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Banquet and Power in the Kingdom of Gojjam: The Experience of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot, 1870-1901

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Abstract

A banquet is a formal social gathering centred around a communal meal, often characterized by elaborate food, drink, and ceremonial practices. Throughout history, banquets have played a vital role in aristocratic and societal life across diverse cultures. Despite variations in culinary traditions and ritual elements, the banquet has consistently served as a platform for political, religious, and strategicinterests, particularly among the ruling elite. In the Ethiopian context, the banquet referred to in Amharic as *geber* was a prominent feature of royal and noble life. These feasts were typically hosted within the courts of emperors and high-ranking officials, functioning as instruments of governance, diplomacy, and religious observance. It was deeply embedded in Ethiopia's socio-economic and political structures of the time. Within the Christian state of Ethiopia, the province of Gojjam developed its banquet tradition that mirrored its regional identity and political significance. During the reign of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot (1870–1901), these ceremonial gatherings served as venues for consolidating power, reinforcing alliances, and displaying wealth and authority. This study investigated the ceremonial dimensions of *geber* in Gojjam and examined their broader socio-economic and political implications during the late 19th century. Drawing upon primary sources, oral testimonies, and secondary scholarly literature, the research aims to illuminate the multifaceted role of banquets in shaping the historical trajectory of the region.

Keywords: Gojjam, banquet, Täklä Haymanot, *geber, täji*

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1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Gojjam, situated in the northwestern region of Ethiopia and bordered on nearly all sides by the Nile River except to the west, was a significant political entity within the Ethiopian state (Bruce, V.III; Schwab, 1970). From its incorporation in the fourteenth century to the early eighteenth century, the administrators were directly appointed by the monarchs of the Christian state (Jones and Monroe, 1935; Abebaw, 2002). However, following the decline of the Gondar administration, *Däjazmač* Yosédéq, appointed by Emperor Iyasu II around 1753, established a degree of regional autonomy for Gojjam. This autonomous status was maintained throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century (Alula, 2011; Fentahun, 1973; Tekleyesus, 2016) .

From the seventeenth century to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the kingdom was divided in to three main administrative divisions , with its appointees as Gojjam Proper, Damot, and Agew Meder , except during the rule of *Ras* Hailu I (1777-1795) (Abdussamad, 1986; Temesgen, 2013). From 1795 to the 1870s, Gojjam was plagued by dynastic struggles among Ras Hailu's descendants. *Ras* Märed (1795 - 1799) ,the son of *Ras* Hailu, and *Däjazmač* Zäwdé of Damot, the husband of his sister,*Wäyzäro* Denqenäš Hailu, initiated a long rivalry between their houses, which continued through *Däjazmač* Gualu Märed ,*Däjazmač* Gošu Zäwdé, and *Däjazmač* Berru Gošu. After Berru's capture by *Däjazmač* Kassa (later Emperor Tewodros II), *Däjazmač* Tädla ruled briefly before his death in 1867, leading to a succession conflict between his sons, Negusé and Dästa (Fentahun, 1973; Abebaw, 2002). The struggle ended when *Ras* Adal Tässäma, the later *Negus* Täklä Hymanot, defeated *Ras* Dästa and became governor of Gojjam, Damot, and Agäw Meder in the 1870's (Abebaw, 2002; Alula, 2011; Nebyu, 2004). Notably, the kingdom's historical administrative boundaries also encompassed the present day Metekel Zone,which is now part of the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State (NALA(ከቤጦ) Folder No.582,File No.009.97) [1] .

The Kingdom of Gojjam features a diverse landscape, including gorges, lakes, lowlands, mountains, and plateaus. Numerous significant rivers, including the Nile, the longest river on the African continent, originate from it (Lobo, 1669; Ludolph, 1682). The region enjoys a mild climate and offers ideal circumstances for agriculture and human settlement. The region has historically produced a diverse range of crops, from grains to root vegetables (Bruce, V.III; Stanley, 1881).

Apart from its importance in agriculture, Gojjam was essential to

nineteenth-century long-distance commercial networks (Abdussamad, 1986; Habtamu, 2011). The region is also home to ancient and diverse ethnic groups, including speakers of Cushitic, Omotic, Semitic, and Nilo-Saharan languages (Tadesse, 1994; Ford, 1989; Tsegay, 2009).

2. Objectives and Methodology of the Study

The general objective of this paper was to investigate how banquets or *gebers* were planned and used in the Kingdom of Gojjam under *Negus* Täklä Haymanot's rule (1870–1901) as political legitimacy and propaganda tools. The specific objectives were;

- To examine how palace complexes used for royal banquets were set up and arranged.
- To investigate the functions of important banquet officials in banquet management.
- To evaluate how banquets reinforce royal authority and hierarchy in socio-political aspects.
- To investigate consumption patterns and eating habits.

This study used a qualitative approach to enable an indebth investigation of the issue. Archival sources from the National Archive and Library Agency and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies ,publicly available documents, and interviews with key informants were used to gather the data. Archival sources played a central role in uncovering the political conditions of Gojjam before and during *Negus* Täklä Haymanot during the reign of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot (1870–1901). To gather this information, the researcher carefully selected and reviewed relevant archival materials. These documents provided valuable insights into the political developments in Gojjam for centuries. These sources offer firsthand accounts written by individuals closely affiliated with both the imperial court and the regional court of Gojjam, making them particularly significant for reconstructing historical narratives and analyzing political practices.

Regarding public documents, relevant articles and books were first critically examined in order to gather pertinent data on the study's objectives. Lastly, a crucial source of information was the oral narratives obtained through key informant interviews. These firsthand narratives contributed significantly to the accurate investigation of how banquets (*gebers*) were organized and employed as mechanisms of propaganda and political legitimation in the Kingdom of Gojjam during the reign of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot (1870–1901). The testimonies provided rich contextual insights that complemented the archival materials,

shedding light on cultural practices, ceremonial norms, and perceptions of authority embedded within historical banquet traditions.

After data collection was systematically completed using the selected methods, the analysis followed a structured process. First, the data were cross-checked and categorized according to the thematic areas they represented. This initial classification helped ensure consistency and relevance across sources. Second, the categorized data were carefully organized, analyzed, and critically interpreted using historical methods of analysis under each theme. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in historical context. Finally, the analyzed data were presented through qualitative narration using a descriptive research design. This approach enabled the study to articulate nuanced findings and effectively address the research objective.

In the analysis phase, data obtained from primary sources (archival materials) and secondary sources (public documents), originally written in Amharic were utilized in their original form. To enhance clarity for readers, the Amharic content was translated into English. Additionally, all Amharic terms appear italicized and have been transliterated to maintain consistency and readability.Literal translations are provided in parentheses, while footnotes are used to elaborate on abbreviations, offer definitions, and clarify terms that require further contextual explanation.

3. Historical Overview of Banquet system

According to Malmberg (2012), a banquet is a formal meal or gathering attended by a large number of people. The tradition has a long-standing history across various regions of the world. Despite cultural and regional variations in food, drink, and ceremonial customs, historical accounts reveal that banquets were consistently integral to the lives of ruling elites and wider society from ancient times. They were organized for political, religious, and social functions and served as emblems of authority, prestige, wealth, and power. As a result,the majority of the attendants were men. Furthermore,banquets functioned as instruments of diplomacy, expressions of loyalty, and mechanisms of political control (Orlowask, 2006; Gómez & Mestre, 2009).

Around the world, banquets played a significant role in state bureaucracy. They were closely related to the fundamental framework of imperial courts prior to the development of modern

administrative systems. Banquet customs were used by numerous ancient and medieval nations for political, social, religious, and economic reasons. For example , to honor his conquest of the Persian Empire and to signify his goal of uniting Macedonians and Persians into a unified governing elite, Alexander the Great, Macedonian monarch, famously threw a lavish feast (Alexander, 2015; Gómez & Mestre, 2009). In Mesopotamia, banqueting was an important cultural practices from as early as the third millennium BCE. Public events such as hunting excursions, temple construction, religious observances, and successful war returns were followed by ornate celebrations attended by men and women,often enlivened by singers and musicians. Over time, these ceremonial feasts became significant to royal life and served as effective instruments of political influence across the Middle East (Ziffer, 2005). In the Roman Empire, the imperial banquet was one of the most powerful instruments used to convey political propaganda and build administrative legitimacy. Emperors hosted extravagant feasts for prominent bishops and influential political officials to demonstrate their political victories and the extent of their power. Through lavish hospitality and public honors, they projected images of generosity, kindness, and royal majesty (Malmberg, 2003).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the banquet system gradually dwindled throughout Europe and other parts of the world due to political upheaval, modernization, and changing social values. Events like the French Revolution, the rise of nationalism, Napoleon's military campaigns, and the rapid industrialization that favored democratic and modern ideas over imperial customs changed political and economic structures (Jones, 2003; Hobsbawn, 1977) . Lavish court feasts were seen as wasteful and outdated as societies grew more industrial and practical (Vries, 1994; Muzzey & Lloyd, 1955). Following World War I, the decline accelerated as major European dynasties that were renowned for throwing extravagant feasts fell, financial crises worsened, anti-colonial resistance grew stronger, and economic instability increased. Their decline was accelerated by the Second World War's destruction of national resources and the political will needed to maintain lavish court feasts and ceremonial banqueting customs (Gilbert, 1994; Fichter, 1997; Muzzey & Lloyd, 1955).

Ethiopia's socio-economic and political structures were greatly influenced by the banquet custom known in Amharic as *geber*, which was a unique symbol of royal legacy and played a significant role in the country's socio-economic and political systems (Budge, 2000). Emperors and other high-ranking aristocracy frequently organized it, making it one of the oldest cultural customs. It accompanied many different types of ceremonial events.

These included commemorating departed family members, announcing imperial decrees and official appointments, celebrating religious and public festivals including Christmas, New Year's, and Epiphany, and celebrating the return from military campaigns (MersaeHazen, 2016; Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.2, 2005; Kebede, 1970; Habtamu, 2003)

In Ethiopia, banqueting customs persisted into the early 20th century, mostly unchanged from their centuries old practices. The continuing importance of these rites was demonstrated on a number of occasions in different periods. For instance,during the reign of Emperor Susenyos(1607-1632), formal banquets followed a well-established ceremony. Once the meal was prepared, all attendants were seated according to their rank. Food was then served based on status, reflecting the strong social order at court. Despite his high position, the emperor's own dining setup was surprisingly simple. When it was time for him to eat, a curtain was drawn between his table and that of the priests. In Ethiopia, it was a strict and respected custom that no one should see the emperor while he was dining. Women brought in large, beautifully woven baskets called *mosäbs* [2]. Inside were stacks of *enjära*, the large and soft flat bread that forms the base of most Ethiopian meals. One of the most valued dishes was raw beef, known as *brundo*. It was placed directly on the *enjära*. The emperor would either cut the meat himself with a small knife he carried or have his attendants cut it for him. This practice was not unique to the emperor. Many Ethiopian noblemen were also fed by their servants, as feeding themselves was considered beneath their dignity (Rey, 1929).

As eyewitnesses, European prisoners recounted the royal banquet ceremony of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868). They clarified that *Ras* Engida, a significant emperor's official, personally escorted them from the royal compound's entrance to a sizable structure that had just been built as a banqueting hall. The building stood tall in the enclosure, obviously ready for a formal and significant event. Nearly 400 of the Emperor's most senior chiefs and officers were already occupying the large hall when they arrived. A scene of rigid hierarchy and discipline was created as the men were arranged in neat rows based on their status and rank. Everyone was elegantly attired for the event. They wore exquisite silk clothing embellished with embroidered details and silver ornaments that glistened in the sunlight (Markham, 1869).

The Showa event in 1878 was the other prominent example. Following Menelik's submission to Emperor Yohännes IV (1872-1889) that same year, Yohännes IV reconfirmed his position

in Showa as well as his title *Negus* by rewarding a crown. Then Menelik organized a ceremonial gathering in the town of Liche to publicly commemorate the event. A special seat was setaside for Menelik, and tents draped with velvet were set up for the feast. He formally wore the crown that Yohännes IV had given him on his head during the church ritual at Debre Berhan Selassie. At his grand feasts, attendance often numbered in the thousands, with guests partaking in the banquet in organized rounds. As part of the celebration, Menelik also bestowed the title of *Ras* upon his uncle, Dargé Sahlä Selassé ,and his prominent military commander, Gobäna Daçä . Following the formalities, the newly crowned *Negus* entered the town with his officials and initiated a banquet (*geber)* to share the moment with his subjects (Paulos, 1992; Orlowask, 2006; Tekletsadiq, 1990b; Gebreselassie, 1967).

The banquet traditions of the different provinces of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia , and particularly that of Gojjam, modelled the structure of the central imperial court. During the Gonderine era, this was extremely prevalent. Yebaba, one of the Gondarine Kingdom's royal palaces, was located in the Diensa district of Gojjam, south of Lake Tana. Because of its location, the Gojjam rulers had direct communication with the Gondar royal court (Abebaw, 2002). The relationship between the royal court and the province was further reinforced by the political marriage of Wälätä Israél II, the daughter of Empress Mentewab, and the province's ruler, *Däjazmač* Yosédéq in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the administration and courtly customs of Gojjam were greatly impacted by the socio-cultural and political developments that took place at the imperial court, including the design and planning of royal banquets (Abebaw, 2002; Fentahun, 1973). In the nineteenth century, during *Däjazmač* Gošu Zäwudé's rule, this similarity was particularly noticeable, as his court system closely mirrored the composition and arrangement of the imperial court in Gondar (Fentahun, 1973; Habtamu, 2003). As a result, many official titles used at the imperial level were also used in Gojjam. These included positions connected to banquet ceremonies and court services such as *mulubét azaž, béjirond, agafari, elfiñ askälekay,* along with other important political offices. Throughout the imperial era, the Gojjam royal family maintained this custom of structuring the provincial court following imperial lines (Fentahun, 1973; Nega, 1970; Tekleyesus, 2016).

The socio-economic and political changes following the Battle of Adwa significantly altered the tradition of the banquet (*geber*) system in Ethiopia. The arrival of foreigners for diplomatic, commercial, and other purposes facilitated the introduction of modern ideas and

European administrative practices. This led to the emergence of various hotels and groceries that sold food and beverages to the foreign visitors, the nobility, and the general public. Consequently,Emperor Menelik's palace began holding *geber* only occasionally rather than regularly, primarily to support those who couldn't afford meals, such as those who had travelled to Addis Ababa for court appeals or other significant events, and to provide food and beverages to palace officials (Sergew, 2022; Paulos, 1992; Gebreselassie, 1967).

The banquet (*geber*) celebrations in the imperial court started to take on a more national character after the death of Emperor Menelik. *Ras* Täferi, the later Häilä Selassé I (1930-1974), strategically used it to support his goals of creating a centralized modern government (Orlowask, 2006; Bahru, 2002). As a regent, he introduced reforms that reshaped the ceremony,replacing traditional court roles with modern bureaucratic practices such as assigning seats using type written name cards, eventually superseding traditional roles like *elfeň askälekay* and *agafari* (Orlowask, 2006). After his return from exile in 1941, the banquet continued in a modernized form , with dining tables taking the place of the customary *mosäb* (Clapham, 1988; Andargachew, 1993; Beken, 2007). Despite these changes,it continued to symbolize royal authority and state tradition until the monarchy was overthrown in 1974 by a military coup (Mengistu, 2011; The Provisional Military Administration Council Proclamation No. 31, 1975).

4. Result and Discussion

4.1.The political Takeover of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot

Adal Tässäma was descended from *Däjazmač* Zäwudé of Damot and Däneqänäš, daughter of *Ras* Haylu Yosédéq (IES MS 1342; IES MS 684; Tekletsadiq, 1990b; Tekleyesus, 2016) [3]**.** In the latter part of the nineteenth century, he became one of the candidates for governmental authority in the province of Gojjam. He was first decisively defeated by the then-appointed governor, *Däjazmač* Dästa, and he lived as an outlaw while waiting for a favorable opportunity to reclaim his power. Such an opportunity arose in 1869, when Emperor Taklä Giyorgis launched a campaign into Gojjam after *Ras* Dästa refused to acknowledge his imperial authority. During this conflict, Adal aligned himself with the emperor. *Däjazmač* Dästa was eventually defeated and taken as a prisoner by Emperor Täklä Giyorgis. In appreciation of his assistance, the emperor bestowed the title of *Ras* on Adal and gave him

the power to rule over the whole province of Gojjam, including Agew Meder, Damot, and Gojjam Proper, in 1870 (HaileSellasie, 1973; Tekletsadiq, 1990b).

Ras Adal saw a brief period of political turmoil after Emperor Yohännis IV rose to power after defeating Emperor Täklä Giyorgis at the Battle of Assam in 1871. *Ras* Adal was essentially ousted from office in 1874 when Emperor Yohännis IV freed *Däjazmač* Dästa and restored him as governor of Gojjam (Abebaw, 2002; Alula, 2011; Tekleyesus, 2016). However, shortly after the emperor's departure from the region, *Ras* Adal launched a military campaign against *Ras* Dästa at a place called Angeta in June 1874. *Ras* Dästa was killed in the ensuing conflict, enabling *Ras* Adal to reclaim his authority over the territories of Gojjam Proper,Damot, and Agew Meder (IES MS 684; Abebaw, 2002). Later that year, in November 1874, with negotiation, *Ras* Adal formally submitted to Emperor Yohännis IV by acknowledging his imperial overlordship. In return, the emperor officially acknowledged *Ras* Adal's rule over the Kingdom of Gojjam (Tekletsadik, 1990a; Tekleyesus, 2016).In addition to his pre-existing power over the province of Gojjam, Emperor Yohännis IV appointed *Ras* Adal as governor of Kaffa in 1881 and gave him the title *Negus*. Additionally, his name was also changed from Adal to Täklä Haymanot (Tekletsadik, 1990a; Getachew, 1986; Bairu, 1977). His reign was mostly marked by peace and stability, with the exception of a few noteworthy military operations such as his expedition to the areas south of the Blue Nile and his conflict with *Negus* Menelik of Showa at the Battle of Embabo in 1882 (Abebaw, 2002; Paulos, 1992; Tekleyesus, 2016; Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.4, 2010) .

4.2. The Foundation of Menqorer (Debre Markos) as a Political Center

Several places had functioned as political hubs for the Gojjam ruling class prior to Menqorer, later known as Debre Markos, being established as the kingdom's capital. For instance, *Däjazmač* Yosédéq presided over Bichena from his political position. Bichena was also the center of power for his son, *Ras* Hailu the Great, who governed Gojjam from 1777 to 1795. In a similar vein,Dembecha became the seat of *Däjazmač* Zäwudé's residence and administration. The regions of Yewush and Menqorer also became the kingdom's political seat during *Däjazmač* Tädela's rule (Abebaw, 2002; Alula, 2011; Fentahun, 1973).

Following *Däjazmač* Berru Gošu's defeat and captivity by *Däjazmač* Kassa Hailu, Menqorer was founded as a political seat in 1854. Its choice and growth as a regional capital during and after this time seem to have been influenced by its closeness to the strategically important

mountain strongholds of Jebela and Mutera. As part of his military operation in the province, *Däjazmač* Kassa built temporary homes in Menqorer and lived there for several months. When he left, he gave *Däjazmač* Tädela instructions to formally make Menqorer a city and administrative center (Abebaw, 2002; Tekleyesus, 2016). While at Gojjam, Emperor Täklä Giyorgis was also based in Menqorer to put down *Däjazmač* Dästa Tädela, who had seized power in 1867. Menqorer's eventual designation as the kingdom's political capital was greatly influenced by this campaign. After *Negus* Täklä Haymanot built the Church of Saint Mark there in the 1880s, the area became known as Debre Markos. From then on, it became one of the region's leading political centres (Habtamu, 2003; Tekleyesus, 2016).

4.3. The Palace Complex of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot

The palace of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot was constructed in the area between the Wuteren and Wuseta Rivers. It was staffed with a structured body of civil, religious, and military court officials responsible for overseeing the regular functions of government by modelling the imperial court of the Christian kingdom. These court officials held a variety of traditional titles, including *wämbär*, *däjazmač*, *fitawrari*, *mulubétazaž*, ligaba ,*béjirond*, *agafari*, *elfeň askälkay*, *afä-negus*, *baldäras*, *zufan bet aläqa*, and *zufan täbaqi* (Nebyu, 2004; Nega, 1970; Tekleyesus, 2016). Residences for members of the royal family and their staff were located within its compound. The Church of Saint Mark, which was closely connected to the royal home, was located next to the palace. Social hierarchy governed the organization of urban communities both inside and outside the palace. As a result of this stratification, discrete residential districts with unique names were created in the surrounding of the palace and other parts of the city (Fekede, 2010; Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.2, 2005).

The palace itself was large and enclosed by a wall of stone with a width of around one meter and forty centimeters and a height of three meters. There were three main gates: the main gate was to the north, and there were other gates to the east and south. Over five buildings were erected along the eastern gate, each with a distinct administrative function. *Säntära* was the biggest hall in the royal complex, with dimensions of about 40 meters in length and 25 meters in width. It served as the primary ceremonial area and was close to the main northern gate. Another noteworthy building, *Mäqdäla*, which had an underground chamber, stood next to it. The palace also included some upper-story and ground-level residences. *Negus foq*, or the Floor of the King, was the most prestigious of the residential structures.

Known locally as *atetägäb*, this imposing building included three doors and twelve windows. Curiously, it had no internal floor divisions in spite of its name. The majority of the palace's rooms and halls were adorned with decorative artworks (Emeru, 2010; Tekleyesus, 2016). Except for the *Mäqdäla* hall, all were constructed in traditional hut styles. The compound gained a unique architectural character from the wicker doors. Many buildings inside the palace were divided by stone barriers, and beyond the enclosure, the nobles' houses were located. However, following the 1930s uprising, none of the original halls or homes survived. (Nebyu, 2004; Emeru, 2010.; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

4.4. Organization of the Banquet (*Geber)* Ceremonies

The food and drink served at banquets were supplied from estates throughout the province that belonged to the monarch or provincial lords. These royal estates, known as *hudad*, provided much of the necessary resources ,while additional supplies were taken from the people through taxation . This system placed a heavy burden on peasants, who were required to pay taxes in the form of crops, livestock, labor, and other goods. As a result, rural communities suffered from widespread poverty and economic hardship. Despite differences in scale and organization, the *geber* rituals sponsored by regional lords and those presented at the Christian kingdom's imperial palaces were very similar(McCann, 1995; Bahru, 2002). The organization of the *geber* rites was led by the high-ranking court officials, and among them were the *mulubét azaž, agafari*, and *elfeň askäleka* (Tekleyesus, 2016; Fentahun, 1973).

The *Mulubét Azaž*

The official camp or palace's internal affairs were managed by the mulubét azaž. He was in charge of the *täji bét* (mead house), *enjära bét* (flat bread kitchen), *segabét* (meat house), *täla bét* (traditional beer house), and *wätbét* (stew kitchen), among other household divisions. He also oversaw service workers in positions like *fanawägi* [4] *asalafi* [5] *feçita* (grinders), and *gäbäta aqerabi* (table attendant). Each of these groups had a chief in charge who received commands directly from the *azaž*. The main ingredients of the feast were exclusively provided at his direction: *täji* (mead), *täla* (traditional beer), *enjära*(a thin, pancake-like bread prepared from teff, wheat, barley, or other grains), honey, and grain. During official functions, the *azaž* wore a ceremonial cloth called *qämis* and directed the household servants with the assistance of his deputies. Together, they meticulously and ceremoniously planned

both regular and special feasts (Fentahun, 1973; Nega, 1970; Samson, 1991; Tekleyesus, 2016). Among the officials who held this position was *Azaž* Yigzaw Gualu (Tekleyesus, 2016).

The *Agafari*

The *agafari* was in charge of making sure those guests and attendants were arranged based on their social status in *geber* days and other events. He ensured that appropriate etiquette was observed during formal ceremonies by introducing dignitaries and significant guests to the province lord or the emperor (Fentahun, 1973; Tekleyesus, 2016). Yimam Sahilu, Damoté Kassa, and Felaté Çuahi were from the well known appointees in this position (Tekleyesus, 2016).

The *Elfeň Askälekay*

The *elfeň askälekay's* main responsibilities were associated with the ceremonial or royal hall, *elfeň*. He had been given the power to allow or prohibit entry to the *elfeň* and was in charge of protecting everything related to it. Furthermore, at *geber* and other ceremonial occasions performed in the *elfeň*, he worked closely with the *agafari* to ensure that visitors were seated appropriately according to their rank (Tekleyesus, 2016; Fentahun, 1973; Samson, 1991; Tekletsadiq, 1990b). Among the authorities who occupied this role was *Grazemač* Liyew (Tekleyesus, 2016).

4.5. Banquet (*geber*) Ceremonies and Dining Protocols

Large amounts of food and drink were consumed at banquet (*geber)* festivities, with *täji* and meat being especially plentiful. While officials and members of the nobility were the main recipients of these feasts, the poor, who would not otherwise have had access to such food in their houses, were also given considerable servings of meat and *täji*. However, these ritual feasts also acted to uphold privilege and social structures (Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.2, 2005; Fentahun, 1973).

Full *geber* ceremonies were performed three times a week on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays under *Negus* Täklä Haymanot's rule. Extensive banquets were also held to commemorate important annual holy days, such as *Enqutataše* (Ethiopian New Year), *Mäskäl* (Finding of the True Cross), *Şegé* (celebrated on November 15), *Şion Maryam* (celebrated on November 30), *Gäna* (Christmas), *Ţemqät* (Epiphany), St. Mark (May 8),

Holy Trinity (July 14), and St.*Abunä* Täklä Haymanot (August 30). Every day, the *elfeň* utilized hundreds of *metads*, traditional clay griddles to bake *enjära* for the court's sustenance. The court housed a significant number of civil, military, and clerical officers because it served as both the administrative and ceremonial headquarters in addition to being the royal palace. These people lived there with their families and retainers, were permanently connected to the court, and frequently attended *geber* events (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M. , and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

In addition to resident officials, the *geber* ceremonies were attended by visiting dignitaries and people who came to the court for various reasons (Abdussamad, 1986; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023). Guests participated in the intricate *geber* customs of the time while dining in traditional fashion, *mosäb,* and at wooden dining tables (*gäbäta*) [6] by wearing traditional clothing (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M. and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

On banquet (*geber*) days, food and drinks were enjoyed in Mäqdäla and Säntära, the two main halls ,in Amharic called as *adaraše*. The court singers, known as *azemari*, and the lower nobilities frequently added music and dance to the mood, resulting in a lively scene of celebration. *Liqä Mequas* Merša and Afäworq took center stage among the known azemaris of the period (Lemäneh M., and SärawituY., personal interview, November 2023; Tekleyesus, 2016). These lavish public meals were frequently followed by the *elfeň geber*, a more private gathering. Selected members of the nobility were invited to this feast, which they had with the *Negus* in the *elfeň*, his private chamber. For certain groups, such as the clergy and other distinguished members of society, special feasts were also organized in addition to the common *geber*. For example, following the reconstruction of St.Mark Church in 1899, the clergy were invited to a dedicated feast where they were presented with generous gifts (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

Before the *geber* commenced, the hall was sealed and guarded by the *elfeň askälekayoč.* Once the *mosäbs* and all necessary items had been arranged, the main door was opened by the *elfeň askälekayoč*, and *Negus* Täklä Haymanot entered the hall accompanied by his nobles. Thereafter, the *elfeň askälekay* and the *agafari* began selecting guests according to rank, age, and personal achievement. The chosen guests were then guided to their designated

seats in accordance with a predetermined protocol, and this process continued until the *adaraš* was filled. Those who were not accommodated, including minor nobles, remained outside, awaiting an invitation to enter once the earlier banqueters had departed. Although close advisers played a key role in discovering and suggesting possible candidates for office, those who had first dined had influence on appointments (Kebede, 1970; Paulos, 1992; Tekleyesus, 2016). Following the banqueters' seating arrangements, hand washing was conducted under the supervision of an official known as the *gäbäta aqafiwoč*[7]. According to a rigid order established by each person's title and social status, these officials performed the ceremony using various utensils made of various materials (Fentahun, 1973; Tekleyesus, 2016; Kebede, 1970). A specially made silver washing bowl and jar were reserved for *Negus* Täklä Haymanot's usage only. Traditionally, during the *geber* rituals, a casserole of *wät*, especially made for high-ranking officials, was presented with food in a *mosäb* containing *enjära* (Tekleyesus, 2016)

The official commencement of the *geber* was marked by the *elfeň askälekay***.** Following a priest's blessing of the *negus's* food ,the *azaž* signalled the *asalafi* to start serving the attendants *enjära* and *wät*. The feast then started after the waiters brought *enjära* and *wät* and unveiled the *mosäb* that had been prepared for the nobility. After that, drinks of varying grades were delivered with different drinking utensils. The most privileged banqueters were offered more elegant meals with *mosäb* and drinks in more expensive vessels, and their drinks were closely examined for possible toxicity. However, for lower status attendants, food and drinks were delivered in wooden dining tables (*gäbäta*) and lesser drinking utensils (Orlowask, 2006; Tekleyesus, 2016)

Negus Täklä Haymanot took part in the banquet's formalities, and he was served food and *täji* in a lavishly decorated vessel called *yäneguś berelé*. The *Negus* consumed the food and drink symbolically rather than for nutrition, and the offering was covered with a special cloth known as *gemeja*. At the conclusion of the rite, the *asalafi* ceremoniously received the vessel containing *täji* by kissing the Negus's shoe. Other senior officials at the banquet also drank from intricately designed *berelés*. The type of drinking vessel in which guests were served *täji* varied according to their political and religious status and their closeness to the Negus. These included different types of *berelé,* such as *šureba* and *mabräja berelé, goškolba* (crafted from buffalo horn), glassware called *dämas*, and *mabräja berçeko*. Britain, Italy, and France were the importers of the *berelés* and *berçekos,* which had been in the colors of black,

white,and dark red. Usually, only high-ranking officials with titles like *fitawrari*, *däjazmač*,and *ras* were permitted to use these elaborate vessels. Conversely, *goškolba* (made from buffalo horn) and more subdued drinking utensils were used to serve lower-ranking officials and guests (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

During the meal, the *azmari* performed music that celebrated the valor of distinguished guests in hunting and warfare. Their songs also highlighted the food and drink served at the *geber* while addressing contemporary political and socioeconomic concerns. Inspired by these praises, some attendees rose to boast of their own achievements and to affirm their loyalty through traditional battle cries and boasting rituals known as *qäräreto* and *fukära* (Lemäneh M.,Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023). Once the performances concluded, the *agafari* used subtle signals to indicate that it was time for the guests to depart. To make space for the next group of banqueters, guests quietly exited through the main door. Meanwhile, the *asalafis* swiftly cleared away the remnants of food and drink and reset the tables in preparation for the following round of feasters. Depending on the scale of the occasion, this cycle could be repeated several times. The *negus* typically remained for a number of rounds, though at times he stayed longer. When he finally chose to leave the *adaraš,* a concluding prayer was offered to commemorate the ritual act of dining within the enclosure. Thereafter, the *negus* withdrew to the *elfeň* ,accompanied by those who had shared the feast with him. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the food that the attendees had left behind was distributed to the poor who resided in and around St. Mark's church (Tekleyesus, 2016) .

Although various types of utensils were used to serve food and drinks to the guests, they were distributed in great abundance without restriction. During *geber* rituals and other occasions, *Negus* Täklä Haymanot's extravagant feasts,magnanimous disposition, and skillful management were constantly on display (Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.4, 2010). Any attendant, including the poor, was free to eat and drink everything they wanted at any *g*rand occasion. In keeping with the inclusive and abundant ethos of the event, servants were also allowed to bring meat and *täji* home. However, after the death of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot in 1901, this custom was modified (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023).

4.6. Socio-Political Functions of Banquet (*Geber*)

Beyond their symbolic significance, Ethiopian *gebers* signalled changes in political dynamics, which had a real impact on governmental operations. Most significantly, *geber* acted as an authorized platform for enacting and validating significant governance reforms. Hence, these events served as ritual confirmations of the status quo, celebrations of divine kingship, and recognitions of the ruler's power and obligations to the populace. The extent of involvement in their *geber* rites, the regularity and grandeur of memorial feasts and holy day observances, and other factors all contributed to the religious and political power of emperors and lords. Therefore, the political and social customs of the time were maintained and strengthened by ceremonies performed in the courts of emperors and provincial lords. The firmly established patronage networks and social hierarchy, which ran from the monarch or regional ruler to the nobles and then to the general populace, were clearly reflected in these events. The banquet's *(geber)* first round sitting arrangements, especially in the *adaraš*, represented the high nobility's socio-political status. They even influenced the selection of lesser nobles who competed for the desirable position (Paulos, 1992; Kebede, 1970).

In the courtroom, the *geber* functioned as a means of expressing political loyalty and fostering consensus. During significant occasions, the ruler displayed generosity by providing abundant food and drink,often prepared from tributes collected throughout the realm ,thereby demonstrating his wealth, honor ,and kindness. The offering of food symbolized the ruler's role as provider, while the shared meal and accompanying conversations emphasized the values of commensality and affability (Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol.2, 2005; Teshalel, 1995). Gaining the support of new allies and retaining the allegiance of current supporters were made possible by the generosity shown during the *geber* ceremony. Beyond its ceremonial and social roles, it was a dynamic tool for changing the political system, allowing for change while still ceremonially upholding existing hierarchies. New appointments or dismissals were frequently indicated by subtle modifications in etiquette during these ceremonies, such as adjustments to seating arrangements. The public display of recently awarded official attire in the *geber* also visibly reaffirmed a person's high rank and signalled significant changes in the political hierarchy (Teshalel, 1995; Orlowask, 2006)

According to a royal document of medieval Ethiopia, the *geber* rituals were an essential component of the royal bureaucracy and court structure. These elaborate feasts were closely

supervised by key court officials and played a key role in strengthening the allegiance of subordinates (Tadesse, 1972). However, they could also bring tension and animosity when the regular provision of such feasts was neglected . For example, this strain was evident after Emperor Särsä Dengel's death in 1597. His successor,Yacob(1597-1603), had a difficult time keeping the government bureaucracy under control. Due in large part to his failure to continue the long-standing custom of providing court dinners for the troops after their military and enslavement campaigns, his relations with the various army units deteriorated. The army units that had faithfully supported Särsä Dengel(1563-1597),particularly those stationed in Begiemder, grew dissatisfied , leading to heightened tension within the court (Mered, 1971).

Women did take part in *geber* cermonies, though their participation was strictly limited by rank and court norms. Royal banquets were primarily political events, focused on tribute,resource distribution and reinforcing imperial authority with formal power largely held by men. High- ranking women, particularly queens and principal wives, played a central role in organizing *gebers.* As a reflection of their household authority and control over court logistics,they managed provisions ,directed servants, and made sure ceremonies adhered to established procedures (Kelly,2020; Kropp, 1988; Herman,2016). Although social status restricted their presence and roles and seating and service arrangements perpetuated gender hierarchies ,elite women outside the royal family could attend some events. Ordinary women had no official political authority , but they were primarily involved in social and religious activities,preparing food ,coordinating communal celebrations , and participating in ritual observances (Kelly,2020).

As the socio-political implication of the *geber* in the province of Gojjam in general and *Negus* Täklä Haymanot in particular was the replica of the central government, the ceremony helped to reinforce the hierarchical order among the attendees as well as the differences in rank between the *Negus* and his guests. The sort of drink offered and the sitting arrangement were used to illustrate the differences (Tekleyesus, 2016). Participants developed close relationships and a unique court identity as a result of the common experience of dining commensally. Such meetings were commonly used as diplomatic negotiation tools and have demonstrated value in fostering unity during times of conflict (Ramos, 2010; Kebede, 1970).

Likewise, the central government the change of *geber* ceremonies caused resentment and conflict in the court of the province of Gojjam in different periods. One indication of this event was the death of *Negus* Täklä Haymanot in 1901. His son and successor, *Däjazmač* Seyoum (the latter *Ras* Hailu) changed the existing *geber* order by a new once. Later that year, a new *geber* system was implemented that severely limited the distribution of food and drink as a pretext of losing the resourceful province of Agaw Meder (Tekleyesus, 2016). However, Ras Hailu reshaped traditional banquet practices to accumulate wealth. His business acumen curtailed the extravagance of *geber* ceremonies, turning them into managed rituals that preserved resources and reinforced his authority (Abdussamad, 1986). The new order limited meal servings and distributed them based on registration,and guests were only permitted to drink *täji* once. Smaller drinking vessels even took the place of the big ones that had been mostly utilized during his father's rule. In addition to this, servants were prohibited from taking meat and *täji* home. As a result, *Ras* Hailu faced criticism and resistance from court officials who had grown accustomed to the generous hospitality under *Negus* Täklä-Haymanot (Tekleyesus, 2016; Lemäneh M., Kähaliw M., and Särawitu Y., personal interview, November 2023; Encyclopaedia Aethiopica Vol. 4, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Banquet*(geber)*, which is regulated by custom and reflects social, economic, and political hierarchies, has been an essential component of social life throughout civilizations since ancient times. These banquets, which were usually attended by men, bolstered social, political, and religious cohesion, established alliances with powerful individuals such as local lords or emperors, and reinforced status. Additionally, the number and makeup of attendees preserved established hierarchies and shaped loyalties. Like other ceremonial practices, the *geber* shaped Ethiopia's political and socioeconomic systems and represented the country's royal past. More than feasts, these occasions legitimized the king and the provincial lord, signaled political changes, and strengthened social hierarchies. *Gebers* were frequently hosted on ceremonial occasions by emperors and other high-ranking nobles, making them a long-lasting cultural institution. The custom eventually came to an end following the 1974 revolution, despite changes in the early 20th century to take on a more national character.

Notes

1. NALA-National Archive and Library Agency.
2. *Mosäb* is a circular and standing dinning couch crafted from grass and wicker.
3. IES MS-Institute of Ethiopian Studies Manuscript.
4. *Fanawägi* was a title given to those who hold light flair in the palace.
5. A*asalafi* was a communal name given to those who deliver food and drinks to the banqueters in the court banquet (*geber*) .
6. *Gäbäta* is also refers to a wooden dish used for washing in other contexts..
7. *Gäbäta aqafi* was a title given to officials who had performing the washing ceremony in the event of banquet or any feasts arranged by lords or emperors before the meal.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

Author contribution

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