



Research Article

Monastic Power and Frontier Governance: Mahbere Selassie Monastery and National Integration in Northwestern Ethiopia, 1942–1974

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ABSTRACT

Lack of giving emphasis to borderland communities and social history has been a major drawback of Ethiopian historiography until recently. In particular, the national integration program implemented on northwestern Ethiopian borderland by the post-1941 imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie I has remained unexamined by scholars. This paper reconstructs the role of Mahbere Selassie Monastery in frontier administration and national integration on northwestern Ethiopian borderlands. Both primary and secondary sources were thoroughly collected, critically analyzed and impartially presented. The primary sources consist of archival documents gathered from the then North Gondar Administrative Zone Record office (NGAZRO) in Gondar city and National Archive and Library Agency (NALA) at Addis Ababa. The secondary sources used were pamphlets, books, articles and newspapers. Additionally, first-hand oral testimonies were collected from elders in the study area. The findings reveal that the monastery maintained an autonomous administration on a vast area and served as a crucial instrument in executing the imperial regime's national integration program along the northwestern Ethiopian borderland. The monastery actively converted non-Christians to the Orthodox Tewahido faith, taught the Amharic language, and established schools and churches among the frontier societies. Consequently, this study significantly contributes the growing body of borderland studies in Ethiopian historiography.

1. Introduction

Many states globally are ethnically and socio-culturally heterogeneous. While some states manage this diversity harmoniously, in others socio-cultural divisions present a direct challenge to national unity and sovereignty, occasionally generating clashes that lead to political disintegrations (Sakeena et al., 2021). Consequently, national integration strategies are vital for multi-nation states. They are served as a cohesive forces employed by governments to foster solidarity and unity among diverse communities. National integration aims to cultivate loyalty to the state across diverse ideological, ethnic, and socio-cultural groups, there by forging emotional and political unity. To achieve this states encourage cooperation, harmony, and a shared sense of belongingness among populations of different regions, languages, religions, and cultures (Azlin et al., 2023).

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Social scientists categorize the theories and approaches to national integration into modernist, post-modernist and consociational frameworks. The Modernist Approach (the Assimilation Theory) argues that integration is the process of amalgamation of diverse socio-cultural and ethnic groups into a single dominant national culture. In this processes, minority groups gradually surrendered elements of their identity by adopting the culture, language and religion of the dominant groups controlling state institutions. Consequently, minorities can be integrated and faithful to states and governments. States employed this assimilation strategy by encouraging a common religion, language, festivals, and national symbols (Sakeena et al., 2021; Connor, 1978; Alba and Nee, 2014). States have used this approach relatively earlier for many years. Scholars who have criticized the modernist approach to national integration develop the Post-Modernist Approach (Accommodation Theory). The Post-Modernism approach suggests that national unity and loyalty are best achieved by fostering cross-cutting affiliations while allowing diverse groups to retain their unique identities. This model values the inclusion of various groups is an essential element of state structure, ensuring equal rights and active political participation. Thus, this model is called accommodation model or approach (Sakeena et al., 2021; Jencks, 2010). The modernist and post-modernist are two opposite approaches to integration. Positioned between assimilation and accommodation approaches is the consociational model. The consociational model argues that a state's diverse ethnic groups should establish consensus based rules to protect their shared and distinct interests. Through mutual agreement, they form a coalition government that minimizes friction, manages differences, and secure national stability (Sakeena et al., 2021).

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state with a long history of state formation, home to diverse ethno-linguistic and religious groups, many of whom reside along its peripheries. Historically, the medieval imperial regime utilized the EOC as a primary agent to integrate these frontier populations with the political center. The relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) and the “restored Solomonic” dynasty was highly reciprocal. While the state provided the church with land endowments (*gult*), resources and protection, the church peacefully converted non-Christian populations and propagated state ideology. Importantly, historic conversion to Orthodox Christianity was generally not forced. In this endeavor, highly influential monasteries—such as Debre Damo in Tigre, Debre Hayq Estifanos in Amhara (modern day South Wollo) and Debre Asbo (later renamed Debre Libanos) in Shewa, Debre Bizen in Mereb Melash (modern day Eritrea), Waldeba on the bank of Tekezie River in Semen, and Mahbere Selassie in Begemder—played pioneering roles. Monks educated from these centers travelled to frontier regions, establish churches and spearheaded integration efforts. During the medieval period, as the Christian Kingdom expanded in various directions, incorporated diverse groups, a parallel revival of monastic communities took place. To consolidate these again, the state encouraged church building, promoted the Amharic language, stationed Christian garrisons on the frontiers, facilitated intermarriage, and settled Christian populations from the center into newly incorporated areas (Tadesse, 1972; Haile Mariam, 1987; Abir, 1980).

Following the territorial expansion of Emperor Amde Tseyon (r.1314-1344) toward the northwestern frontiers of Ethiopia, several churches were established or reopened. For instance, Waldiba Monastery, situated in Telemt district at the foot of the Semen Mountain near the Tekezie River, was revitalized. Local tradition asserted that Waldiba was founded in the late fifth century, but its clergy were massacred and the church was closed during the tenth century reign of Queen Yodit (Gudit). It was eventually reopened in the fourteenth century by the celebrated saint *Abba* Samuel of the Waldiba, who founded a cenobite community there. According to hagiographic tradition, the monastery's name is derived from the Wali tree, which produced pumpkin-sized fruit (known in Amharic as *Duba*); hence monastery was named Wali Daba (Waldiba). Similarly, oral tradition trace foundation of the Mahbere Selassie Monastery back to the fourth century AD during the reigns of Abreha Wo Atsebeha, followed by its destruction by Queen Yodit and eventual reopened in the fourteenth century (Addis Zemen, 1951 E.C; Kefletseyon, 2010 E.C; Nosnitsin, 2003; Persoon, 2003). However, written monastic archives and modern historical studies indicate that the monastery was actually established in the first decade of the sixteen century. During the reign of Emperor Susenyos (r.1607-1632), who converted to Catholicism and subsequently persecuted Orthodox *Tewahido* clergy, many Orthodox priests left Azezo town and its surroundings to the remote borderlands of Qwara and Metema where they established safe havens and built churches (Berry, 1976; NGAZRO, 1959 E.C). It was likely during this period of upheaval that Mahbere Selassie was founded.

Mahbere Selassie Monastery is located approximately 121 kilometers west of Gondar city on a small hill in the lowland district of Metema. The monastery is located approximately 50 kilometers far from the Ethio-Sudan boundary as shown on Figure 1 and 2. Historically, this frontier zone served as refuge for outlaws and politically dissidents. It was also a challenging environment, plagued by malaria and highly vulnerable to foreign incursions as shown on figure 1. *Abba* Amede Selassie, who reportedly travelled from Shewa during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, founded the monastic association under the name “የጣህበረሰላሴ ገዳም የሺህ ማህበር” (“The Thousand Member

Association of Mahbere Selassie Monastery”), named after roughly 1,000 monks residing there at the time. Over the centuries, this population fluctuated due to disease, conflict, economic shifts and others. Mahbere Selassie is a cenobite monastery exclusively for monks, where residents live serve according to strict rules. The monks achieved economic self-sufficiency by rearing hundreds of cattle and cultivated cash crops like cotton and sesame. Hence, the monks are self-sufficient economically. Led by an abbot (*memher*), the monastery gained immense prestige during the reign of Emperor Fasiledas (r.1632-1667). At the emperor’s request, monks of the monastery travelled to the capital, Denqez, and allegedly healed his ailing father, Susenyos. In gratitude, Fasiledes endowed the monastery with 44 tributary churches ቅፋፍ (*qefef*) as *gult* land in the neighboring districts of Alefa, Taqusa, Qwara and Chilga (Birhanu, 2009 E.C; Tekle Tsadeq, 1951 E.C; Persoon, 2003).

The monastery remained a staunch defender of the Orthodox *Tewahido* doctrine during the intense theological disputes of the Gondarine Period (c.1636-1769) and the *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of the Princes, c.1769-1855) (Birhanu, 2009 E.C; Tekle Tsadeq, 1951 E.C). It was highly effective propagating Orthodox *Tewahido* religion among the borderland societies and it served as a center of church education. Notably Kasa Hailu (the future emperor Tewodros II) was educated at the monastery in his youth and maintained a lifelong attachment to it (Birhanu, 2009 E.C; Tekle Tsadeq, 1982 E.C). Emperor Tewodros II’s chroniclers, *Aleqa* Wodemareyam, and an anonymous writer, recorded that *Dejazmach* Kinfu Haylu—Kasa’s half-brother and governor of Dembiya and Quara in the 1830s—sent emissaries to Mahbere Selassie asking the monks to pray that his governorship of the region would pass to his sons. The monks, however, prophesied that it was Kasa who would ultimately take power (Viallhet, 1904). In 1855, Kasa was indeed crowned Emperor Tewodros II after defeating the regional lords of the *Zemene Mesafint*, and ruled Ethiopia for thirteen years. Following his committed suicide at Meqdela in 1868 fighting the British Military expedition led by General Napier, his son, *Ras* Meshesha, with the permission of Emperor Tekle Giorgis II, transferred Tewodros’ remains to Mahbere Selassie Monastery for reburial in about 1871 (Birhanu, 2009 E.C; Persoon, 2003).

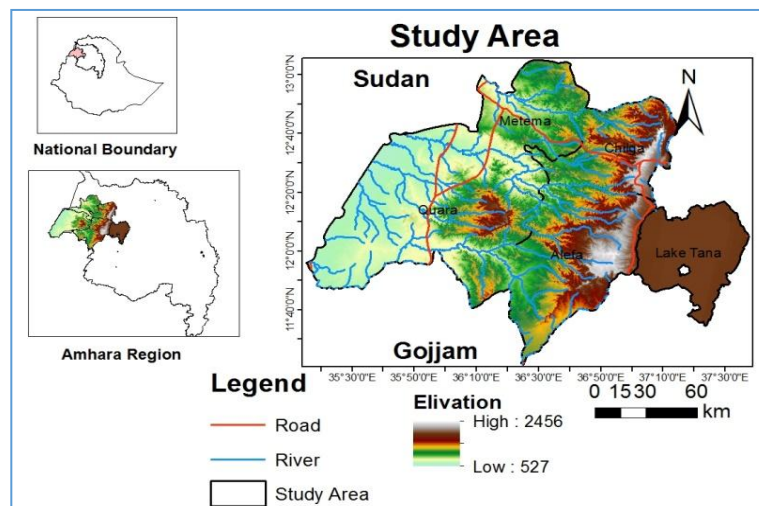


Figure1. Map of the Study Area.

Foreign invaders and internal civil wars have reportedly threatened the monastery. It was devastated and its clergy massacred during the Mahdist (Dervish) invasion from in Sudan in 1888 (Tekle Tsadeq, 1951 E.C; Persoon, 2003). Later, during the Italian Occupation (1936-41), the Fascist Italy force—hostile to the Orthodox Church and the Amhara elites—burnt the monastery and executed several monks suspecting them of sheltering patriotic resistance fighters (Gerima, 1949 E.C; Persoon, 2003). Despite this destruction, the monastery actively aided the liberation war. In August 1940, the monks provided pack animals to “Mission 101”, a British- led operation headed by Colonel Daniel Sandford and accompanied by *Azazh* Kebede Tesema, as they crossed into Ethiopia from Sudan. In recognition, *Azazh* Kebede presented the monastery with 200 *birr* sent directly by the emperor (Kebede, 1962 E.C).

For centuries, the monastery played a due role in administering northwestern frontier communities and integrating them into the Ethiopia state—activities that intensified significantly after the restoration of the imperial government

in 1941. Despite this historical importance, this region has received little academic attention. Existing historical literature on northwestern borderlands has focused on the Ethio-Sudan boundary and cross border dynamics (Alemayehu, 2020; Puddu, 2017; Belete, 2016; Mulatu, 2016). Local administrative and economic dynamics have also been examined to some extent (Setegn, 2020; Setegn, 2024a; Setegn, 2024b). However, apart from Setegn's recent contribu, academic research on the region has largely overlooked the pivotal role played by the Mahbere Selassie Monastery. The primary objective of this study is to reconstruct the contributions of Mahbere Selassie Monastery to the administration and national integration of the frontier societies and their responses in Northwestern Ethiopia from 1942 to 1974.

2. Methodology (Materials and Methods)

To ensure historical rigor, this study employs standard historical research methodologies, utilizing both secondary and primary sources. The core primary data consists of archival documents retrieved from the former North Gondar Administrative Zone Record (NGAZRO) now Central Gondar Zone at Gondar City and the National Archive and Library Agency (NALA) at Addis Ababa. The primary archival documents and secondary sources were collected in 2018 and recently in October 2025. The archives at NGAZRO are exceptionally for historical research on the Begemder and Semien Province. However, because these archives are poorly organized and lacked standardize folder numbers or systematic file codes, precise archival citation are difficult to construct. Consequently, the author has cited these documents primary by the dates of correspondence. To corroborate these archival materials and fill empirical gaps, the study incorporates oral histories collected from elders who witnessed the events in the study area. I have interviewed five key informants in the study area. The oral information from informants was collected in December 2018 and October 2025. The recorded audio was transcribed into written Amharic and translated to English. Finally, all primary and secondary sources were cross-checked, critically evaluated, triangulated and interpreted properly. This systematic historical synthesis ensures the objectivity and reliability of the data. The chronological scope of this study begins in 1942, making the post-liberation restructuring of provincial administration by the restored imperial regime and ends in 1974 with the collapse of the imperial system.

3. Discussion and Result

3.1. The Monastery in Frontier Administration, 1942-1974

Following the end of Italian military occupation in 1941, the restored Emperor Haile Selassie I initiated a program of administrative centralization and frontier integration. To achieve these goals, the imperial state and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) maintained a close, collaborative relationship until the regime's demise in 1974. In 1942, the modernizing imperial regime issued a landmark decree regarding church administration. This decree legally recognized various historical forms of church land tenure (*gult*) and property. It empowered the church to collect land taxes directly from peasants living in its *gult* lands and to utilize these revenues to expand parish education and charitable works (Negarit Gazieta, 1942). This legislation provided formal legal backing to church land rights that had previously been governed by customary law, allowing churches and monasteries—particularly in the central and northern regions—to reclaim their historical economic privileges and extract tributes from local populations. As a result, the churches and monasteries collected different forms of tributes from the people who lived in their *gult* lands (Haile Mariam, 1988).

Mahbere Selassie Monastery benefited significantly from the 1942 decree. Beginning in 1943, monks petitioned Emperor Haile Selassie and his son, Crown Prince Asfawosen (Governor-General of Begemder and Semien Province, and Wollo Province) requesting the return of their historic *gult* lands—Matebiya sub-district in Metema—and authorization to collect local tributes and taxes. The emperor agreed to restore Matebiya, provided the monastery could present documentary evidence of its pre-1936 ownership. Although the monastery was unable to present evidence (likely they were destroyed during the Italian occupation), the Crown Prince ordered *Dejazmach* Asrate Kasa (Deputy Governor of Begemder and Semien from 1942 to 1944) to grant Matebiya to the monastery (NGAZRO, 1936 E.C; NALAE, 1935 E.C). Furthermore, during the Emperor's visit Gondar in 1946, the monks petitioned him directly regarding administrative interference in the monastery domain by government officials from Chilga Awraja (sub-province). In response, the emperor issued a directive confirming the monastery's administrative autonomy based on the 1943 decree. First, the monastery was authorized to collect its tributes and taxes using official receipts issued by the Holy Synods (ecclesiastical council), directing this funds to its local charitable activities. Second, the monks were granted the right to govern the monastery's *gult* lands without the intervention of local state officials or governors (*meslenie*). Third, this administrative autonomous would only be

revoked if the monastery harbored sheltered criminals its territory and failed to hand over them to state authorities. Fourth, the monks granted administrative control over Matebiya sub-district, with instructions to formally demarcate its boundary in coordination with Chilga *Awraja* government officials. Geographically, the monastery's territorial jurisdiction was entirely surrounded by the Chilga *Awraja* except to the west, where it bordered Sudan as seen in Figure 1 (NGAZRO, 1939 E.C).

In 1947, the monastery's jurisdiction included Matebiya (with its ten constituent localities) and seven and ten other tributary churches (NALAE, 1940 E.C). In 1950, a frontier customs post established in Matebiya. The monastery petitioned the government for a share of its customs revenue, and the imperial regime subsequently authorized the monastery to retain one-third (1/3) of the post's total collection (NGAZRO, 1960 E.C). The government also provided direct financial aids for the physical reconstruction of the monastery. The monastery collected various tributes from frontier people. Despite these privileges, the boundaries of the monastery's territorial domain remained poorly defined, sparking decades of administrative frictions with local state authorities (NGAZRO, 1962 E.C). The monastery also clashed with neighboring churches and monasteries, claiming them as historic tributaries (*gult*), while the latter fought to maintain their independences. A prominent example of this territorial tension was the protracted dispute with the Wataho Abo Monastery in Chilga. In 1958, *Memher* Gebre Yohannes Yemeretu of Wataho Abo wrote a petition to *Dejazmach* Kefli Dadi, the Governorate-General of the Province:

... በእኛ በዋታሆ አቦ ገዳምና በማህበረ ስላሴ ገዳም መካከል ስላለው ክርክር ዋታሆ ገዳም እራሱን ችሎ የሚኖረውን ማህበረ ስላሴዎች ቅፈፍ እናደርጋለን ብለው በሀይል ውግዘት ጥሰው ስርዓት አበዉን አፍርሰው ከገዳሙ እየገቡ አላስቀምጦን ቢሉ ለክቡር ቤትወደድ አንዳርጋቸው መሳይ አመልክተን ራሱን የቻለ ገዳም መሆኑን አስመስክረን በጉባኤ ታይቶ ተወስኖ ነበር። ውሳኔውን አልፈው በ፵፮ ዓ.ም አዲስ አበባ ሂደው በማስመሰል ለብፁዕ ሊቀጳጳስ አመልክተው ህግ በማይፈቅደው ወር በህመማት ሱባኤ ከያዝንበት የጦር መሳሪያ ይዘው ከገዳማችን ገብተው ማህበሩን በትነው የገዳሙን ንብረት ስለያዙብን ይህንን ግፍና በደል... በውሳኔው መሰረት ተፈጽሞ ወደ ገዳማችን እንድንደርስ ስንል በማክበር እናመለክታለን። (NGAZRO, 1950 E.C)

... Regarding the ongoing dispute between our monastery, Wataho Abo Monastery, and the Mahbere Selassie; Wataho Abo has historically been an independently monastery. However, the monks of Mahbere Selassie Monastery have attempted to forcefully turn us into their *qefef* (tributary) by violating church traditions established by forefathers of the church and entering in our monastery. We previously appealed to *Bitwoded* Andargachew Mesay (Governor General of the province) who reviewed the case in council and formally confirmed our independence. By passing this decision, the clergy of Mahbere Selassie travelled to Addis Ababa in 1945 E.C (1953) and misled the Archbishop. Armed with weapons, they entered our monastery during the holy weeks of *hememat* (Passion Weeks) - a time when carrying arms is strictly forbidden, dispersed our association, and took our property.... We respectfully request that the previous rulling be enforced so that we may return to our monastery in peace.

Table 1. *Members* of Mahbere Selassie Monastery from 1947 to 1976

No.	Name	their tenure as head of the monastery in G.C
1	<i>Memher</i> Gebre Mareyam Fenta	1947-1952
2	<i>Memher</i> La'cke Mareyam Berru	1953- 1964
3	<i>Memher</i> Gebre Mareyam Tesfaselassie	1965- April 1967
4	<i>Memher</i> Gebre Hiywot Habtegiorgis	May 1967 -1968
5	<i>Memher</i> Gebre Kirstos Abebe	1968- June 1970
6	<i>Memher</i> Gebre Selassie Haylemareyam	July 1970- June 1976

Source: organized from different archives collected from NGAZRO

The monks of Mahbere Selassie possessed significance political influence at both provincial and national levels. The monastery held an elite status in Begemder and Semien province, equivalent to an *Awraja* (sub-province) administrative unit. There were six *members* in the monastery during the imperial period, their names and tenure is shown in Table 1. Minutes from the provincial governorate-general office in Gondar indicate that the *members* (abbots) of the monastery listed in Table 1 regularly attended high-level administrative meetings alongside the province's seven *awraja* governors. When dissatisfied with decisions made by the provincial authorities, the *members* bypassed them entirely, travelling to Addis Ababa to present their grievance directly to the higher level of the government including the emperor's office. Furthermore, several prominent figures (*members*) of Mahbere Selassie rose to the higher ranks as archbishops/ bishops in the EOC hierarchy. For example, *Memher* Gebre

Mareyam was consecrated as *Abune* Yoseph in 1960 by Patriarch *Abune* Basilos (the first Ethiopian Patriarch). *Abba* Hawaz (born in 1939 at Goha Tseyon, North Shewa, and joined Mahbere Selassie in 1968) was one of the thirteen bishops/ archbishops consecrated in 1978 by Patriarch *Abune* Teklehaymanot, serving as *Abune* Selama until his death in 2004. *Memher* Gebre Selassie (born in the Ebnate district of South Gondar in 1939 and joined the monks of the monastery in 1970s) was consecrated as *Abune* Diosegoros by Patriarch *Abune* Paulos in the late 1990s. *Abune* Atenatewos, the current bishop of South Wollo, also spent his early monastic life at Mahbere Selassie (Birhanu, 2009 E.C).

Although the monastery maintained strong, cordial ties with the imperial regime at Addis Ababa, its autonomous administration over a vast sensitive borderland was a constant source of friction with local state officials. Regional administrators frequently accused the monastery of failing to maintain security and harboring outlaws. Persons after committing crime in the neighboring districts often sought asylum within the monastery's borders (NGAZRO, 1957 E.C). In its defense, the monastery argued that the monks could not verify the backgrounds of every individual entering their territory; many suspected criminals entered under the guise of devout pilgrims seasonal commercial farmers or daily laborers seeking jobs (NGAZRO, 1961 E.C). Furthermore, some Gumuz communities in Matebiya complained of heavy taxation and tributes demanded by the monastery, a lack of modern secular education and health services, and inadequate protection from cross-border Sudanese raids during the boundary tensions of the last imperial period (NGAZRO, 1961 E.C). Consequently, provincial governor-generals repeatedly recommended the Ministry of Interior strip the monastery of its administrative autonomy and place the entire territory under the direct jurisdiction of Chilga *Awraja* (NGAZRO, 1967 E.C). However, these recommendations were never implemented; the imperial regime feared that undermining the monastery would disrupt its vital role in the national integration and cultural assimilation of northwestern Ethiopia frontier societies.

3.2. The Role of the Monastery in National Integration

Following its restoration in 1941, one of the primary objectives of Emperor Haile Selassie I's government was national integration of Ethiopia's diverse ethno-linguistic and religious communities. This initiative was seen as crucial for state centralization and modernization. While the government lacked a formalized, modern integration policy, it relies heavily on a traditional assimilation model. The state utilized Amharic as the sole national language of administration and education, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the primary institutional vehicle for integration. The national education system was designed to foster a culturally and linguistically a homogenous population. In many peripheral regions where the local population did not speak Amharic, state administrations faced severe communication barriers. Consequently the government aggressively promoted Amharic in public offices and schools throughout the country. Meanwhile, the EOC spearheaded evangelical efforts targeted at specifically at non-Christian populations (Wudu, 2006; Abebe, 2000). In this political framework, the Orthodox Christianity served as a powerful unifying ideology and a bridge connecting the peripheral populations to imperial center (Markakis, 1975; Haile Mariam, 1987).

The imperial government's focus on national integration and cultural homogeneity was driven by both internal and external challenges. Internal challenge, the state was alarmed by the growing influences militant Islamic movements and rapid expansion of foreign Protestant missionary churches. The state felt the EOC's evangelical efforts were sluggish, largely due to lack of coordination between the Ministry of Education and EOC. Although Emperor Haile Selassie frequently stated that “ሀይማኖት የግል ነገር ሆኖ የጋራ ነው” (religion is a private matter, while the nation is a collective one), in practice the state survival was tied directly to religious unity. The imperial government feared that the expansion of Protestantism—not only in the newly incorporated non-Christian areas of southern Ethiopia but also within historically Christian areas of northern provinces—and the growing of Islam posed a threat to national cohesion. Hence, the government designed national integration as a possible solution to bring religious homogeneity, linguistic uniformity and ethnic intermixing in the country. The external challenges, the rise of Pan-Arab nationalism in the Middle East and its expansion into the Horn of Africa posed a significant geopolitical threat. The imperial Ethiopian government regarded the growing Arab nationalism as a threat to the sovereignty of the country because it provoked the non-Christian mainly Muslims on the borderlands contrary to the interest of the country (Abebe, 2000). Following his rise to power in Egypt in 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser aggressively promoted Arab nationalism and Islamization throughout the Horn of Africa. Nasser, actively encouraged Muslim populations in Eritrean and Somali to align with the Arab world. He also supported secessionist movements within Ethiopia, including Ogaden insurgents and Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and backed the Somali Republic during the border conflicts in the 1960s as well as the 1968 Bale uprising (Erlich, 2002). State elites viewed non-Christian frontier communities as highly vulnerable to Islamic influences and foreign subversion, often characterized them as

“backward and infidel” populations susceptible to external manipulation. Converting these societies into Orthodox Christianity was framed as a civilizing mission that would establish a cultural barrier against external geopolitical pressures. Thus, the imperial government used religious conversion along the national borders as a national security strategy to counter hostile influences emanating from neighboring countries like Sudan (Abebe, 2000).

In 1957, the government established the Ministry of National Community Development (የህዝባዊ ኑሮ እድገት ሚኒስቴር) to integrate the Muslims and none-Christian borderland populations into the dominant Amhara and Tigrean cultural elements. The ministry’s official mandate was to improve the social and spiritual wellbeing of local populations by introducing development projects including schools, clinics, administrative offices, and police stations. Although its developmental goals did not explicitly mention religious conversion, the ministry worked hand-in-hand with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, focusing heavily on the spiritual and moral alignment of these peripheral communities believing they were underdeveloped and neglected regions (Wudu, 2006). By the late 1950s, the Ministry had established provincial offices in various provinces and developed teachers to implement these programs.

Chilga *Awraja*, part of the study area as indicated Figure1 in Begemder and Semen Province, bordering Sudan, was among the 74 borderlands regions selected for this integration program. The imperial government officially designated the Mahbere Selassie Monastery to lead this effort along the northwestern borderland of Ethiopia. In 1956, *Memher* La’eke Mareyam Berru, the *Memher* of the Monastery, was appointed director of the national Community development teachers for Begemder and Semen. The borderland of the province adjacent to Sudan was home to Christian Amhara, and non-Christian Gumuz, Qemant, “Kunfel” (or Kulsi) and small groups of Kunama. While the Christianization of these groups had a long history, it was pursued with renewed vigor in the 1950s and 1960s. The “Kunfel” (also known as *Qolegnoch* or “lowland Agew” due to their linguistic ties to the Awngi language) live in the scattered settlements the Dinder and Beles River valleys and already practiced a form of Orthodox Christianity; the national integration program focused on establishing schools to teach them Amharic (Teqebba et al., 1971; NGAZRO, 1959 E.C). Meanwhile, parts of the Qemant population practiced a traditional religion known as “ሀገ ልቦና” (“the law of heart” or “the law of consciences”). The anthropologist Fredrick Gamst who studied the Qemant, described their belief system as “Pagan-Hebraic” because it combined indigenous, Christian, pagan and Hebraic elements, led by a religious leader called the *wembar*. This traditional belief lacked a written canon or formal preaching system, relying instead on oral traditions and the moral precept “ከልብህ ይደረ” (“let it be in your heart”) (Gamst, 1969; Simoons, 1960; Esubalew, 1994 E.C).

Because the religion has no written rules, for centuries the surrounding Orthodox *Tewahido* followers marginalized Qemant traditional religious practitioners for centuries, calling them ‘worshiper/son of wood’ since they performed their rituals under a tree (Rassam, 1869). The Gumuz, who lived a certain lowland area in Qwara and Metema districts, also practiced traditional beliefs and were among the primary target communities of the national integration and cultural homogeneity program. The educated churchmen assigned to teach Amharic, converted the population to Orthodox *Tewahido* doctrine, construct churches and schools in the 1940s and the 1950s include *Members* La’eke Mariam, *Merigeta* Isayas Sisay, Tekle Mareyam Gebre Meskel, Gebre Hana Hagos, Mere’awi Mistiru, Gebreyesus Kasa and ascetic (*bahtawi*) Woldegebriel. These national community development teachers also helped the Gumuz to adopt the habit of wearing clothes for their welfare (Aemero, 1952 E.C). In 1950/51, *Memher* Gebre Mareyam of Mahbere Selassie baptized about 700 Gumuz into Orthodox *Tewahido* religion. In 1952, he was appointed the head of the teachers of National Community Development in Metekel *Awraja* of Gojjam Province (located to the south of Chilga *awraja*), where he worked tirelessly to implement the program. He expanded the Orthodox *Tewahido* faith, constructed churches and schools, and taught Amharic throughout the region (Addis Zemen, 1950 E.C; Birhanu, 2009 E.C). Due to his education, exemplary behavior and dedication to the national integration program, Gebre Mareyam was ordained as a bishop under a name *Abune* Yoseph in 1960 by Patriarch *Abune* Basilos.

Memher La’eke Mareyam Berru—who attended education in various churches and was a *memher* in Wataho Abo Monastery—succeeded Gebre Mareyam became *memhre* of Mahbere Selassie in 1953, a position he held until 1964. He vigorously evangelized Orthodox *Tewahido* Christianity among frontier populations as far north as the Tekezie River. From 1954 to 1956, La’eke Mareyam baptized approximately 2,000 Gumuz to Orthodox Christianity, and many Gumuz boys received the title of *deacon* from *Abuna* Mikael, the Bishop of Begemder and Semen governorate. La’eke Mareyam also constructed schools and Churches for the Gumuz, including Saint Mary Church at Kulit-Serfedin. Because of his energetic works, *Memher* La’eke Mareyam was appointed head of the National Community Development teachers in Begemder and Semen province in 1956 (Addis Zemen, 1950 E.C). He also

baptized approximately 120 Kunama into Orthodox *Tewahido* religion on the frontier of the Setit-Humera district in the late 1950s (Aemero, 1952 E.C).

Although other structural factors were at play, the EOC argued that its shortcomings in evangelization were primarily due to lack of finance. Consequently, the imperial government permitted the church to collect 10% of the Education Tax introduced in 1947 to fund the expansion of church education and evangelization activity (Wudu, 2006). Accordingly, Mahbere Selassie was authorized to collect education and health taxes from people within its jurisdiction, remitting a portion to the governorate-general office at Gondar. However, governor-generals frequently criticized the monastery for failing remit these taxes on time. For Example, the arrears of education and health taxes collected by the monastery that were owed to the provincial administration office from 1948 to 1962 amounted to \$37,526 *Birr* (NGAZRO, 1963 E.C).

The last major and remarkable initiative of *Memhere* La'eke Mareyam was the evangelization of non-Christian Qemant in Chilga district in the late 1950s. Although many Qemant in Chilga and its surrounding were Orthodox *Tewahido* followers and spoke Amharic due to their long historical of interaction and integration with the state and Amhara people since the 14th century, a significant population still adhered to the traditional belief system known as “hegelibona.” From 1956 to 1960, La'eke Mareyam preached to them and converted approximately 13,000 Qemant to Orthodox *Tewahido*. He subsequently constructed about twenty-one churches on their former traditional ritual hill sites (Aemero, 1952 E.C). To honor this work, the local people composed the following verse:

መምህር ላዕከ ማርያም በመስቀሉ ባርከ፤
ተራራውን ታቦት አደረገው እኩ። (Aemero, 1952 E.C)
Memher Ba'eke Mareyam, blessing with his cross
Converted the sacred hills into Churches

With regard to the Muslim population, who were relatively few in number, the monastery struggled both to convert them into Christianity and to maintain smooth relations. Compared to converting traditional religious adherents, proselytizing Muslims to Orthodox Christianity was proved to be a far more challenging task. A segment of the Muslim population lived in the town of Metema Yohannes. In the early 1960s, driven by drought and shortage of arable lands, the imperial government relocated Muslims from Wore Himenu (Wollo) and Gayint (Begemder) settling them within the territorial jurisdiction of Mahbere Selassie in Metema. These settlers engaged in agricultural activities and paid taxes and tributes to the monastery (NALAE, 1966 E.C). However, the Muslim community faced tense relations with the monastery and local Christians for two primary reasons. The first root cause stemmed from memories of the 1889 Battle of Metema and the settlers' subsequent demands to construct mosques within the monastery's territorial domain. The local Christians recalled that Muslims of Metema, disappointed by Emperor Yohannes IV's religious policy, had historically supported the Mahdist force, leading to the Emperor's defeat and death. Consequently, local Christians opposed the government's resettlement schemes, submitted petitions to state offices demanding their evacuation from the area and indirectly encouraged bandits to raid the resettles to force them out. The second cause of friction was the Muslims' insistence on constructing mosques within the monastery's territorial jurisdiction, a request the monastic leadership flatly refused. Despite these compounding hardships, the Muslim settlers managed to ease tensions over time and continued living in the area, as they lacked better alternatives (NGAZRO, 1959 E.C). Nevertheless, Muslims conversion to Orthodox Christianity remained an exceedingly a rare phenomenon.

3.3. The Responses of the Frontier Society

While the national integration program driven by Amharic language instruction and conversion into Orthodox *Tewahido* religion was conducted peacefully without overt physical force, the responses of the frontier peoples of northwestern Ethiopia to cultural homogeneity and national integration was mixed. The program successfully encouraged the Gumuz and Kunama women to adopt modern attire; prior to the initiative they did not traditionally wear clothes. The following poem highlights the role of the program in transforming their daily lives:

እራቁቷን ስትሄድ የኩናማ ሴት
እራቁቷን ስትሄድ የጉምዝ ሴት
መምህር ላዕከ ማርያም ሰባኪ ጥምቀት
ቀሚስ ተዋህዶን አጠለቀላት።
(Interview with Sisay Yimer, Abuhay Tadese, and Alemneh Belay)
While the Kunama Woman walked naked
While the Gumuz Woman walked naked

Memher La'eke Mareyam, the preacher of baptism
Clothed her in the dress of Tewahido

The local communities unanimously supported the introduction of modern education and the Amharic language, which significantly integrated them with the local administrative system. It allowed them to secure civil employment within local administration, even though ethnic Amhara continued to dominate the higher tiers of the provincial administrative hierarchy (such as sub-district, district and *awraja*). Education empowered them to draft their own petitions, drastically reducing reliance on translators and professional scribes. They were able to articulate their litigation directly in court using Amharic (Interview with Sisay, Abuhay, and Alemneh). Consequently, they viewed the program favorably due to the tangible social benefits it provided. The responses of the Gumuz and Kunfel populations to the national integration scheme were largely positive, as evident by the petitions they submitted to the provincial government (NGAZRO, 1952 E.C). One petition sent by the Gumuz local representatives in Quara to the Emperor in May 1959 reads:

“የኢትዮጵያ ብርሃን ግርማዊ ጃነሆይ እኛ አምነን ስለተጠመቅን ልጆቻችን ስለተማሩልን ቤተ ክርስቲያን ስለተተከለልን ከልክ ያለፈ ምስጋና እናመሰግናለን። ነገር ግን በሌላ ሀገር የሌለ የማር ዩናይትድ ክፍለ ጥቅም ስለተገኘን እንደሌለው ሀገር ታግዶልን እግዚያብሄርንና መንስታችንን እያመሰገን እንድናር ከገናናው ዙፋን ስር ወድቀን እንለምናለን። የነገደ ጉሙዞች አለቆች። (NGAZRO, 1951 E.C).

O Light of Ethiopia, Your Imperial Majesty Honor Jan Hoy! We are proudly grateful for our baptizing in Orthodox *Tewahido* faith, the education of our children, and the establishing of our churches. However, we are facing heavy burdens, as local officials force us to pay unique tributes in honey and goats not demanded elsewhere. Prostrating ourselves beneath your great throne, we beg you to ban these unfair tributes so that we may live praising God and our government in peace. – The chiefs of the Gumuz Tribes.

Though generally cooperative, Gumuz were deeply discontented by the arbitrary taxes and tributes extorted by local government officials. Supporting their cause, *Memher* La'eke Mareyam petitioned to the governorate-general office, accusing local officials in Quara of actively hindering his evangelization and cultural homogeneity works (NGAZRO, 1948 E.C). observers noted that while many Gumuz were not deeply devoted theologians of Orthodox *Tewahido* doctrine, the schools altered their socioeconomic reality. Prior to obtaining modern education, many Gumuz had lived as generational servants of the Amhara a status hierarch upended by the opening of schools, as commemorated in following verse:

ከእንግዲህ አማራ አታገኝም ሎሌ፤
 ጉሙዞች ተማሩ በደጃዝማች ክፍሌ። (Interview with Wodaj Hussein)
 The Amhara shall no longer find servants
 For the Gumuz have been educated during the tenure of *Dejazmach* Kiflie

Almost all ethnic groups welcomed the expansion of education facilitated by the National Community Development Office, a sentiment captured in this popular poem:

የህዝባዊ ኑሮ እድገት እንዴት መልካም ነው፤
 እኔንም ደስ አለኝ ስራውን ባየዉ፤
 ህዝቡን ለማሳደግ የታጠቀ ሰው፤
 ላዕከ ማርያምን ጌታ መረጠዉ። (Interview with Sisay and Beletu)
 How good is the national community development?
 I am filled with joy witnessing its works;
 It is equipped to develop the community
 God chose Teacher La'ake Mareyam

In contrast, the response of the Qemant to La'ake Mareyam's evangelization push was highly fractured. While a vast number converted, it did not encompass the community in its entirety. Many Qemant chose to maintain their traditional religion exclusively, while others practiced a syncretic blend, mixing traditional rituals alongside Orthodox *Tewahido* traditions. Several traditional Qemant practitioners openly express their frustrations with the aggressive conversion campaigns. When Emperor Haile Selassie I visited the province of Begemder and Semien in May 1959, they complained about the systematic discriminations they faced from the neighboring Orthodox Christians when practiced their religion. The emperor assured them that they would not be barred from practicing their religion and explicitly urged them to preserve their native language from the threat of extinction (Ministry of

Pen, 1951 E.C; Zelalem, 2003). Concurrently, however, the Emperor instructed provincial officials to encourage intermarriage between the Qemant and Amhara, and to actively push for the wider adoption of Orthodox Christianity among the remaining non-Christian Qemants (Zelalem, 2003; interview with Abuhay and Beletu). This dual approach aligned closely with the operational guidelines issued by the Ministry of National Community Development. The majority of the converted Qemant supported their transition; many willingly donated money to build new churches and composed couplets praising La'eke Mareyam and Emperor Haile Selassie I (Aemero, 1952 E.C). Conversion to Orthodox *Tewahido* granted them equal social footing with the Amhara, a shift reflected in this contemporary verse:

በምን ይበልጠዋል ቅማንትን አማራ
አምኖና ተምሮ ሀይማኖት ከሰራ።
አገኘነ ዛሬ የማያልቅ እጅረ። (Interview with Beletu, Abuhay, and Alemneh)
In what way is the Amhara superior to the Qemant?
If the Qemant believes, learns and practices Orthodox *Tewahido*
Today, we have received an endless bounty [spiritual and social security]
እርስታችን ብሎ አማራ ሲቆጣ
አባጠቅል ሀይሌ እየመራው መጣ።
እርስት የለን ብለን እንዲያ ሲከፋነ
መምህር ላዕከ ማርያም እኩል አረገነ። (Aemero, 1952 E.C)
While the Amhara angrily claimed the land as their *rist*
Aba Teqel Halie [Emperor Haile Selassie I] arrived leading the way
When we were despondent, believing we had no *rist* land
La'eke Mareyam made us equal
የሰሳ ልጅ ብለው ገደል ሲጥሉነ፤
የእጩት ፍሬ ብልው ከንጩት ሲያስጠጉነ፤
እሰይ የምስራች አባት አገኘነ፤
እሰይ የምስራች ዘንድሮ ሰው ሆንነ። (Interview with Beletu, Abuhay, and Alemneh)
They through us into gorge, calling us low-born children
Calling us the fruit of the tree, they bound us to the wood
Rejoice at the glad tidings! We have found a father
Rejoice at the glad tidings! This year, we have truly become human

These vernacular epics underscore how the surrounding Orthodox Christian Amhara had marginalized traditional Qemant believers for generations. The poems reveal that because the Qemant historically rejected the Orthodox *Tewahido* Christianity, they were systematically denied *rist* (hereditary land) land use rights generating deep-seated frictions. Following their mass conversion by *Memher* La'eke Mareyam in the late 1950s, this structural religious prejudice softened and the Qemant achieved social parity with the dominant Amhara. Educated and converted Qemants came to revere *Memher* La'eke Mareyam their spiritual father. They similarly credited Emperor Haile Selassie I and *Dejazmach* Keflie Dadi (governor-general of the province from 1957 to 1960) for their socioeconomic elevation.

Consequently, the initiatives of the National Community Development office regarding state integration and cultural homogeneity were largely successful in the short term. However, the momentum of the program began to wane after 1966, although it persisted until the collapse of the imperial period. This decline was triggered by emerging geopolitical shifts on Ethiopia's northwestern borderlands, including the rise of large scale commercial agriculture, escalating Ethio-Sudan boundary disputes, and rampant banditry. These dynamics induced severe regional insecurity and disrupted national integration efforts (Interview with Abuhay and Alemneh; NGAZRO, 1957 E.C). The symbiotic relationship between Mahbere Selassie and the imperial administration fractured permanently in 1974 when the Derg deposed the Emperor. The monastery lost its structural privileges overnight. The Derg's state ideology of Ethiopian Socialism was fundamentally incompatible with the monastery's historic local autonomy. Derg officials asserted that two separated administrative bodies could not exist in a single sovereign territory. Following a series of tension deliberations between the monastic leader, *Memher* Gebre Selassie, and provincial authorities in late 1974 and early 1975, the monastery was stripped its civic powers and ordered to confine its activities strictly to spiritual matters. The administrative, security, and judicial domains of its vast territory were formally transferred to state bureaucrats, bringing a definitive end to the monastery's centuries-old autonomous borderland administration (NGAZRO, 1967 E.C).

4. Conclusion

Many multi-ethnic and multi-national states deploy diverse structural strategies to integrate the peripheral frontier populations into the central state apparatus, with cultural assimilation historically as a primary mechanism. In imperial Ethiopia, the crown and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church worked acted as mutually reinforcing institutions. The EOC operated as the official state religion, receiving sweeping territorial privileges from successive emperors; in return, the church acted as the ideological and administrative right hand of the state. In the post-1942 imperial period, driven by both internal consolidation goals and external pressures, the imperial government accelerated the national integration by expanding Amharic literacy and converting the non-Christian populations into Orthodox *Tewahido* Christianity. In this geo-cultural push, Mahbere Selassie Monastery of in Metema district—leveraging its traditional autonomous administration status on northwestern Ethiopian borderland—served as a primary vehicle for the state’s integration and cultural homogenization policy. It taught Amharic, built schools and baptized thousands of traditional religious believers among the Gumuz, Kunama, “Kunfel” and Qemant populations. The monastery’s *members* (abbots) were double-hatted as regional directors for the Ministry of National Community Development on Begemder and Semien province as well as Metekel sub-provinces of Gojjam province. Ultimately, Mahbere Selassie was trusted to safeguard and assimilate a vast, strategic frontier spanning the rugged corridor between Abay to the Tekezie Rivers.

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- _____. (Genbot 5, 1960 E.C). a letter from Hagos Meshesha (director of Customs of Begemder and Semien) to Colonel Tamrat Yigezu. Gondar.
- _____. (Miyaziya 19, 1961 E.C). a petition of Gumuz people to Colonel Tamrat. Gondar.
- _____. (Genbot 6, 1961 E.C). a letter from Tamrat Yigezu to the Ministry of Interior. Gondar.
- _____. (Nehasie 12, 1962 E.C). a letter from *Fitawrari* Ferede Teruneh (governor of Chilga *awraja*) to the governorate-general office. Gondar.
- _____. (Hamle 28, 1967 E.C). a letter from Bezabeh Gebrie (administrator of Begemder and Semen province) to the Ministry of Interior. Gondar.
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List of Informants

No.	Name	Age	Date of interview	Place of Interview	Remark
1	Ato Abuhay Tadesse	80	13/04/2010 E.C	Aykel town	He lives in Aykel town. He served in the government office for several years starting as typist, a secretary of Chilga district in late 1960s E.C and a mayor of Aykel town in 1970s E.C. Now he is retired and engaged privately in legal case consultant. He knows Qemantegna language and has a good knowledge about the history of the region.
2	Ato Alemneh Belay	85	08/04/2010 E.C	Gondar city	He lives in Gondar city. He served at different posts during the imperial period. He was a member of House of Chambers twice in 1957 and 1961 E.C representing Chilga <i>awraja</i> . During the Derg period, he served as administrator various districts. He also served as assistant administrator of various <i>awrajas</i> . Now he lives on pension and works in North Gondar Patriots Association.
3	Woyzero Beletu Sharew	79	14/04/2010 E.C	Aykel town	she lives in Aykel town. She knows Qemantegna language and history of the region.
4	Ato Sisay Yimer	86	18/04/2010 E.C	Genda Wuha town	He was born in Lower Armacheho and went to Mahbere Sellasie Monastery in the 1940s due to murdering an individual. He was a local official under the monastery. He has a very good knowledge about the history of the area.
5	Ato Wodaj Husien	77	19/04/2010 E.C	Genda Wuha town	He was one of the Muslim settlers came from Gayint and settled in Metema. He served as government militiamen in the early years of the Derg and he was a refugee in the Sudan in the late 1980s and 1990s.