

## INNOVATIONS

### **The Bale Peasant Rebellion, 1963-1970**

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**Abstract:** This article tries to examine one of the challenges that the regime of Solominonic Dynasty of Emperor Haile Selassie faced in the Southern parts of Ethiopia (post of Ethiopian independence); and the triggering causes that fueled to the decline of Feudalism and Emperorship period in Ethiopian History around 1970s. The post-liberation period of 1941 Ethiopia witnessed growing opposition among peasants in different parts of the country against Haile Selassie's regime thereby giving the opposition a broader dimension. Peasant revolts, although on a small scale, were especially numerous in the southern territories, where the imperial government had traditionally rewarded its supporters with land grants thereby reducing the indigenous peasantry into tenancy. Among those Southern rebellion groups, the Bale peasant uprising presented the most serious challenge to the Ethiopian government. Initially, rebel groups conducted hit-and-run raids against military garrisons and police stations separately. The causes of the uprising were multifaceted. The indigenous peasants largely became tenants on their own land after the introduction of the Qalladland measurement in 1951. Likewise, peasants also suffered from religious antagonism which reached to unprecedented level after the appointment of Christian man of WarquEnquselassie as governor of the Muslim areas of Bale in 1963. Further, the Somali government extended material and moral support to the rebels as part of its strategy of reestablishing a "Greater Somalia". The rebellion ended in 1970s after some of its popular leaders including WaqoGutu surrendered to government forces due to the mediation role played by General JagamaKello.

**Key Words;** 1.Bale, 2.WaqoGutu, 3.Peasant Uprising, 4.Feudalism, 5.Land Tenure, 6.Greater Somalia

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#### **Introduction**

Opposition to Feudalism (Monarchical) regime was not to the elite. It assumed a broader dimension with the outbreak of peasant rebellion in number of provinces. Their incidence as well as their

intensity was much greater than the earlier periods. Furthermore, the necessary economic and political reform was not made to improve the lives of the majority of Ethiopia people given to the length of his government. However there were sporadic resistance against the regime such as Raya and Azebo (late 1920), Gondar(1920), Tigray(wayane rebellion of 1943),Gojjam(1951-1960) and Bale peasant uprising(1963-1970).<sup>1</sup>

In 1963, Bale peasant rebellion broke out in south–eastern provinces of Bale. This revolt is believed to have started as a result of many peasants, primary composed of the Oromo people and Somali tribes men ,was set off by a potent combination of grievances stemming from mal-distribution of political and administrative power ,land alienation, taxation, ethnic hostility, religious discrimination and ecological imbalance. The forces opposed the settlements of northern and feudalistic system. The rebellion, which broke out in the Somali inhabited district of El-kere, also had supported from Somali state, which claimed all the Somali –in habited areas of Ethiopia as belonging to it by right.<sup>2</sup>

The revolt was led by Oromo leader and rebel figure General ‘Waaqo Guutuu’ and supported by Somali government. ‘Waaqo Guutuu’ is believed to have started the rebellion when he received no governmental aid after a conflict over grazing right. After receiving no aid, he went to supply him and others rebels weapons.<sup>3</sup>

The Bale uprising lasted from 1963-1970. It controlled large province of Bale for a number of year’s .The involvement foreign military experts in 1968-69 and more importantly to change of government and policy in neighboring Somali which has supplied the rebels with weapons,enabled the Ethiopian army to suppress the uprising in Bale in 1970.<sup>4</sup>

### **Causes of the Bale Peasant Uprising**

After suspension of the Wayanerebellion,eastern Tigray remained sullenly peaceful under RasAbebeAregay. The western half of provinces had not been much affected. In 1947 RasAbebe was replaced as governor by RasSeyum who,however, was required to stay in the capital most of the time. He handled regional appointments in his native province skillful and Tigray remained at a peace. It was not favored with development projects however, nor was there a great deal of urban growth. The peasants remained deeply traditional. When RasSeyum was killed in December 1960, the emperor appointed his son Mengesha in his place, thus keeping Tigray in hands of decedents of YohannisIV. Mengesha his wife Aida Desta, the emperor granddaughter,established themselves in the castles in Mekele and worked to develop the limited sources of this environmentally degraded region. For the last two decades of his rule,Tigrayconfronted Haile Selassie with no serious problem.<sup>5</sup>

In the south province of Bale, separated from Hararge in 1960, was different matter. There were local grievances in Bale, but a serious uprising would never have developed had it not been stoked from beyond Ethiopia’s border. Bale was a country’s second largest province in areas, but the most thinly

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<sup>1</sup>BahruZewde, A History of Modern Ethiopia(1855-1991), (Addis Ababa: AddisAbaba university press, 1994), p.236.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Ghalib, Ethiopia from century obscurity to Dawn fall of democracy, (Addis Ababa:Berhan and selam printing press, 2006), p.228.

<sup>3</sup> Paul B, Henze, Layer of time: A History of Ethiopia,(London: Hurst compony,2000),p.262.

<sup>4</sup>[www.org.access](http://www.org.access) 18-08-2021.

<sup>5</sup>Paul B. Henze, p.260,SaheelAdyumbbi ,TheHistory of Ethiopia,( London: Greenwood, 2007),pp.103-104.

populated. Three quarters of Bale's inhabitants were Oromo, living in its forested northern highlands were Ethiopia's second highest mountain, Batu, rises to 14,360 feet. The vast central and southern regions of Bale are sparsely inhabited savannas that slope gradually to the Somali border. This area has for at least three or four centuries provided grazing for Somali nomads. The highland of Bale may have been the original home of the Oromo, but for several generations, perhaps longer, Somali had been advancing westward through lowland Bale into Sidamo, where the occasionally clashed violently with Borana Oromo.<sup>6</sup>

Though the river valleys of the Ogaden have a good potential for irrigation, there was little cultivation. The Ethiopian government and foreign aid donors initiated modest agricultural development projects in 1960. In Somalia, the lower Webe Shebelle valley was opened to agriculture during the Italian colonial period. The Somalia Youth League (SYL) founded after British occupation in 1943 first articulated territorial claims to the Ogaden. Britain returned the major portion of the Ogaden to Ethiopian administration in 1948 but kept the Haud. The area directly south of British Somali land, until 1954. Thus it took thirteen years for Ethiopia to regain the entire area it had held since the colonial boundary arrangement negotiated during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

But Ethiopia control remained tenuous. The region had few roads and few settlements. Many names on the map were only weekly market sites or wells with no permanent inhabitants. Lack of readily exploitable resources gave the region low priority for economic development. While lowland Somali were primarily nomadic camel and goat herders, highland Oromo herded cattle and some were cultivators. As Addis Ababa governments resumed control of the area, friction developed between Oromo peasant and Amhara officials who sought to impose tax and exact service. The arrival of Amharan settlers caused further strain as local grazing and land rights were arbitrarily abrogated.<sup>8</sup>

The government began to institute an enlarged and rationalized bureaucracy and a change in the taxation system both of which accelerated land alienation. Governors conveniently confiscated lands claiming acts against the state which slowly turned farmers into landless tenants.<sup>9</sup>

Almost entirely Muslim Oromo and Somali also resented the special privileges accorded the northern Christian settlers and the bureaucratic abuse that accompanied the extension of the state authorities. Islam provided cultural idiom for mobilization of mass discontent especially the independence of Somali in 1960 in this context contributed greatly to growth of a new form of consciousness, pan-Somalism. As a result of Somali of Ethiopia became attracted to the homonymous post-colonial state of which many of them wanted to become part.<sup>10</sup>

The Oromo on their turn in the hope of ameliorating their depressed conditions choose to ally themselves with a foreign power than to lose their lands. Moreover constrained by the settlers continued, domination of economic system and frustrated by the state unwillingness to allow substantial devolution of power; the narrative genre began to look for outside assistance,

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<sup>6</sup> Ali Ghalib, pp. 228-229.

<sup>7</sup> Paul B. Hienze, p.261.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Paul b Henze and Ronningbashvik, Haile Selassie students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution 1952-1974, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa university press, 1985), p.96, Bahru Zewde, The Quest for Socialist Utopia C. 1960-1974, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2014), p.193.

<sup>10</sup> Girma Alemayehu and Tadesse Delessa, Ethiopian History: From Early Aksumite period to down fall of Emperor Haile Selassie I, (Addis Ababa; Mega printing press, 1994), p.235.

which Somali was too willing to supply. Therefore conditions were ripe for popular defiance because they were conducive to class alliances and susceptible to outside manipulation. Likewise the character of the revolt could be identified as a loosely united leadership without a definite program for political action which was able to wage an armed resistance for many years that enjoyed the support of disaffected peasantry and received foreign aid at argument its military capability. The revolt was a typical rural protest that sought vainly to redress a multiplicity of grievances. Therefore as the dividing line grew increasingly sharper Fitawrari Abebe Gebre the Amhara governor of the province took the bold initiative of introducing mild reform which was directed to nullify Somali propaganda by soothing the native gentry.<sup>11</sup>

The policy of the governor was to establish at least a semblance of parity in the distribution of administrative power that was for each Amhara officers there would be an Oromo or Somali deputy or vice versa but his efforts were however failed by the settlers accusing him of having irresponsibly replaced Christian officials with illiterate Muslims and appointing untrusted worthy Muslims. This was followed by social turmoil and resentment and Fitawrari Worku Enquselassie a Shewa Amhara who replaced Abebe reversed his predecessors' policy and became a staunch supporter of the settlers and alienated the local people especially the gentry the Somali and Oromo, more particular the Worku years were characterized by administrative disorganization and increasing social polarization. In the real sense the settlers were the administrators' security agents and custodians of state interest.<sup>12</sup>

The leadership of Somali government always had a common goal that is for the unification of all territories inhabited by Somalis across the border having a common culture heritage and origin that includes the former British, Italian Somali lands, Djibouti in northeastern district of Kenya and Ogaden including a section of south eastern Ethiopia an extensive area that is not entirely inhabited by Somali but which the nationalist referred to as western Somali. Therefore the Ogaden question is of dual nature, while on one hand it involved the right to self-determination of an oppressed national minority in an empire state on the other it was simply territorial dispute between two sovereign states.<sup>13</sup>

Hence to justify their territorial claims the state nationalists frequently invoked the right to self-determination yet they failed to liberate their kinsmen from colonial bondage for the nation that they argued for had been fractured by imperialist. This popular claimed them both to a frequently clash by daily radio broad casting from Mogadishu inflammatory propaganda in Oromiffa and Somali. The principal focus was Bali and Bandits, disgruntled petty officials, ambitious men of title and property, heavily indebted and much abused ordinary people readily responded to such agitation and call to arms. This pockets of uncoordinated resistance eventually coalesced into provincial uprising that reached its peak in the year 1966-1968.<sup>14</sup>

### **Courses of the Bale Peasant Uprising**

The rebellion started in the Somali inhabited frontiers near Afker in the district of Elkere under leadership of a bandit named Kahin-Abdi of Rer Afgap. Kani was well known for harboring Somali nationalist sentiment and was frequently placed under surveillance. Finally in June 1963 tired of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.234-235.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp.239-40.

<sup>13</sup> Paul B. Henze, p.262.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

harassment and wounded by his son's detention for alleged tax default, he openly defied the state of becoming an outlaw of the Robin Hood type. He was able to attract a large following and gained little success in capturing certain areas and resistance could no longer be characterized as banditry for the intentions of the rebels had become clear that it was to become part of somalinnioimo/somalicomunity, as aspiration that the promise of Somalia's independence had helped strengthen. Thus the rebels wished to sever their links with the Ethiopian states by refusing to pay tax and other levies, refusing to sell cattle, sheep, goats, and other products to government representatives.<sup>15</sup>

By the middle of 1964 they had successfully mobilized the pastoralist in the district when KahinAbdi replaced by Sheik Mohammad AbdinurTakani another prominent defector. Only three groups remained loyal to the state, these were the Dabe, Gherrimero and Gherri, river rine farmers along the Wabi-Genale river. As in Elkere, it was bandits and disloyal officials, who initiated the resistance in Wabe and Delo.<sup>16</sup>

In Wabe the most distinguished deserter was Haji Isaaq Mohammad Daddi of the Raiytu a serious intelligence officer in Bale and NegelleBorana. In 1961 he was implicated in the number of arrival, Amhara settler fled to Moqdisho to avoid arrest, and established line communication with their bandits in Wabe, Hussein Bunni, AliyiDadi and IsimiHissu Aba washa. With arms generously flowing from Somalia under auspice of Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) an organization of Ethiopia exiles from Ogaden and with which the defector became associated, the bandits banded together under Hussein Bunni and began to incite the peasants. Unrest in Delo also grew perceptibly in scale following the desertion of several men especially the village judge, BalambarasWaqo Lugo between September and October 1964. Wako's defection was occasioned by the long standing rivalry between himself and FitawrariGalchuTogie, a sub district administrator. The two men accused each other of abetting the Somali cause and Wako lost the loyalty of the state and after his home was ransacked and his livestock confiscated he made his way to Moqdisho from where he would emerge as the second most important leader in the expanding the uprising.<sup>17</sup>

### **Measures taken by Government**

Bale peasant uprising which started in 1963 in small province of Elkere; gradually spread to Dalo, Wabi and Ganale under leadership of Wako Gutu last stronghold that challenged the government force but later in Dec, 1966 the government placed the provinces of Delo, Elkere and Ganale under martial rule of commander of the army, fourth division.<sup>18</sup>

In Addis Ababa had to mobilize units of Territorial Army and recruit local militia among Christian settlers. A Christian Oromo General, JagamaKello, was put in charge of determined effort to defeat the Bale uprising. Infancies more professional, too avoiding pitched battles and attack on well – defended position and turning to hit –and–run raids. They achieved their maximum effectiveness, with 12000-15000 fighters.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>[www.revolvy.com](http://www.revolvy.com) revolt accessed on 20-08-2021

<sup>16</sup>Girmaalemayehu and Tadesse Delessa, p.239

<sup>17</sup>Girmaalemayehu and Tadesse Delessa, p.240, Paul B. Henze, p.263

<sup>18</sup> Paul B. Henze, p.263-4

<sup>19</sup>BahruZewde, pp.236-237

During late 1968 Ethiopia's air force began bombing rebel strong holds and livestock concentrations. A British army engineers unit flew into build a bridge across Ganale River, greatly facilitating the mobility of Ethiopian force. Most important was a lessening of support from Somalia, from Prime Minister Mohammed Ibrahim Egal on coming to power decided it was unwise to challenge Ethiopia and Kenya neglect his own country's development. The effect of this policy change was not immediately apparent because the uprising had been to generously supplies that they were able to maintain momentum even with a slowing of Mogadishu's logistical support.<sup>20</sup>

The Ethiopian administration in Bale began an effort to divide the rebels from the population by cracking down on corruption and moving energetically to deal with peasant grievances. Both carrot and strike had effect, for aerial bombardment struck terror into peasant supporting the uprising and encouraged disengagement from them. When rebels began to surrender at the end of 1969 the rebellion quickly lost momentum. Somali chief of staff General Mohammed Said Barre's military coup in Mogadishu in October 1969 further weakened Mogadishu's support for the rebellion in Ethiopia.<sup>21</sup>

In February 1970, the Ethiopian had surrendered General WaqoGutu who retained barely 200 armed men under his command, in Arana, an isolated area south of mount Batu. He and his fighters pardoned on condition that they return to peaceful life. Emperor Haile Selassie subsequently granted WaqoGutu a title a commission in the Ethiopian army .Finally emperor appointed General JagamaKellogovernor of Bale several other Oromo and Somalis to other positions. The participation of province and of most of Ogaden was complete by 1971.<sup>22</sup>

### **Consequences of the Bale peasant uprising**

Under Emperor Haile Selassie the annexed territories were exploited economically and benefit from whatever social and economic development took place in the empire. The inhabitants of the territories were generally excluded from political participation and administration at regional and national level. The fact of conquest and subsequent occupation led to a revolt in Bale. In 1960 the uprising led General Wako Gutu began to oppose the feudal governments and control large provinces of Bale for several years .In one of land mark battles at Malka –Anna near Genale River in 1963 , the Oromo combatants took down two military helicopters using anon – automatic rifle called Dhombir. At this battle the rebels were able to capture and take a lot of weapons from enemy there by boosting their defense capabilities. But latter the declaration of state emergence in Bale province in August 1969 and the opening of the additional army base on the forest fringes as in Maena (Meslo) limited the rebels' position. Though the governor was extra ordinary careful not to antagonize peasants, villages in particular who persisted in their support to the uprising were made to bear heavy bombardment and collectives monetary fines. The governor raised the number of the militia that made regular patrols at the border and played a key role in siege operations. Externally the newly independent Somalia government for Ethiopian favor of giving recognitions to Ibrahim Egal's government and independence it disassociated itself from the uprisings. There the rebels who were isolated from both their internal and external source of support lost their internal and external sources of support lost their morale and many of Wako's deputies unilaterally accepted the offer for a cease-fire and general amnesty. By the 1970 the rebel force had dwindled too drastically and Wako military operation was limited only to Wallabu in February 1970. Wako's families and other prominent rebels' families

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<sup>20</sup>Paul B. Henze, p. 264-5

<sup>21</sup>Girmaalemayehu and Tadesse Delessa, P. 241 , Paul B. Henze, p.265

<sup>22</sup>ibid

surrender and February 23, 1970 Wako Lugo gave himself up. Then through Wakos mediation the rebel chief Wako Gutosurrender on march 28, 1970 thus movement had been effectively shattered without a base supplies, leaders and remaining fighters simply dispersed, hundred fleeing to Mogadishu where they formed a part of a community of Ethiopia refugees that called itself western Somalia Hareket and successive Somalia government referred to it as the united Liberation Front of Western Somalia (ULFWS) or (WSLF).<sup>23</sup>

The emperor also declared that the sentry of Bale would be allotted one third of the land like the ballabbats in other regions. Not only this the new tax abandoned, but also tax arrears from 1950-1968 was avoided. Many government officials who had not been over population were transferred.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The Bale peasant rebellion in the southern province of Bale emerged as the major forces opposing the Haile Selassie government in the 1960s. This movements organized by peasants. The Bale uprisings lasted from 1963-1970. It controlled large province of Bale for a number of years. When the revolt continued, the government declared state emergence on the provinces and launched a military campaign involving the army, Police and *nachlabash*. The involvement of foreign military experts in 1968-69, and more importantly the change of government and policy in neighboring Somali which had supplied the rebels with their weapons, enabled the Ethiopian army to suppress the uprising in 1970. But the peasants did not lose their causes; not only the new tax abandoned, but also tax arrears from 1950-1968 was avoided. Many government officials who had not been over population were transferred.

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<sup>23</sup>Richard Pankhurst, A History of Ethiopia, (California: black bell publishing, NY), P.266, Richard Greenfield, Ethiopia: a new political history, (London : pall mall press, 1965), p. 120.

<sup>24</sup>BahruZewde, pp.236-237.