that *zéqenät* was an extreme form of power and domination. Nevertheless, we can also safely argue that Atné, Yämano, and Asayo, though of lowly status, were not actually in a condition of slavery, which is designated specifically by the term *barya*.

Another documentary source about *zéga* is much more enigmatic, but it too serves as evidence for the historical reality of this institution. The document reads as follows: “The *zégoch* who have been given to the *emäbété* by lot were Yusuf the young, Ayabo with his brother . . . and Dämé’s wife.”⁶ This document does not bear any date, and the identity of individuals that initiated this human transaction in *zégoch*—including the one at the receiving end of it—are not known. Nevertheless, we do know that *emäbété*, “my lady,” was a title used to describe a woman of distinction and substance, and it seems that the four *zégoch* working and living in servitude to their overlord were being transferred to their new owner. Clearly, then, this record also attests to the humble status of the *zéga* class. It may be that these *zégoch* were all Muslim, which would be a matter of little surprise considering the presence of so many Muslims in the property register of Däbrä-Şehäy Qwesqam, as we will shortly see. At any rate, it seems clear that the term *zégoch* does allow here for a rough translation as *serfs*. The power of lords over *zégoch*, where it pertained to disposing of their labor, appears to have been comprehensive.

The Qwesqam church *mäzgäb* of Gondär, further helps draw a picture of the total subordination of the *zéga*. The *mäzgäb* of Qwesqam testifies that lords exercised extensive private judiciary power over their dependent *zégoch*. In some instances, this legal right extended not only to the disposing of the labor of the *zégoch*, but also to trading *zégoch* for more valuable agricultural fields, making them seem more akin here to slaves than serfs. One of the documents recording the trading of *zégoch* for land involved the grantor of the charter, Mentewab herself; the *mäzgäb* lists several agricultural fields as the holding of *yätégé* (queen, empress), a title held exclusively by Mentewab at the time. In a locality called Qäräfu, she received “Wärädé’s cotton [fields] in exchange for *zéga*” (III/IES, 88.III.13, *Mäzgäb*, Däbrä-Şehäy Qwesqam).⁷ Her daughter, Wälätä-İsra’el, acquired the estate of a certain Ala, together with three *zégoch*, without compensation to the former owner (III/IES, 88.I.31, *Mäzgäb*, Däbrä-Şehäy Qwesqam). A certain Shaläqa Gäbrä-Le’ul received “Şhité’s cotton (fields)” in a locality called Qäräfu “in exchange for *zéga*” in the same way that Mentewab did (III/IES, 88.II.10, *Mäzgäb*, Däbrä-Şehäy Qwesqam), and one Mälakä-Sälam Abésolom received “the abandoned homestead of Anjätam in exchange for *zéga*” (III/IES, 88.II.12, *Mäzgäb*, Däbrä-Şehäy Qwesqam). Apparently, the granting of full ownership of rim land and absolute control over the terms of social relations created the opportunity for the elite to dispose of the labor of the *zégoch* or give them away in exchange for land, since only full control over land and social relations could justify this kind of action. Rim owners had absolute power over their *zégoch*, commensurate to seigniorial lordship.

The *mäzgäb* of Qwesqam has several features that distinguish it from other land documents, including a detailed record and survey of rim land in three districts of Bajäna, Bäläsa, and Ebbenat. Three officials, Mälakä-Şehäy

Hezqeyas, Bāzher Wānd Zéna-Gābra'el, and Liqé Giyorgis, were entrusted with the task of witnessing the transfer of the land to the social elites. According to a contemporary royal chronicler (as quoted and translated by Crummey [2000:170]), the three officials “wrote down all the land of Bajāna and returned quickly after a short time. Then the queen and king held an assembly in the Trellis Chamber and called the priests with their leader [*liq*] and gave to each of them a portion of the land.” Considering that the record of an actual survey and location of specific agricultural lands in the context of their locality is the exception rather than the norm in the land grant documents, the *māzgāb* of Qwesqam documents an unusual, if not totally unknown, practice in Gondarine Ethiopia. In some specific instances, the actual borders of the lands assigned to individuals as rim, and in other instances the type of soil and the crops predominantly grown on the agricultural fields, are described carefully and precisely (III/IES, 88.I–IV.30, *Māzgāb, Dābrā-Şehāy Qwesqam*).

Unfortunately, in other respects the three officials who produced the Qwesqam *māzgāb* left us with as little information on some key issues as other scribes did. The entries are replete with abbreviations and written for the most part in incomplete sentences. Clearly the pressure of urgent business required haste on the part of the officials, who “returned quickly after a short time” following their visit to the lands of Qwesqam. Moreover, the first and the last folios of the *māzgāb* have been lost forever. For this reason the Qwesqam *māzgāb* is somewhat elliptical in its definitions of the nature and scope of the rights of the elite in rim lands. The strategy that I have employed to understand these rights, then, is to analyze charters that explicitly drew upon the model of Qwesqam. The spirit and form of the Qwesqam charter was copied and applied in Gojjam in the eighteenth century and particularly in the nineteenth century, initially through the founding of the churches of Moṭa Giyorgis and Qāranyo Mādhāné-Alām, built, respectively, by the daughter (Wālātā-Isra'el) and grandson of Empress Mentewab (Crummey et al. 1994). The land charters of both churches explicitly invoke the model of Qwesqam, and later in the nineteenth century the land charter of Moṭa became a model in its own right for similar grants elsewhere in Gojjam. One such grant belonging to the church of Dābrā-Eliyās given by King Tāklā-Hāymanot of Gojjam (r.1874–1901), a descendant of Wālātā-Isra'el, is cited below.

Several documents recording the founding of the church of Moṭa Giyorgis that specify the model upon which it was drawn and the principle of land division, the relationship between the *zégoch* and their overlords, the administration of justice, and similar matters have been found incorporated into other manuscripts located in a variety of other churches, including the well-known monastery of Mahdārā-Maryam in the province of Gondār. The Mahdārā-Maryam document is dated two years after the accession of Iyo'as (r.1755–1769) in 1757. I quote the essential part of the Moṭa preamble from the Mahdārā-Maryam copy. The passage on the affirmation

of the Moṭa charter by Häylu I (r. c.1770s–1790s), son of Wälätä-Isra'el and ruler of Gojjam, is an interpolation into the original terms of his mother's grant. The grant to Däbrä-Eliyas by King Täklä-Häymanot was made well over one hundred years later in the 1880s.

Charter of Moṭa

In the name of the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son, one God, during the time of Empress Mentewab, during the grandson of Emperor Bäk-kafa, when Wälätä-Isra'el established Moṭa Giyorgis by the permission of Emperor Iyo'as she has given two-thirds [of the land] for the *däbtära* and one-third for the *restänña* [hereditary owners of the land]. The land located beyond the edge of the escarpment is given out exclusively for the *däbtära* to be exploited by themselves as they saw fit [literally, for them to plant cabbage and crops on] and is immune from the intervention of the local *cheqa* [the lowest level local officials]. . . . Häylu has reaffirmed the earlier grant [of Wälätä-Isra'el] of land found in the highlands in which the *cheqa* are forbidden to make intervention which shall remain binding and in force till the Last Judgment. Violators of the terms of the charter shall be punished by a fine of fifty ounces of gold. The witnesses for this are . . . [list of many people]. The system of [Moṭa] is based on the model of Qwesqwam in Gondär. Written in Mahdärä-Maryam two years after Iyo'as's accession to the throne. (III/IES, 89. V. 36, Mahdärä-Maryam)

Charter of Däbrä-Eliyas

When he [King Täklä-Häymanot] established this [the church of Däbrä-Eliyas] he declared that the *däbtära* [under the church] should have two-thirds and the *restänña* one-third of the land according to the establishment of Moṭa. If the *Demah-Gänät* [title of the head of the church][,] in violation of this, seeks to dispossess the *däbtära* or the *balärest*, or if the *däbtära* attempts to dispossess another *däbtära*, or if the *däbtära* and the *restänña* seek to dispossess one another[,], the fine on each party shall be fifty ounces of gold. This has been sanctioned as inviolable by the bishop, the *episcopos[ates]*, the *echägé*, the *qomos* and the *qés*. As regards judicial matters the *däbtära* shall abide by the rules pertaining to their group; the [owners of the one-third share of land] shall abide by the rules pertaining to their group. The *aläqa* [the head of the church] shall, likewise, abide by the rules provided for their group. These are the terms of the Moṭa system. (Mengistie 2004:47)

The rights of the elite—who are referred to as *däbtära*—in rim land are clearly defined by the charters of Moṭa Giyorgis and Däbrä-Eliyas. The second charter is an articulation of the first one and of the Qwesqwam grants. There are two key sentences in a similar grant document for Moṭa Giyorgis, which are not included in the copy at Mahdärä-Maryam: “If the *däbtära*

owned oxen[.] they shall cultivate their lands [by themselves]; short of this, they shall rent [out their lands to others] and exploit their lands. On the two-thirds of the *dābtāra* [beneficiaries] land there shall be no dues and obligations” (see Mengistie 2004:47). The charter states that in return for specific liturgical services rendered to the church, the grantees were given property rights on the land taken away from the peasantry, referred to as *restāñña* or *balārest*. The rim owner could either perform these services himself or herself or provide other persons—including relatives and dependents—to fulfill these obligations. In all other ways owners of rim rights were able to exploit and manage their property free from the intervention of both secular and religious authorities as well as peasants. The peasantry surrendered two-thirds of their former land to the grantees and retained only one-third. This points to the conclusion that *rist*, the hereditary land of the peasants, was not inviolable. This rights of owners applied to the land itself, rather than to tribute from peasants farming the land. It is explicitly stated in the charters that the rim owners would not have any obligations to the peasants who had once owned the land. The social elites could exploit the rim as they saw fit; that is, they could cultivate the land or else lease it to others and collect rent from them.

In what follows I will quote some entries from the *māzgāb* bearing on the property rights of the elites involving rim and then discuss their significance as it bears on the main issues raised in this article. Below are three of many pertinent sections from the *māzgāb* of Dābrā-Şehāy Qwesqam. I have selected the entries below randomly, but all of them are from lands in Bajāna (III/IES, 88. I.4; III/IES. III. 13 and III/IES. III. 15, *Māzgāb*, Dābrā-Şehāy Qwesqam).

Māzgāb of Dābrā-Şehāy Qwesqam

Excerpt 1

[The lands] of . . . Wāldā Le’ul: 1 *gasha* [unit of land measurement rated at 40 hectares] in Kārāwa: the *şāmad zēga* [are] Dāmo Qādadi, Dāmo Ayahoy, Liwa Adari, Yezeyah Hāleyaw [and] Netéwez. [The] *ṭis* [are] Létahen Mālka, Nifezeze Shemereshigi, Sisay, Kemezeyga [and] Gewteleyen. . . . The *mādāb* [is] Ayahoy.

Excerpt 2

[The (listed) lands of] *Dājzasmach* Mamo [Dājzasmach: a military and civil title two steps lower than the king]: 1 *gasha* in Derkwa, 2 plots formerly [belonging to Yādebi, in Kābāye, Emesalagé, . . . [and] Shendewa. Across Dāmbigāwa, the homestead of Esléman, in Qārāfa 1 land from Qérellos, in Saherina 1 land from Wārtu. . . . Total 20 lands. . . . The *şā[mad] zē[ga]* [are] Esléman, Ayahoye Shumé, and Abdālawi, [the] *ṭis* [are] Mahemād Daud, Mamud Emadu, and Abdālnawi. [The] *mādāb* [is] Esléman.

Excerpt 3

... 1 gasha in the locality [called] Gānbāra: the beneficiary is Zufan-Bét Mamo [*zufan-bét*: a palace official and the overseer of the throne of the king]. The hereditary owner of the land is Wäldé. [The total number of plots is]18 lands. The *šāmasd zéga* are Wäldé with an ox, Adāra with an ox, Fesahoy with a team of plow oxen, Ašemé with a team of plow oxen, Kidané with an ox, Bešälāhwaderé with a pair of plow oxen, and Māyu with an ox. The *ṭis* [are] Mamo . . . , Wäldu . . . , Fasil, . . . [and] Kiflé.

The *māzgāb* is replete with these kinds of entries. Particularly intriguing is the term *šāmad* that precedes *zéga*. Whenever the people with the status of *zéga* are listed, the scribes consistently qualify the term by using this word (the abbreviations *šā* and *zé* stand for *šāmad* and *zéga*). The juxtaposition of the *šāmad zéga* with *ṭis* and *mādāb* further complicates the deciphering of meaning. The root form of *šāmad* is *šāmādā* (“he yoked,” or “joined up”), referring to oxen for plowing land. The word *šāmad*, therefore, would mean one who yokes oxen to plows, or simply a plowman, and joining *šāmad* and *zéga* would give us the meaning “farmer *zéga*.” The literal meaning of the term *ṭis* is “smoke,” but here we can assume that *ṭis* is an abbreviation for *ṭisāñña*, meaning tenant. Therefore, the people who are listed side by side with the *šāmad zéga* are sharecroppers, since they have a similarly dependent relationship with the means of production. This juxtaposition of the *šāmad zéga* and the *ṭis* makes distinguishing between the social realities embodied by the two terms a matter of great importance. If the *zégoch* and the *ṭisāññas* had belonged to the same social category, there would have been no purpose in listing and grouping some people as *zéga* and others as *ṭis*. Neither tenants nor *zégoch* had property rights over land, but the two categories were distinct. The *zégoch* and *ṭis* were different kinds of people operating under different tenure conditions,

Excerpt 3 is especially helpful in clearing up the ambiguity of these terms. The document acknowledges a certain Wäldé as *restāñña* who now surrenders a portion or all of his land to the beneficiary of the grant, Zufan-Bét Mamo. The name Wäldé is listed a second time with people grouped under the term *šāmād zéga*, although the document does not specify whether *šāmad zéga* Wäldé was the same person as *restāñña* Wäldé. But significantly, the names of the individuals listed as *ṭis*, as in many other documents, are different from those mentioned as *šāmad zéga*. Perhaps that the *šāmad zéga* were held in servitude, while the *ṭis* were bonded neither to the lord nor to the land but had a crop-sharing arrangement with the lord Mamo. At any rate, it is clear that Mamo essentially employed the labor of the *šāmad zéga* to cultivate the land that he acquired from the *rist* landowner, Wäldé. The historical record does not tell us where Mamo deployed the *šāmad zéga* or how they acquired their plows. But it is apparent that they entered

into new terms of socioeconomic dependence with him after the charter of Mentewab created his property rights.

Excerpts 1 and 2 are interesting for several reasons. The grantees in both documents have high social status. One of them, Wäldä-Le'ul, was the brother of Mentewab. Like Wäldä-Le'ul, the beneficiary of the grant in excerpt 2, Mamo was a high dignitary. Some of the names of the *šāmad zéga* and the *ṭis* under Wäldä-Le'ul's lordship do not bear the slightest resemblance to Amharic proper names; this suggests that these people were of a different ethnic background, probably either Agāw, Qemant, or Fālasha (Beta-Israel), since these groups were the dominant inhabitants of the land of Bajāna where the holdings of Wäldä-Le'ul were located and in several documents specific agricultural fields are described in reference to Fālasha or Qemant burial ground. In excerpt 2, if direct inference can be made from their names, both the *šāmad zéga* and the *ṭis* are Muslims. In other words, *zégenāt* was not merely a cultural distinction or concept but rather a sociological and economic category. *Zéga* could come from either Christian or non-Christian background and from any ethnic group. As an economic category, the *zégoch* were destitute persons; as a sociological category, the *zégoch* were people of servile status lacking social rights.

No less important is the term *mädäb* that consistently appears in the *māzgäb* of Qwesqwam church, including the entries quoted above. It is usually mentioned at the end of each entry and next to the people listed as *ṭis*. The root form of the word is *mädäbä*, which means "he assigned" or "put someone in charge of something." Mostly likely the term *mädäb* refers to a person designated by the landlords for special duty. Accordingly, Wäldä-Le'ul designated one of his *zégoch* called Ayahoy as *mädäb*. Likewise, Däjjazmach Mamo designated one of his *zégoch* called Eslleman as *mädäb*. The documents give no particulars about the special duties of the *mädäb*. This calls for further research.

By now the meaning and the concepts that underlie the term *zégoch* and the connection of these individuals to rim property should be clear. During the eighteenth century, rim was the standard form of tenure through which both clerical and secular lords held their land. Tenure in rim, although dependent, was free of all duties and obligations except for the performance of specific liturgical services. Contrary to previous assumptions, peasants were expressly excluded from exercising property rights on rim land—land they had formerly owned. Furthermore, rim land was normally hereditary, and according to clauses in some land charters as well as actual practice it could be alienated through sale. Finally, the socioeconomic relationship mediated by rim land was essentially a relationship between the rim-owning landlords and their subjects—the *zégoch*. It may be that the category of *zégenāt* was created to cater to the labor demands of the ruling classes. Consequently, the relation of dependency and servitude that existed between the *zégoch* and the landlords was apparently a derivative of the rim system of tenure.

Conclusion

The categories of rim and zéga complicate the social and agrarian picture of Ethiopia by casting the Ethiopian land system within the context of private property. We are now sufficiently confident that the rights of the elite receiving land in the form of rim was essentially an entitlement to the land itself and that the land was worked by the labor of the zégoch. Rim land was a property right in the modern sense of the word. It was exclusively held, and the rights of the individual lords in rim land were also heritable. In the wake of these discoveries, the argument that the Ethiopian ruling classes derived their wealth and social status essentially from their fief-holding rights instead of property ownership rights in land should be discarded. Analysis of the Ethiopian property system and the social relationships arising out of it should be carried out in a much broader context than the constraining concepts of gult and rist. This renders the need for further study on zéga and rim more pressing so that we may understand the social and economic processes underlying the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ethiopian societies and state.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank several individuals for their support and for incisive comments and suggestions that I received in the course of writing this article. Jeffrey Ahlman, Donald Crummey, and Elisabeth McMahon helped in the framing and presentation of my argument. Donald Crummey also provided me with the land charters and other property documents from northern Ethiopia on which this article is based. He has been very generous in allowing me access to his collection. I would like also to express my gratitude to Kenneth Cuno, Carol Symes, and Max Edelson.

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Notes

1. For definitions of all Amharic terms discussed in this article, see the Glossary.
2. For a review of the traditional colonial and anthropological literature on African land tenure system, see Crummey (2005:2, 5–7).
3. While drawing on and complementing the work of the social anthropologist A. Hoben on rist and gult, Crummey (2000) has expanded the definition of gult. Unlike many other scholars, Crummey claims that gult carried rights and obligations that were both proprietary and governmental; thus he views the relations between the Ethiopian political classes and the peasantry in terms of a property nexus.
4. However, in the Amharic and Tigreñña languages today the terms *zéga* or *zégenät* translate as "citizen" or "citizenship."
5. UNESCO 10:2, Ms. 6, Dima Giyorgis manuscript, from a microfilm copy at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. Sishagne's translation is to be found in a database created in Notebook 2 (Gojland database: 18–19); copy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University.
6. UNESCO 10:5, Ms. 16, Dima Giyorgis manuscript, from a microfilm copy at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. Sishagne's translation is to be found in a database created in Notebook 2 (Gonland database: 28) deposited at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University.
7. These references are drawn from a collection of documents microfilmed in Ethiopian churches and monasteries and deposited at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. The catalogue form is as follows: Ill/IES, the collection; 88.III.31, a microfilm exposure number as catalogued. The title of the manuscript and the name of the church then follow.

Glossary of Amharic Terms

aläqa. Head of an endowed church; leader.

aläqenät. From *aläqa*, leader; when used as an institution of inheritance, the term denotes a property arrangement in which a favored heir was recognized as family leader and received the lion's share of the family patrimony.

balärest. Hereditary owner of *rist* land.

barya. Slave.

- däbtära.** Choir, cleric; as of the seventeenth century the term also denotes both the laity, including women, and clerics holding land under ecclesiastical institutions and owing clerical service.
- gasha.** Unit of land measurement rated at 40 hectares.
- gult.** Rights involving any combination of tribute and tax collection, jurisdiction over people and land granted to individuals and institutions by kings and lords.
- jiyya.** A term used for “poll tax” paid by non-Muslim subjects in lieu of military services during the early centuries of Islam; as of the fifteenth it signifies tax in general and also land tax specifically.
- liq.** Religious scholar, learned cleric.
- mädäb.** A person designated by landlords for special duties to manage their property held under the church of Qwesqam during the eighteenth century.
- mäzgül.** A term used to refer to property register of endowed ecclesiastical institutions such as Qwesqam, providing a written description of land ownership or title-deed which made its first appearance in early eighteenth century Gondär.
- Restänña.** See *balärest*.
- rist.** Land ownership right based on lineage.
- šämad zéga.** A term used to refer to servile farmhands working on the land of the clerical landlords attached to the church of Qwesqam in eighteenth century.
- šämädä.** A term used to describe the act of joining up oxen for plowing .
- ṭis.** Smoke, hearth; in the context used in this study it stands for an initial for *ṭisänña* (see below).
- ṭisänña.** Tenant.
- yätégé.** Empress, queen.
- zéga.** Subject; as of 1974, it denotes citizen.
- zégenät.** Derived from *zéga*, meaning servitude; as of 1974 it denotes citizenship and nationality.
- zégoch.** Plural for *zéga*, meaning subjects; as of 1974 the term signifies citizens.
- zufan-bét.** Palace official and the overseer of the throne.