Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia and Eritrea 🔓

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Summary

Slavery and the slave trade were persistent features of the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the Ethiopian-Eritrean region, which is historically constituted by various polities and societies across the Christian, Semitic-speaking highlands and the Rift Valley with its surrounding lowland regions, bordered by the Nile Valley on the west and the Red Sea coast to the east. The connectedness of this vast region through long-distance trade routes reaching the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean world is attested in sources since antiquity. There were multiple ways into enslavement: wars, raids, debt, birth, or trade, which involved various actors, be they *shifta* (bandits), soldiers, traders, or kings. Slave markets dotted the region along the general trade routes, and slaves were distributed into various social categories and labor occupations. While the expansion of the Ethiopian empire turned an increasing number of peasants into servants of the feudal class, the 19th century saw both a growth in the volume of slaves traded in the region and a growth in sources related to slavery thanks to increasing international attention. Despite a pronounced commitment to abolition by Ethiopian rulers since the late 19th century, abolition happened late and slowly. Legacies of slavery play a role in the continuing exclusion and marginalization of persons of slave descent in the 21st century.

Keywords: enslavement, long-distance slave trade, status, barya, gabbar, domestic labor, marginalization

Subjects: Slavery and Slave Trade

Slavery and Slave Trade: Geographical Width and Historical Depth

The Ethiopian-Eritrean region surveyed here represents a territory with changing boundaries across centuries. From antiquity up to modern times, this region would roughly include highland-agrarian, mainly Christian, Semitic-speaking communities that shared similar social characteristics and were connected to larger regional trade networks. These networks were constituted by trade routes connecting Muslim principalities and Omotic kingdoms to the southeast and southwest of the Ethiopian-Eritrean highlands, as well as by trading communities along the Red Sea coast and the Nile Valley. The 19th century was key in transforming the political dynamics and the territory of this region. Following the Italian occupation along the Red Sea (1885–1941), the incorporation of the former colony of Eritrea in the Ethiopian empire became a major political issue. It was only in 1993 that Eritrea became an independent country, which nonetheless still shares various cultural traits with Ethiopia. The late 19th century saw the extension of the Ethiopian state along the Rift Valley and the forceful incorporation of numerous independent kingdoms, chiefdoms, and sheikdoms to the west, east, and south of the Christian highland kingdoms. Thus, the territory of Ethiopia was transformed, giving to the country its

contemporary international borders. In some areas the Ethiopian empire, itself a slave-holding society, connected to preexisting structures of slave raiding and slave holding, and demanded tributes in slaves for the courts of the ruling elites. In this vast region, the term *slavery* oversimplifies a broad variety of dependent statuses.[1] In order to meaningfully appreciate the persistent phenomenon of economic and social bondship in the Ethiopian-Eritrean region, numerous variations of dependency must be analyzed, from sources scattered over centuries.

Strategically placed between two main trade routes, the Ethiopian-Eritrean region was a hub for the slave trade with an outlet to the Red Sea to the east and the Nile Valley to the west. Both the Red Sea and the Nile Valley connected the region to a global export trade in slaves for centuries. Since Pharaonic times the Egyptian slave trade was fed by chattel from Ethiopia.[2] Traces of this trade can be found in the Egyptian art of the time. Slaves from this region were also found in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds given the connections to the Mediterranean trade.[3] Nilo-Saharan areas placed between the Aksumite and Sudanic empires were areas of raids and extraction of slaves. The Aksumite port of Adulis was known as a hub for slaves since the 1st century, and in the 6th century, Nestorian trader Cosmas indicated that most slaves to be shipped from Adulis were brought from the Aksumite hinterland of Sasu (ostensibly the areas of present-day Fazoughli in Sudan).[4] The 7th century agreement that established the terms of peace south of Aswan, between the Makuria (Christian Nubia) and Muslim Egypt, featured the exchange of slaves as annual tributes to the *wali* (ruler) of Aswan.[5] "Abyssinian slaves" remained highly valued across the Middle East, Northern Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean worlds over centuries, but the trade centers shifted throughout the centuries depending on political power. In the 10th century, Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal recorded that the port of Adulis had been "superseded" by that of Zayla.[6]

Eunuchs, too, from the Ethiopian-Eritrean region were some of the most valued slaves. In the 13th century, the Muslim scholar al-Umari described the different Islamic principalities in proximity of the Christian highland kingdoms. These principalities were engaged with Christian Ethiopia in various economic exchanges. Most prominently, the practice of castration was done in a certain place called Washlu, south of the Christian Ethiopian realm. The castrates healed in the Muslim principality of Hadiyya before they were sold at highest prices in Arabia where they were greatly esteemed. On this division of labor between Washlu, a "pagan place" specializing in castration, and Haddyia, specializing in healing, François-Xavier Fauvelle noted it "was motivated less by economic rationality than by the common hypocrisy that allowed Christians and Muslims to collaborate in a practice whose operation they preferred not to see."[7]

Slaves from the Ethiopian-Eritrean region can be traced by the spread of the term *Habasha* and its derivates. *Hubshees*, in Muscat, referred to slaves from Ethiopia or persons from Northeast Africa. "In Arabia, Abyssinian slave-soldiers were called *Ahabish* (plural of *Habash*), a term which stems from the early centuries of Islam. In Iran also, people of African origin were called *Habashis*."[8] A growing number of studies have documented the trajectories of Ethiopians enslaved across the Indian Ocean in the early modern era, such as the Habaši and Siddi groups in India, and of personalities like the Siddi ruler Malik Ambar, of Ethiopian origin.[9]

The local term *barya* (meaning "slave" in some Ethio-semitic languages) originating in the Aksumite hinterland, was probably originally applied to non-Semitic groups in northern Ethiopia, raided by the kings of Aksum in the 4th century.[10] But whether the word *barya* derives

from a group (e.g., the Nilo-Saharan Nara of present-day Eritrea), or became a blanket term for subaltern groups is not fully and satisfactorily settled. The 15th century *Liber Axumae* mentions the *ad barya*, the "house of the slaves."[11] Ayda Bouanga reported that since the 15th century in various chronicles, the term *medr barya*—the "land of the slaves"—is frequently used to designate the slaving zones beyond the Christian realm.[12] *Medr barya* carried a spatial meaning, designating an area where raids were frequent and where tributaries, vassals, or slaves lived. Similarly, the northern Ethiopian kingdoms were surrounded by non-Christian communities which they termed *shangalla*, or *shankilla* (a derogatory term for peoples with darker skin complexion) on which the Christian kings would customarily lead raids to extract resources and make prisoners of war.[13]

Ways into Enslavement and Becoming *Barya*

Generally, the expansion of polities and mass migrations often produced slaves, such as the Adali *jihad* in the 16th century. In fact, the great Oromo migrations and the wars of the 16th century between Christian polities and Muslim principalities had yielded many slaves on both sides.[14] During this time of war, uncertainty, and insecurity, the pastoralist Oromo expanded westward, *subjugating* various groups and assimilating them into their lineages at the lower stratum. During the westward expansion and the conquest of land, the ritual *gada* leaders (following the customary age-grade system of the Oromo) became landlords and adopted new territorial strategies. With the growth of land-based chiefdoms in the Gibe regions or in parts of Wollega, the new landlords increasingly enslaved "vanquished peoples" for labour."[15] Through conquest and assimilation of subjected peoples, the Macha society, for example, was organized between the *borana*, the *gabaro*, and the slaves—the *borana* being "pure" Oromo and the *gabaro* being the descendants of an Oromo union with either slaves or non-Oromo (often the indigenous population of an area where the Oromo migrated and settled). Regarding social stratification, these *gabaro* were regarded as "impure," but they were free and ranked higher than the slave. The Macha society identified three kinds of enslaved people. These categories recall the pattern of enslavement: the lowest grade were the *garbota*, slaves who were bought and could be sold. The *manbate* were slaves with a limited freedom who could marry and live in their own house in their master's compound. These slaves could attain freedom if they were able to provide a slave who would replace them in their owner's household. Finally, the *yabata* had more honor and ranged over the other two categories. They were prisoners of war and raids.[16] In the Macha society, the ritual manumission of slaves was called *lubabasa*. It enabled a certain mobility and acceptance in the society, but nonetheless a former slave could never become *borana*.

Slavery is rationalized in its cultural and political contexts, which involve various social categories. However, the slave is almost always considered an ethnic or religious "other" and its presence is steeped in power relations. The demand in slaves created categories that designated areas and corresponding societies as "enslavable." Such distinctions recall the Islamic division of the territories of Islam and those with potential slaves in the *Dar al Harb* as opposed to the *Dar al Islam*. Across the regions and over the centuries, the most common ways into enslavement were by war and raid, ambush and theft, birth, or transaction. In Christian areas, possession of slaves

was sanctioned by the *Fetha Nagast* (lit. "Law of the Kings"), a law code that "specified that persons of the faith could own and purchase slaves, and that the latter could be either captured from outside the Christian community or be the descendants of already existing slaves living within it."[17] *Shifta*—widespread gangs of bandits— would attack and kidnap individuals and bring them to the markets to sell them into slavery.[18] Also, in various areas people would give their kin or themselves into slavery if they were unable to pay tributes or taxes.[19]

While war and raids fed the slave markets, the expansion of states and polities also expanded tributary relations and vassalship, as well as slave ownership. For example, in the early 18th century, the kingdom of Leeqa subjugated various neighboring groups who became a tributary providing *corvée* labor and commodities.[20] Such vassalship is attested frequently in regional history. The Omotic kingdoms and the Gibe states retained vassals whom they protected in return for labor.[21]

For its part, the slave was entirely subject to a master who was bound by the legal and social conventions of the society. The conventions usually enabled the master to "buy, sell, free, adopt, ill-treat or kill his slave whose children belong to their owner and can be treated in the same way."[22] Such regulations were multiple and complex in the region and may have differed from society to society, not only across the two main religions, Christianity and Islam, but also across different polities, such as chieftaincies, or divine kingship systems often with diverse religious practices.

In the Christian highlands, a slave (*barya* or *lole* in Amharic) was considered moveable property that could be inherited or rented out, which is attested in various collections of oral traditions: "*endä barya, endä bazra*," "like slave, like mare" goes a local saying in Amharic.[23] Another is "*lolenna amole, kazzezut yewelall*," "slave and rock salt spend the day as ordered."[24] The lore of the Tigre of present-day Eritrea, collected by the Princeton Aksum Expedition in 1905, are evidence for the inclusion of slaves in daily lives.[25] Thanks to oral sources, invaluable insights into the cultural material related to slavery can be accessed. Relying on oral history and collective memory, historian Ahmed Hassen has provided poetic verses that convey the slaves' lament or popular appreciation on slave markets and slave auction.[26] With the 19th century expansion of the Ethiopian state, the designation *barya* moved from use in northern Ethiopia to the newly incorporated areas in the south and west of the Shoa, marking the new slaving frontiers of the Ethiopian empire. *Barya*, as opposed to *shankilla*, did not always carry the connotation of black skin, but this connotation has been common at least since the late 20th century in Ethiopia. The term *barya* and to a certain degree *shankilla*, are opposed to the term *chawa*, the freemen, configured as "red" (a person of lighter skin complexion) in the discursive color spectrum of Ethiopia.[27]

Social Categories and Practices of Slavery across the Region

Both slavery and the trade in slaves were driven by economic strategies, but it is important to bring nuance by taking stock of the diverse polities and territories of the region where slavery was practiced differently. Enslaved people could be employed in all sectors of the economy and

society, including in the military and in high offices across royal courts. Most slaves across Ethiopia and Eritrea were probably employed in homes for domestic duties. At least since the early 19th century, owning domestic slaves was not a privilege of the nobility, although courts usually had larger number of slaves that served as concubines, eunuchs, and domestic servants and soldiers.[28] Any peasant household could own slaves, and in turn, slaves could have slaves in their service. A traveler in southern Ethiopia in 1933 observed that the families of slaves and slave owners lived on the same compound and "appeared to him indistinguishable in their huts, clothes, and way of living."[29] Svein Ege argued that in the Amhara society of the 19th century most slaves were employed in domestic service and less so in the plow-based agriculture. The demand for women and children may have generally been higher than in men, owing to the occupation of slaves and the absence of large-scale agricultural plantations. Generally speaking, slaves inhabited the bottom end of society and their social relations with the free-born were limited, even though in some societies there was certainly space for social mobility.[30] In the highly stratified kingdoms of southern Ethiopia, like Kaffa or Sheka, the social hierarchies always involved slaves at the lowest end of the social spectrum, usually below the status of hunters, tanners, and other occupational groups.[31] Royal slaves and servants had highly differentiated offices and status attested in multiple titles in Kaffa, like *tofacho* ("beverage server"), *atellecho* ("food pre-tester"), and *gucho-guddo* ("supervisors of slaves"). This last term is equivalent to *liqa barya* in Amharic and to *ginne-raso* in Sheka.[32]

Military slavery played an important role across the region. The Oromo *mooti* (king) Jote Tullu (*c.* 1855–1918) of the Leeqa Qellem in Western Ethiopia, is said to have ruled over large contingents of Dinka and Nuer slave soldiers in 1883.[33] Slaves formed special units within the Christian military, but the ordinary peasant soldiers also brought their slaves along on campaign, as observed by a Russian military advisor during the campaigns of Emperor Menelik:

> Abyssinian soldiers, setting out on a march must take care of their own clothing. For the most part, they take their wives, sometimes children, slaves or servants if they have such since each soldier goes with his own transport, which greatly impedes and slows the movement of the army.[34]

In the traditional Christian Amhara society, "slaves were not a class but a legal category," claimed Svein Ege.[35] The use of slaves as property or within terms of kinship was regulated by various customary law codes in different societies. Customary laws dealing with slavery, inheritance, kinship, marriage, and similar matters are often difficult to come by since only a few have been codified and written down or published based on oral sources. Prominently though the Christian Ethiopian law book *Fetha Nagast* deals, among other things, with legal issues related to slavery. The text discusses legal matters like manumission and slave inheritance, tailored to the Christian context, and thereby "underlines the significance attached to slavery and slave-related issues in traditional Ethiopia."[36] As compared to Islam, in the Christian tradition,

> the *Fetha Nagast* not only recognizes the Christian slave as a member of the church, but it obliges the master to give them facilities for religious worship. Duty is on the master to compel his non-Christian slaves to accept baptism, and to baptize any slave child born in his house.[37]

Similarly, "the Quranic injunction required that domestic slaves be kindly treated, their children recognized as legitimate, and their eventual manumission encouraged."[38] The acceptance of Islam was allowed but not mandatory, and this did not impact the status of the enslaved person. German anthropologist Ulrich Braukämper argued that in the traditional religious and legal system of the Hadiyya of Southern Ethiopia, the Muslim belief that manumission was pious and a compensation for sin did not exist. Instead, "redemption could be achieved by extraordinary merits of enslaved people for their masters. If their owners agreed, slaves could participate in warfare and also carry the insignia of killers." Slaves would be buried like the free-men, "although with considerably less ceremonial attention."[39] Writing in the 1930s, A. L. Gardiner underlined the paternalistic character of slavery in Christian society, as following the *Fetha Nagast*, slaves were not to be despised,

> but that they are to be esteemed like children, and further that slaves are to obey their masters, and masters are to love their slaves, and to act with justice and equality towards them and to pardon their offences; and this conception of slavery exists up to the present.[40]

It is often difficult to know how codified laws were applied both in courts and at the local level, and several ambiguities seem to emerge. The *Fetha Nagast*, for example, forbade Christians "from selling slaves but not from owning them (so long as they were baptized)."[41] Concubinage was another of these ambiguities in the Christian context. According to Gardiner, "in the *Fetha Nagast* a very high standard of morality is inculcated, only one form of marriage, namely with communion and in church, being recognized, and concubinage being absolutely forbidden."[42] This is quite contrary to the various mentions of customary concubinage in the courts and to the sexual relations between male masters and female slaves.[43]

In other non-Christian societies, the life of slaves was ruled by conditions of kinship. According to Werner Munzinger's study of precolonial customary law among the Eritrean Bilen (whom he called *bogos*), if a female slave had a child with a free-born male, the children would still belong to the master of the slave. Among other things, the master inherited the belongings of the slave unless the slave died in someone else's custody. In some circumstances, the master acted as foster father to his slave: he paid a blood price if his slave murdered someone or received the price if his slave was murdered.[44] The Macha Oromo of Western Ethiopia had sophisticated ways of integrating slaves into their lineage. This is largely due to the Oromo's customary ability to integrate strangers and place them in defined levels of the social hierarchies without awarding them high social statuses. Oromo men married slaves, though the offspring would not be allowed to inherit property. Despite this general rule, fathers would customarily also share some land or

cattle with the children from a slave marriage. Legally recognized children would only be those from a Macha-Macha relationship. Female slaves who were regarded as wives (endowed with property, land, and cattle) were called *gaya*.[45]

Slaves and *Gabbar* on the Land

One important issue that has often blurred the analysis of the institution of slavery is the difficulty in distinguishing between the peasant-serfs (*gabbar*) and the slaves (*barya*) in the Ethiopian-Eritrean economic history. Like "slave," *gabbar* is a complex socioeconomic concept with diverse meanings across space and time. In the northern Ethiopian kingdoms, the *gabbar* were mainly tax- and tribute-paying peasants. Slaves and serfs often lived in comparable conditions and did comparable work, and slave ownership was not a privilege of the nobility. Some peasants owned slaves, too, though less frequently and in fewer numbers. Hence, inequality existed both between and within households.[46] In rural Ethiopia, despite the "dominant role of family labour, slaves formed an important part of the rural work."[47] This issue is directly related to the fact that agriculture was the backbone of the Ethiopian economy, but how significant was the impact of slave labor on the Ethiopian economy? Answers to such questions need to be sought in the various labor contexts. In the ox-plow-based agriculture of the highland regions, slave labor in agriculture may have been limited, even though the slaves took part in the field labor. While there was no clear division of agricultural tasks across slave and free workers in North Wollo, James McCann has argued that in North Wollo, despite the relatively high prices of slaves, they were preferred to distant household members for agricultural work who were free and could easily move to make a living elsewhere. In the agricultural-based household areas, slave labor offered comparative reliability.[48] There is a general assumption that slavery and the slave trade focused on children and women, satisfying the demand for domestic work both outside and inside Ethiopia.[49] On the occasion of a discussion in the British colonial institution Chatham House in the 1930s, one observer declared that there were no plantations in Ethiopia and therefore a male labor force was of limited use.[50] However, there is some evidence from the same period that slaves were, for example, employed on coffee plantations.[51] For his part, the *gabbar* paid taxes and owed *corvée* labor to the landlords. This *gabbar*-slave dichotomy has attracted much controversy and was often used to justify slavery in Ethiopian households as mild in character. The picture of the slave-serf status becomes grimmer in the late 19th century with the expansion of the Ethiopian empire. Especially in its early stage, the process of integration followed the logic of predatory exploitation by the central power. In fact, during the expansion of the Ethiopian empire and the incorporation of southern territories, the *gabbar* status was conferred to conquered populations forced to render service to the new overlords.[52] Serfs could be sold if they were unable to pay tribute, and occasionally sold themselves when faced with crop failure and famine. Writing in the 1940s, Christine Sandford asserted that the "children of the house" were "often well treated, had a house of their own, were allowed to own cattle," and they "were often also baptized and guarded under the Orthodox faith."[53] By contrast, the same author concluded that

> the serfs or *gabars* (*sic*) who worked the land for their soldier-owners were less well cared for, and might indeed be starved and over-worked to supply their masters. In the districts around Addis Ababa there was little evidence of this; but in the outlying districts there was little to check extortion and oppression.[54]

There were three types of land administration that can be identified in the wake of empire-making.[55] The newly incorporated lands were either tribute paying areas where soldier-setters (*neftennya*, literarily meaning "gun-carrier" in Amharic) were rewarded with land and the workforce of peasants residing on the land. Then there were tribute paying semiautonomous territories, where traditional rulers organized labor and tribute. Lastly there were the outlying peripheries where control was remote and taxes were collected in annual raids. As shown before, in the *gabbar-neftennya* areas, the southern population was placed under the control of northern soldiers, who settled among them, administered taxation, and extracted *corvée* labor. In these areas, the labor demand of the northern settler elites blurred the boundaries between peasant and slave labor.[56] In semiautonomous areas like Benishangul-Gumuz or Leeqa Qellem and Leeqa Neqemte, tribute was levied by the traditional authorities in currency, such as gold, honey, hides, and slaves. This system led to an increase of slave raiding locally and to increasing exploitation of slave labor to meet the tributary demand. Oral evidence indicates that in areas like Benishangul, a child tribute was levied on the villages, to provide children for the household demands in Addis Ababa.[57] There is a sense of loss within many of the peripheral groups that have been historically incorporated in the expanding Ethiopian state system. Many social divisions in 21st century Ethiopia are rooted in the often violent integration of the Ethiopian empire between the end of the 19th and the early 20th century.

The Slave Trade in and out of Ethiopia

The great demand for slave labor in the Ethiopian-Eritrean region, as well as in the Nile Valley (Sudan, Egypt), Arabia, and the Indian Ocean world helped sustain a vibrant slave trade. On the many trade routes crisscrossing the region and across centuries, slaves were traded alongside other goods and commodities. In the 19th century, the main export markets of Ethiopia were still both on the borders with Sudan and on the Red Sea: Mätämma, Massawa, and Tejoura.[58] The demand in slaves was booming between the 1840s and the 1880s, due to the expansion of the Egyptian, Ethiopian, Omani, and Merina empires.[59] Alice Moore-Harrel attributed the magnitude of the slave trade in the 1850s "to increasing need for porters to carry ivory, which was in great demand in the North and in Europe. Porterage was also needed to carry miscellaneous commodities to the prospering markets in Northern Sudan and the Red Sea."[60] Additionally, pearl divers and crew were recruited from slave markets on the Red Sea shores and in Oman. Agricultural slavery, too, "skyrocketed after the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1820, when slave-owning became accessible to almost all free Sudanese families."[61]

Other trade routes went to the Somali coast of the Indian Ocean: 10,000 slaves were transported annually across the Juba River for the Somali plantations.[62] In the mid-19th century, an annual total of approximately 6,000 slaves left Ethiopia for the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and an

additional 2,000 traveled to Sudan via Gallabat.[63] The long-distance reach of these trade routes is very significant, and is attested over the centuries.[64] British administrator Walter Plowden believed that Ethiopia was always well connected to the Funj, Sinnar, and Darfur trade and had connections as far as Timbuktu.[65] Augustus Wylde, in the late 1880s, is said to have met a slave woman from Darfur in Eastern Ethiopia and met others who spoke Eastern Sudanese languages.[66] Slaves from Ethiopia grew in value and trade flourished, albeit clandestinely, well into early 20th century despite regional attempts to suppress the slave trade in colonial territories. The Ethiopian empire remained independent until the Italian occupation and although the Ethiopian government responded to international abolitionist demands, the state apparatus to suppress the slave trade remained fraught. In Arabia, for example, due to spikes in prices and inflation, African slaves by the early 20th century "increasingly became a luxury commodity, with female slaves favoured over male, child slaves favoured over mature adults, and Abyssinian slaves increasingly dominating the market."[67]

Domestically, too, slave markets dotted the region and formed a web connecting southern and northern territories. Major southern markets included Jiran, Hirmata, Saqa, Käffa, Jimma, and the Gibe states.[68] Jimma was known as a slave hub for domestic trade as well as for international trade connecting with the Indian Ocean and the Sudan.[69] Recently published data on the Shoa region points to the significance of the markets of Chakka, Bullo Worqe, Majäté, Aleyyu Amba, Abd Al-Rasul, Rogge, and Goyo. Abd Al-Rasul, which connected trade routes with the Red Sea plains, was called "*hulät eger*," literally "two feet," a reference to the human goods evaluated for health and physical ability and sold.[70] The importance of these (mostly weekly) markets varied in time depending on the expansion or contraction of local powers. Slave trading could be a very profitable endeavor for the largest slave trading networks or could be carried out as a side business by minor traders, who sold a few slaves as well as other goods, and was a very profitable and central commodity for other traders.[71] For example, still in Abd Al-Rasul, the Warjehs were known slavers who rented out their slaves in order to get regular revenue before selling them.[72] There, slaves were valued at least at twice their price compared with southwestern distant markets, meaning that much value was added to them along the trade route.[73] The Italian traveler Antonio Cecchi reported slave prices in 1886 in Rogge, Shoa's second commercial hub after Abd Al-Rasul (see table 1).[74]

Table 1. Slave Prices

Articles	Price in Maria Theresa Thaler
A very good horse	20–25
A good ox	2–3
A sheep	1
A child slave male or female/*mamul*	10–15
A young slave man/*gurbé* between ten and sixteen years old	15–20

Articles	Price in Maria Theresa Thaler
A young slave girl/*qadaama* between twenty and twenty-four years old	12–15
A young slave girl for domestic work/*qonjo*	17–18
A pretty virgin girl/*wasifa*	30–40
An old male slave/*shämshämmo*	7–8
An old female slave/*shorkobbé*	4–5

Source: Authors; Adapted from A. Cecchi (1886), in Ahmed Hassen, *Aleyyu Amba*, 222.

The Maria Theresa Thaler was a currency generally used for trade in expensive goods, and the list in table 1 shows how much added value was attached to the female slaves. But traders were not the only ones to make profit from the human trade. Ethiopian kings as well as regional rulers usually taxed the slave trade passing through their dominions. In 1840, William Harris noted on his visit to Shoa that Sahle Selassie (r. 1813–1847) "in addition to a tax of one in every ten (slaves) possesses the right of pre-emption of all slaves that pass through his dominions."[75] The southern Gibe states had an elaborate taxation system for trade, and King Kassa, the future Emperor Yohannes (r. 1871–1889) is said to have made gains from controlling the cross-border trade before he signed a treaty with Great Britain to suppress the slave trade.[76] Although estimates exist, the magnitude of the slave trade within and out of Ethiopia is hard to ascertain.[77]

The largest domestic demand in Ethiopia was concentrated in the main political centers and in the early 20th century, in the capital Addis Ababa. However, there are only estimates about the numbers of slaves in Ethiopia at various times. For example, around 1910, Dr. Merab, a Georgian Francophile physician and long-time resident in Addis Ababa, estimated a number of approximately 15,000 "shankillas" and "beni shangul" in Addis Ababa (mostly slaves for household work).[78] He went as far as estimating the overall number of slaves in Ethiopia to be a third of the population.[79] Margery Perham, on the basis of the work of the Anti-Slavery Department, suggested that in 1935 between 300,000 and 500,000 peoples lived as slaves in Ethiopia.[80]

The Legacies of Slavery in the Ethiopian Social Fabric

The abolition of slavery in the region was a complex process due to various internal and external factors studied elsewhere.[81] Suffice to underline here that as early as the 1880s the abolition of slavery became a major political stake where European strategic interests converged.[82] Every Ethiopian emperor in favor of maintaining positive foreign relations with Great Britain sought to end the trade in slaves. And slavery was a stumbling block for the membership of Ethiopia to the

League of Nations, as well as a pillar of belligerent Italian propaganda. The legislation related to slavery in Ethiopia mainly aimed at suppressing the trade in slaves, and the possession of slaves was eventually criminalized by a decree in 1942, after the return of Haile Selassie to the throne.

Accordingly, and depending on the viewpoint one takes, the date of the abolition of slavery can be related to the edicts of 1923 and 1924, to the Italian occupation (1936–1941), or to the final edict of 1942. Notwithstanding efforts by Ethiopian rulers to abolish slavery, slaves often remained with the masters after the formal abolition. In fact, until the 1970s slaves were to be found living and working in rural households. Major changes occurred in the wake of the Ethiopian revolution (1974) and the nationalization of land (1975), which may have accelerated the emancipation of slaves and their descendants and allowed for access to land.[83]

Despite these changes, the social impact of slavery leaves the descendants of slaves marginalized and despised in various societies of Ethiopia in the 21st century. In the western Nilotic lowlands and the southern regions, which were slave reservoirs in the 19th century, the identity term *shankilla* carries strong negative connotations (negroid, black, backward, enslavable). It featured in academic and administrative discourse and in common parlance until the 1970s and it remains vernacular. It vanished gradually since then as a result of the antifeudal and antidiscrimination policies of the military regime called the Derg (1974–1991), and is hardly in use publicly.[84] Nevertheless, persons thought of as being of *shankilla* descent still suffer from discrimination.[85]

It is also important to understand that the state-making process calibrated social categories related to slave-status that are relevant at the national scale. At the higher end of the spectrum are the northern conquerors, who were regarded as light-skinned (i.e., "*qay*," "red" in Amharic) and at the lower end people were referred to as "black" (i.e., "*tequr*" in Amharic). These distinctions not only inform a national discourse of citizenship and belonging, they also represent important class distinctions at the local level. The descendants of slaves belong to the despised groups within the diverse sociocultural context of Ethiopia. McCann has argued that

> the value of slaves as permanent household members lay in their marginality to society, which deprived them of rights over land, and their inability to move freely within society. They were *yabet lej* (lit., "children of the house"), and, although always baptized as Christians, their physical traits and lack of kin kept them outside of the set of rights associated with *yasaw lej* (lit. "children of man"). Through assimilation, a slave could reduce his marginality and even obtain legal freedom on the death of his master, but physical appearances of most slaves from southern Ethiopia (especially Nilotic- or Omotic-speaking groups) made it difficult, if not impossible, to enter the domain of *yasaw lej* within one generation.[86]

Tom Boylston has observed the legacies of slavery around the monastic community of Zege on Lake Tana. The use of the word *barya*, even if just uttered jokingly among teenagers, for their black (slave descent) friends

> actually carries a serious and wounding insult. It does not stop the boys from being friends, but it serves as a permanent reminder of an underlying difference that would become much clearer if questions of marriage or even romance ever came up.[87]

In fact, an anecdote taking place in Shashemene, in Southern Ethiopia, conveys how the term *barya* can be felt as an insult. There, a Caribbean Rastafari resident, who proudly identified as "Black" was called "*barya*" by a local Ethiopian, who ended up badly beaten.[88] While the use of the term *barya* or the lighter version "*baricho*" carries much social hierarchy and cultural prejudice as it refers to skin complexion, curly hair, and other traits that are related to blackness, its use is often defended as a term of endearment even within households or among friends.[89]

Skin color and slave descent are widespread markers of marginalization. In western Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz, minority groups like the Mao are often associated with a lower status and with a history of exploitation, and they are widely despised. "(Body) ornamentation and material culture, and above all skin colour, elicit constant public mockery. This 'otherness' is enshrined in the self-descriptive term of *sith shwala* (black people) among the Mao in Oromia, recalling racial stereotypes based on historical marginalization."[90] Slave descent is also an issue in the political organization of the state. In the multiethnic context of the Ethiopian federation, the marginalization of whole groups based on historical stratification leads to the continued exclusion of these peoples in the arena of citizenship and political and social participation.[91]

There exists also a relevant body of texts that questions the relationship between slave status and that of marginalized communities and occupational groups.[92] This research is often focused on southern Ethiopia.[93] Pioneering data on social stratification among southern Ethiopian societies came from the ethnographic missions of the German Frobenius Institute.[94] Studies of the boundaries between occupational groups in southern Ethiopia and between marginalized and mainstream communities suggest that the boundaries of social exclusion are manifest in cultural, social, political, and economic terms.[95] In various instances, these lines of exclusion and status ascription can be used to discuss the social differentiation between former slaves and racially segregated communities who are related to slaves descendants and subservient or subaltern populations.[96] While the boundaries of exclusion are quite solid in some instances, there are divergent patterns of mobility for former slaves and occupational groups in different Ethiopian societies. There are many theoretical and methodological questions still unanswered due to a lack of data on the social status of slaves across Ethiopian societies.

The legacies of slavery seem very persistent, not only in terms of marginalization of slave descent but also in terms of persistent patterns of oppressive labor relations, migration, and stigma. The legacies of slavery remain one of the burning contemporary issues that require carefully designed study.[97]

Discussion of the Literature

Pioneering studies on slavery in Ethiopia have been published chiefly between the 1960s and 1980s.[98] Largely descriptive, these studies focused on the trading dimension of slavery rather than on the systems of slavery that coexisted in Ethiopia. Analysis of the Abyssinian "feudal"

system has shed some light on the complexity of social status related to land and labor, and their closeness to servitude.[99] However, so far, "slavery has not merited attention in the historiography of the Great Tradition, save as a trade factor."[100] This "Great Tradition" is precisely associated with the highlands of Ethiopia, with Christianity, literate cultures, and Semitic languages, and it was vastly studied in the foundational historiography of Ethiopia.[101] Few Ethiopian historians have dealt with slavery and the slave trade. Most notable are the remarkable works of Takelign Wolde Mariam, Abdussamad Hajji Ahmed, Guluma Gemeda, and Ahmed Hassen.[102] These valuable contributions draw upon oral history and challenge some of the foreigners' descriptions, travel reports, and diplomatic archives that built the core of traditional slavery historiography. The exhaustive treatment of the British archives on the Sudan–Ethiopia border concerning slavery by Bahru Zewde is also noteworthy.[103] A precise but brief overview on slavery and slave trade was published in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica.* It deals with the history and patterns of slavery and its diplomatic aspect as well as with the Red Sea slave trade.[104] While slavery is acknowledged as a "historic fact," there is reluctance to explore slavery systematically in Ethiopian studies. The reality of slavery is not denied, but its patterns, its social thickness, and its pervasive impact on many realms of society is neglected. Slavery is a sensitive topic in many societies, and its occultation in Ethiopian history illustrates the intellectual and political will to construct a national unity that is not to be questioned; it is a necessity in order to preserve Ethiopia's representation as a sovereign and independent state and as a historical leader in Pan-Africanist engagements and institutions. A new cohort of young Ethiopian scholars have taken on the question of slavery and, together with foreign students, built on ethnographic methods to explore slavery beyond the archival materials and carry out research on its legacies and contemporary trajectories.[105] These studies expand the frontiers of previous studies of slavery and explore the legacies and persistence of slavery in contemporary Ethiopia.

Primary Sources

Ethiopia and Eritrea combine written and oral cultures within their national territories. With regard to slavery and the slave trade, Christian and Islamic manuscripts and sources are not yet well exploited. Land charters and legal documents have not been fully screened for information on slavery, and only a few hagiographies have been analyzed in this regard.[106]

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, accounts by Arabic travelers and geographers that focus on Ethiopian Muslim societies are available and include slavery as "factual data is provided on their commercial and economic activities, and on the practices of neighbouring Christian and 'pagan' Ethiopian geopolitical entities."[107]

Varied documentation on slavery exists from the 18th century onward. This is manifest in travel reports and eyewitness accounts from foreign travelers, explorers, diplomats, and missionaries, many of whom stayed in the region for several years or died there. Examples include the Jesuit reports of the 16th century, as well as descriptions of the court of Gonder, and the Funj kingdom of Sinnar as presented by James Bruce in the 18th century.[108] British travel memoirs by explorers and diplomats abound with reports on slavery and the slave trade, as the interest increased at the turn of the 19th century with the Victorian abolitionist and colonial aspirations in the Red Sea, in Egypt, Sudan, and Aden. This is especially noticeable in the work of the Anti–Slavery Society and

the publications of the Anti-Slavery Reporter.[109] Similarly, Italian colonial archives constituted by a large variety of documents are replete with references to slavery and accessible in the library of The Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO) in Rome. Extensive collections in the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford complement these documents. Noteworthy are the Arkell papers or the collection of the Anti-Slavery Society, including the Anti-Slavery Reporter. The documents relating to the investigation of the League of Nations on slavery in Ethiopia are kept at the League of Nations Archives in Geneva. An important but understudied resource is missionary archives. In fact, freed slaves often became members of theological missions, helped to translate biblical texts, and often left eyewitness accounts and memoires narrating enslavement and emancipation.[110]

Regional archives, located at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, in the National Archives in Khartoum, and the National Archives in Nairobi hold significant colonial documentation on the suppression of the slave trade across the region and into British and other colonial territories. An extensive study by Jonathan Miran showed uses of Islamic manumission documents from the Massawa Islamic Court Records as a source for practices of slavery and manumission in the Eritrean port town of Massawa at the end of the 19th century.[111] Together with a yet unstudied set of court documents from 19th century Harar emirate in eastern Ethiopia (kept at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies), these are some of the rare cases of Islamic documentation on slavery being brought to attention. For the 19th and 20th centuries, there are no oral history corpora on slavery formalized or institutionalized yet which would represent a major step ahead in the accessibility of primary sources related to slavery and slave trade in the region.

Acknowledgment

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