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Rivalries over Revenue from Zege Coffee among Local and International Powers from 19th Century to 1935

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Abstract:

Though there is a lack of clear historical corroboration, on how and when coffee was introduced to the peninsula, sources attributed its beginning to the founder of Zege Monastery, Abba Betre Maryam. Before it began to serve as an international trading item, the peninsula's coffee had been used for local consumption as a stimulant beverage. At least from the last decade of the 19th century onwards, however, coffee has been a dominant cash crop in Zegie peninsula. In the first three and a half decades of the 20th century, its lucrative revenue attracted the interest of both local and international powers. On the one hand, there were national and international coffee merchants who visited Zege purely for commercial cause. On the other hand, there were people who had aspired to make political profit as well. Ostensibly Ras Teferi, the later Emperor Haile Selassie I and Ras Hailu, governor of Gojjam province (1902-1932) entered to the rivalry as concerned authorities to maintain peace and order in the peninsula. Obviously the two rulers had opposite interests; Ras Hailu to keep hold of his hereditary regional power and the emperor to consolidate central authority by getting rid of regional lords.

Until its culmination upon Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941), the struggle for Zege peninsula's coffee revenue between the Italians in Eritrea and the British in the Sudan was part of the colonial effort each with a political aspiration to bring the Lake Tana region under their dominion. Relying on all the relevant sources, the article traces the roots and course of competition for revenue fetched from Zege peninsulas' coffee and its trading activities.

1. Introduction

Zegé peninsula, which is situated at (11° 40' to 11° 43' N and 37 °19' to 37 °21' E), is located at 600kms northwest of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia is enclosed by Lake Tana, the largest lake in Ethiopia. The peninsula is attached to dry land on its eastern part. As a place name Zege stands for the peninsula that encloses two rural *gebele*, the former monastery and Zägé town at the gate of the main land of the peninsula. At present, Zegé is part of Bahir Dar city Administration and is 32kms far away from the main town, the capital of Amhara National Regional State. The origin of the term Zegie is somewhat obscure. Informants from Ura Kidane miheret monastic church, one of the earliest church in the peninsula associated the term to Debra Zegag and Abba Nahom; where as some monks who were servants of Mähal Zegie Giyorgis attributed the term to *Zengie* (my shaft) and to Abun Betre Maryam, founder of Zegie monastery. Still another church scholar, Aleqa Aynakulu Mersha, related the term to a name of a tribe called Zegie (Aleqa Aynakulu 1955 E.C:466; Tadese Tamrat, 1994:954-959). In the peninsula of Zege there are six Monastic- churches established between 14th and 17th centuries.

1.1. Early History of Coffee production in Zegie Peninsula

Until recently, farming practices using draft animals had been forbidden and the main occupation of the people is coffee plantation and fishing. Coffee has grown under shade of big trees. The people of Zegie or Zegegnas (as the inhabitants of the peninsula used to call themselves) considered Abune Betre Maryam not only as their spiritual father, but also as a miraculous monk instrumental to the foundation of natural coffee in the peninsula. Basing their belief on what is recorded in the *gedel* (Miracle of Abune Betre Maryam, Zegégnas generally hold a view that natural coffee was endowed to them through the saint's prayer. The discovery and introduction of coffee in to the peninsula is therefore, attributed to Abune Betre Maryam. However, there is lack of clear historical corroboration on how and when coffee was introduced to the peninsula. Based on the available sources, however, it is possible to deduce that the saint introduced coffee at the early stage of his monastic life.

Before it began to serve as an international trading item, the peninsula's coffee had been used for local consumption as a stimulant beverage. One of our informants in Zegie recounted that coffee has been served as source of livelihood in the peninsula since the arrival of their ancestors and forefathers in the early 17th & 18th centuries (Mered Welde Aregay, 1988:19-25). In support of this view two well-known historians, Pankhurst and Merid, noted that coffee was cultivated in the Lake Tana region before the 19th century. Besides Zegie, Qurata and Tana chirqos were centers of coffee production. However, throughout the 18th century up until

19th century there was very little or no coffee exported from any part of Ethiopia (Abdusamad H. Ahmad:1997:543; Pankhurst, 1968:202).

From the early 19th to the last decade of 19th century, however, coffee from Zegie peninsula coffee had become a dominant cash crop in Zegie peninsula and was exported in to British Sudan through Mettema, a town on the Ethio-Sudanese border. In the first three and a half decades of the 20th century its lucrative revenue kindled both local and international merchants. Like other long distance caravan merchants coffee traders had used one of the major 19th century Ethiopian trade route which linked South Western Ethiopia to the north and North West Ethiopia. Beginning from Bonga (in South west Ethiopia) long distance traders headed towards Gondar, which was the imperial capital of Ethiopia, and Mettema town. Before reaching Gondar and Mettema towns, caravan traders went all the way through Basso, Bure, Dangela, Yismala market towns (in Gojjam) and Dengel Ber and Derita (in Beghemider) (Bahiru Zewde, 2002:21-23; Seleten Seyum, 1988: 15-16; kapiten Negash:4). At Yismala, a market town situated at about 40kms to the south east of Zege peninsula, merchants in need of coffee branched off the main trade route and reached Zege market. From Zege coffee traders transported their coffee loads to Delgi town using tankwa (reed boat) across Lake Tana (Abdusamad H. Ahmad, 1980:53).

1. 2. *Zegie Peninsula's Coffee as a Bone of contention Among Rival powers.*

The steady growth of its coffee trade had a substantial contribution for Zegie to become one of the principal towns and prospected capitals for Emperor Tewdros II (1855-1868) in the Lake Tana region. As a port and center of coffee trade Zegie peninsula had been frequently visited by Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868). Perhaps the emperor had great interest to directly exploit its coffee resources by improving its transportation facilities. However, outbreak of cholera epidemic and the on and off attacks from local hereditary rulers made it uneasy for the emperor realize his plan (Blanc, 1968: 143-163; Tekle Yesus). As he did in other parts of his Empire, therefore, the Ethiopian Emperor unleashed his wrath on Zegie against his main opponents and rebels in Gojjam. Thus he is noted in Zege for cutting the coffee trees down into hatches and for destroying the prosperous town into ashes (Hormuz Rassam 1969:18-20; Bairu Tefela, 1973:30). The peninsula & its natural endowments, however, continued to attract the attention of sovereigns and coffee merchants. The presence of the British and the Italians in the Sudan and Eritrea respectively had contributed for augmentation of coffee demand in Sudan and Eritrea. Among other reasons the use of Coffee as a stimulant beverage by the ordinary people in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan contributed for its growing demand. From the late 19th century onwards demand for coffee escalated in the British and Italian colonies. This growing demand in turn motivated the inhabitants of Zegie to increase their coffee production. Zegie peninsula's coffee then rejuvenated and the peninsula soon becomes famous for its coffee plantation (Abdusamad H. Ahmad ,1994:620-621).

1.2.1. Process of coffee cultivation and transaction in Zege peninsula

With the increase of coffee demand in markets, the inhabitants' labor alone found to be insufficient to produce the required quantity of coffee. The peninsula's community, who has been dependent mainly on coffee cultivation for its livelihood, embarked on labor intensive coffee cultivation. The absence of irrigation for Zege's coffee plantation, made its production labor intensive. Firstly coffee seedlings are planted in winter (during dry season) and kept until grown well by letting them drink water fetched from Lake Tana. When the first month of heavy rains began in July the seedlings transplanted to their permanent plantation area under the shade of tall trees. Once after well grown under the shade of trees Zege's coffee could resist the dry season without irrigation. Towards the end of February coffee seeds ripped and harvested. Harvesting coffee in Zege is labor demanding that every family member of each homestead from far and near required taking part on it. Therefore, in addition to engaging the whole family members, some well to do individual cultivators in the peninsula used to employ slave labor to their coffee farm (Abdusamad H. Ahmad, 1997: 543; Cheesman, 1936:351). On the other hand the congregation coffee farm land began to be developed by the räd, (lit. helper) who are beginner monks or novice. For the novice serving the elder monks and their religious institution has been part of their examination to test their persistence to take the yolk of monasticism (Taddese Tamrat, 1972:164-172). However, members of the congregation (priests, monks and deacons) had to give priesthood service to endowed churches and had no adequate time to fully engage in coffee production and its transaction. The clerical congregation had used to give delegation to the liqarad (lit. head of beginner monks) to take the responsibility of coordinating all activities related to the production, transportation and transaction of congregation's coffee. Informants agreed that after selling the coffee merchandize in Metema market the liqarad had used to submit the cash to the Qesa gebaze, clerical official in charge of financial affair of churches.

1.3. *Beginning of Conflict of Interest over the control of Zege and its resources*

Zegie Peninsula's coffee production reached its peak in the first three decades of the 20th century and its trade continued to stimulate the interest rival powers and merchants. There had been well established long distance trade between the Lake Tana region and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. After buying coffee from Zegie long distance traders headed over to Mettema by way of Delgi across the lake and reach Mettema after 6 days travel on foot. The coffee producers (both the clergy and the laity) on their part either sold their coffee in Zägé market or took it to Mettema. They had used tankwa (reed boat), to transport their coffee across the Lake Tana. Grabham and Black, who visited the Lake Tana noted that the tankwa was the only means of crossing the lake and its importance in relation to Zegie's coffee trade came to an end only when the Italians introduced modern boats in 1930s (Seletene Seyum, 1988:15-16; Grabham G. Black, 1925:125) 1980:53). After reaching Delgi, a port in north western side of the Lake in Beghimider, both the Zegegnas and other coffee traders had used to hire pack animals to load their coffee to Mettema market. (Abdusamad H. Ahmad, 1997:544).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the rich coffee trade between the Lake Tana region and the British Sudan began to fetch high profit. Among other reasons the lucrative profit served as episode for sparking of local and international rivalry for bringing coffee trade and its port under their influence. Ostensibly Ras Teferi, the later Emperor Haile Selassie I and Ras Hailu, governor of Gojjam (1902-1932) entered to the rivalry pretending as concerned bodies responsible to maintain peace and order in the peninsula. Obviously the two had opposite interests. For Ras Hailu, who brought Zegie peninsula under his dominion in 1911, considering Zege as his fief strived to consolidate his grip for appropriation of large sum of money and property. The ras therefore devised in different mechanisms for grabbing farm land and moveable property. Snatching land from individuals who had no offspring to inherit their property was one of his mechanisms. Besides revising the tax system, the ras began to collect market dues in cash. Within a short span of time the governor expropriated large sum of money and established vast coffee farms (Patrike Gilkes, 1975:31; Bahiru Zewde, 2002:98).

In 1920s, Ras Hailu grew in power and wealth and became one of the serious economic and political rivals of Ras Teferi Mekonnen. His lure for wealth and power motivated the ras to make independent dealing with the British through to the extent of signing loan agreement. Considering him as a security risk, Ras Teferi and Empress Zewditu (r1916-1930) on their part made every possible effort to undermine Ras Hailu's hereditary authority in Gojjam (Teferi Mekonen, 2004:70-71). Meanwhile, through his opportunist neutrality Ras Hailu maintained smooth relationship with the central government. It was rather unpopularity by his people that made Ras Hailu easy prey to his opponents. Among others Ras Hailu's merciless taxation in his kingdom and his notorious undertaking in Zegie such as inheriting moveable property & grabbing unmovable property including coffee land aggravated the popular unhappiness. Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974), on his part used the people's dissatisfaction as excuse to remove his notorious rival from power. To that end, Ras Teferi had already called up on the people of Gojjam to bring grievances against their hereditary governor. Perhaps the pioneer ship in bringing complaints into the Imperial court was taken by the *zegegnas*. Being tired of shouldering the grievances imposed by him, they accused Ras Hailu a number of cases. The emperor on his part sentenced the governor as guilty of maladministration and handed Hailu's hereditary power over to his cousin in 1932 (Takle Iyasus, 155; Bahiru Zewde, 2002:145).

As regent and later as emperor who embarked on centralization of customs administration, Ras Teferi had also confronted with Ras Gugsa Wale of Beghemidir. In the pre-Italian occupation period Ras Teferi did his best to facilitate smooth transaction and to obtain good profit from Mettema-Galabat trans-frontier trade and its customs. He therefore prearranged Ethiopian frontier officials to protect Ethiopian merchants not to enter the Sudan without paying custom dues's main concern was capital accumulation from customs and other shire economic activities. Ras Gugusa and his agents on the contrary refused to lose their control. Assisted by his agents at three toll-posts /lit. *kella*/ from Delghi to Gallabat, where coffee merchants forced to be charged a thaler from each three load of donkey, governors of Beghemidir had used to fetch large sum of revenue. They had been taxing coffee merchants mercilessly in the name of the ras. Ras Gugusa was directly receiving the country's share of revenue from Mettema-Galabat custom. Therefore elimination of toll posts and bringing Mettema Galabat customs under the central government was one of the major factors for outbreak of the battle of Anchim (1930) where the ras defeated and killed. Ras Gugusa persisted in his opposition and did not to relinquish the revenue from customs to Imperial Government (Bahiru Zewde, 2002:99; Tsega Endalew, 2006:77-87; kapiten Gurumu:4).

After the occupation period, the Emperor's effort to centralize customs administration reinforced and indeed succeeded. The Sudanese merchants trading in Ethiopia too were taxed. For a mule loaded with coffee a merchant was taxed one amole, which was salt bar served by then as currency (Abdusamad H. Ahmad, 1997:522; Seletene Seyum, 1988:15-16)

The struggle for Zege's coffee revenue between the Italians in Eritrea and the British in the Sudan was part of the colonial effort each with a political aspiration to bring not only Zege peninsula but also the whole of the Lake Tana region under their dominion. When the Ethio-Sudan border agreement signed between Ethiopia and Great Britain on behalf of Sudan in 1902, the Ethiopian Emperor Menilek told to refrain from giving any concession to other powers with regard to Lake Tana and Nile. Again in 1920 the British won a tentative agreement to keep much of the trade and its routes flowing towards Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Ras Hailu who was then in control of Zege and part of the Lake Tana region (Teferi Mekonen, 2004, 47; Chrls Rey, 1927:27).

Until its culmination in 1935, the lucrative profit from Zege's coffee continued to attract local and international traders. Two Greek merchants, Mussie Dimitry and Mussie Baslinyos, were among foreign coffee merchants attracted by coffee trade to Zegie town. These two Greek merchants entered Zegie by way of Dangela. At the beginning they were engaged in this lucrative trade privately. After their arrival in 1904-1905, they involved in coffee trade (A.J. Hayes, 1905:159; Yeshiwendim Wereta, 1990:12). Indeed some people who had started coffee trade for the sake of profit making ended up as prominent politicians. A case in point is Gilla Giyorgis. With humble background, Gila's birthplace was Hamasen, in Eritrea. Before he had become one of the well-known personalities for abolishing slavery and for his patriotic activities in the Zegie and Bahir dar in the 1930s, Gilagiyorgis was a coffee merchant in Zegie. By then Zegie's coffee reportedly had exported mostly to Mettema and less went to Massawa (Seleten 1988; Abdussamad H. Ahmad, 1997:554-555).

Some other people started coffee trade on behalf of their country. Colonel Peluso, a retired Italian army officer, was a case in point. Peluso was an Italian agent sent by the colonial government of Eritrea with a mission of establishing a commercial link between Eritrea and the Lake Tana region. Before accomplishing his assignment, however, Peluso was murdered in Zägé in 1932 (Chessman, 1936:150). Nevertheless, his death did not bring the Italians plan to an end. They continued to strive to establish commercial link between Zegie and their colony Eritrea. Indeed, in the first three decades of the twentieth century the Italians did their best to divert most of the coffee trade towards their colony. In 1910s, Giuseppe Ostini, the Italian colonial agent in Gondar, recommended his government an idea to connect Zegie and Massawa by water and land transport systems. In 1915, Ostini himself had amassed 50,000 kilograms of coffee (Abdussamad H. Ahmad, 1994:620-621).

Fifteen years later another Italian consul at Gondar, Raffael Di Lauro, renewed the Italian initiative. Basing him on scientific research, Lauro had advised the Italian government to improve the Zegie - Dalgi transportation system so that a sufficient and a better quality coffee would reach Italy (Abdusamad H.Ahmad 1994:621). Great Britain, on her part, seems to have had a strong desire to keep much of the trading merchandise from Ras Hailu's kingdom, Gojjam, under her own influence. In connection with this, one of her diplomats, Charles Rey, won a tentative agreement from Ras Hailu in 1920. In that, negotiation the ras confirmed the diplomat to keep much of the trade and its routes flowing towards Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Teferi Mekonen, 2004:59-61; Nebyu Iyasu, 2004:13). In the early years of the post occupation period, the pre-Italian form of trade revived in Zegie. Both long distance caravan trade and local trade linked Zegie town with several different markets. The removal of pre-war political barriers such as custom tariffs and the use of currency encouraged trade.

Coffee was still a major export of Zegie. Some merchants used to export about fifteen pack animals at once. Unlike pre-occupation traders of Zegie, post war coffee merchants preferred the land route to the lake route. Now, they had no problem of finding pack animals. Traveling in groups under the leadership of chief merchant negadras, coffee traders used to tackle with the problem of bandits. Following the land route that runs through Achefer and Wondgie, merchants of Zegie entered Mettema and Basounda, a market located in the Sudan, through Alafa. From the Sudan merchants brought bales of abujudid and zeha (thread) (Seleten Seyum, 1988: 88; Abdusamad H. Ahmad 1980:59).

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