



Research Article

Customary Land Tenure and Land Redistribution in Wadla-Delanta (Wollo), Ethiopia prior to the Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical evolution of the *rist* and *gult* land tenure systems in Wadla-Delanta from the medieval period to the twentieth century. Drawing on royal charters, church manuscripts, legal documents, and oral traditions, it traces institutional and individual land grants from King Sayfa-Arad to endowments at Debre-Dibba Meqdesa Mariyam Monastery. *Rist*, as a hereditary usufruct right, and *gult*, as a tribute-appropriation right, structured social hierarchy and political authority. Under regional rulers like Kolase Amade and during Haile Selassie I's reforms, these systems grew complex, incorporating *gabbar*, *zemach*, *semon*, and *galla* tenures. Twentieth-century reforms, including the 1966 Land Tax Amendment, sought to standardize taxation and limit intermediary claims, yet layered rights and peasant obligations persisted. The study argues that, from medieval charters to twentieth-century reforms, land tenure consistently served as a key instrument of political authority, enabling elites to consolidate power while subordinating peasants. Land tenure in Wadla-Delanta functioned not only economically but also as a mechanism of governance, military organization, and ecclesiastical authority, shaping enduring socioeconomic relations.

1. Introduction

Historically, political power, social relations, economic production and obligations are all formed with regard to land tenure in agrarian societies (Hoben, 1973; Crummey, 2000). In Ethiopia, the royal power, local organization, military obligation, and church hierarchy gave rise to complex landholding systems, such as landholding rights based on *rist* (hereditary usufruct rights) and *gult* (tribute rights) (Hoben, 1973; Crummey, 2000). In Wadla-Delanta Awraja of Wollo these systems were developed over the centuries and comprised of *rist*, *gult*, *rist-gult*, *gabbar*, *zemach*, *semon* and *galla-maret* (Crummey, 2000; Shiferaw Bekele, 1995). Their development is documented by royal and ecclesiastical grants, particularly the grant of Debre-Dibba Meqdesa Mariyam, and also by the twentieth-century political changes. Government efforts after 1941 to control land ownership and taxation, including the Land Tax Amendment Proclamation of 1966, failed to eradicate customary and overlapping land claims, which remained after the 1974 Revolution (Shiferaw Bekele, 1995; *Negarit Gazeta*, 1966).

While work on both the national and overall regional context of Ethiopian land tenure has already been done, the local complexity of customary land use, especially the relationship between *rist*, *gult*, *zemach*, *semon* and *galla-maret*, and peasants' obligations to political authority, military service, taxation, and the exercise of land, has received comparatively little attention so far in the context of Wadla-Delanta. This work traces the development of customary land tenure and land redistribution in Wadla-Delanta from the medieval period to 1974 focusing on land

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rights, political authority, military service, ecclesiastical institutions, taxation and peasant obligations. It uses royal charters, church records, legal and land documentation, government records, secondary scholarship, and oral history to reconstruct the continuity and change in the local practices of landholding. To examine these historical developments, the study draws on documentary and oral sources, as outlined in the following methodology. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the evolution of the customary land tenure system and land redistribution in Wadla-Delanta starting from the medieval period until 1974. It aims in particular to investigate the evolution of the types of tenure *rist*, *gult*, *rist-gult*, *gabbar*, *zemach*, *semon* and *galla-maret*, to study the links between these and political power, military service, church institutions, taxation and peasant duties, and to evaluate the degree of continuity and change in these tenure systems up to the Revolution of 1974.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the evolution and transformation of land tenure systems in Wadla-Delanta from the medieval period to 1974. The research is primarily based on documentary analysis of royal charters, church manuscripts, land measurement records, tax registers, and post-1941 government proclamations, complemented by oral testimonies collected from knowledgeable elders and local informants to corroborate archival evidence. Oral evidence was obtained through individual, in-person interviews with nine (9) informants, including farmers, clergy, priests, retired soldiers, and a retired civil servant, whose ages ranged from 78 to 94. The interviews were conducted in Wegel Tena capital of Wadla-Delanta and Addis Ababa and focused on customary land tenure, land measurement, church and military landholding, tenancy relations, and local responses to imperial land reforms.

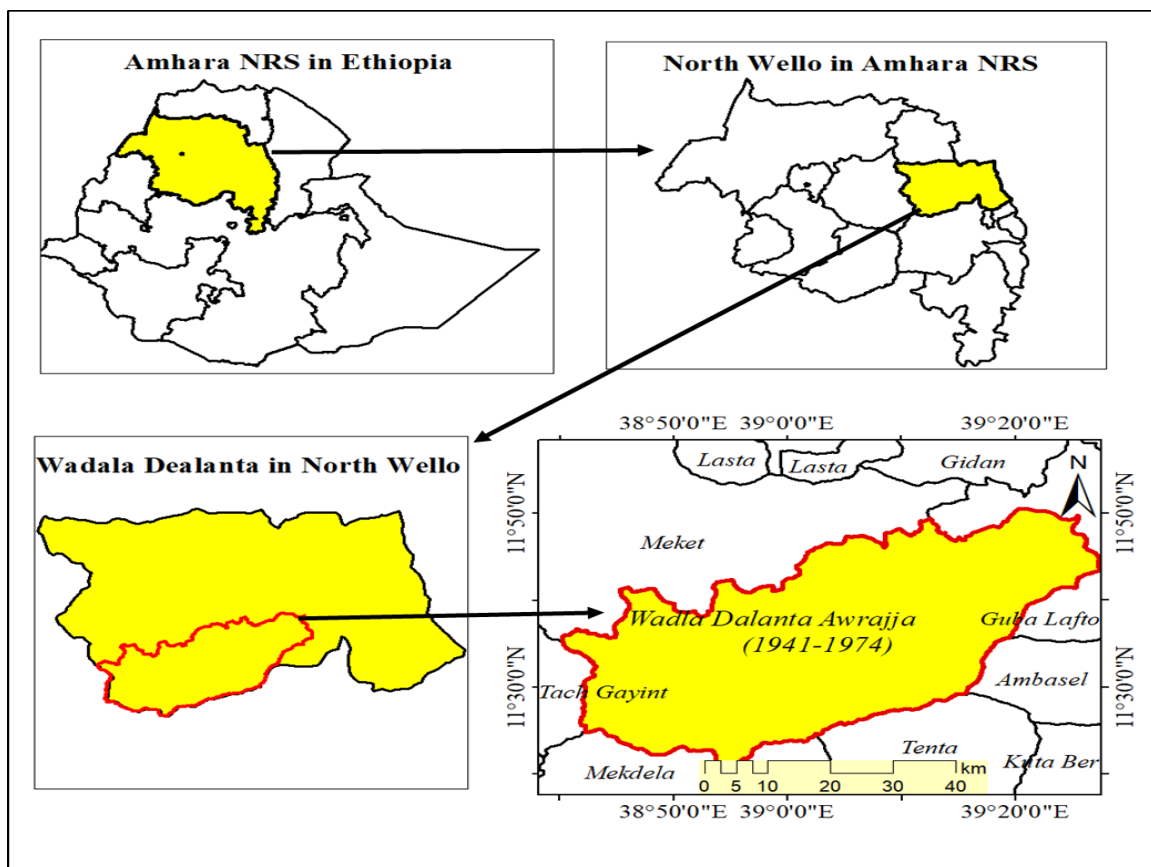


Figure 1. Map of the study area (Wadla Dalanta Awrajja).

Both primary sources such as land grant charters associated with rulers like Sayfa-Arad, Gelawdewos, and Haile Selassie and secondary scholarly works were critically analyzed through source criticism and contextual interpretation. The study was guided by the following basic research questions: (1) how did *rist*, *gult*, and related

tenure systems originate and evolve in Wadla-Delanta? (2) In what ways did political and military developments influence patterns of land distribution and tribute appropriation? (3) How did post-1941 imperial reforms transform earlier tenure arrangements and peasant obligations? and (4) To what extent did change and continuity characterize landholding systems up to the 1974 Revolution? By integrating archival, textual, and oral data, the research reconstructs the layered property relations and socio-political dynamics that shaped land tenure in the *awrajja* across different historical periods. In short, this study is reconstructed through the combined use of primary and secondary sources. Oral data were collected and cross-checked with archival documents, and vice-versa. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide methodological model for future studies within the same academic discourse. The geographical setting of Wadla-Delanta provides the spatial context for these historical developments, as shown in the map below.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. The Evolution of *Rist* and *Gult* Land Tenure Systems in Wadla-Delanta from the Medieval Period to the Twentieth Century

Prior to the emergence of modern agrarian societies, including Ethiopians, most people earn their livelihood through agricultural activities such as farming, pastoralism or both. It follows that in agrarian societies, the land tenure functioned as a source of social dominations and political power like in twentieth century Ethiopia. Several social scientists waged on the Ethiopian longstanding property organization underlined that the occupation of new areas by the state of Ethiopia was often supplemented by the commencement of the Ethiopian kingdom's land tenure system into these newly integrated localities. Besides, the country's monarchs remunerated the armed forces and their subordinate officials by giving landed property as salary, which served the former as a way of conveying newly integrated areas and peoples into their domain and forfeiting for the latter.

The earliest known grant of land in Wadla-Delanta recounts to King Sayfa-Arad's (r.1344-1371) land charter to Debre-Dibba Meqdesa Mariyam monastery, in Dawunt. The charter just mentions the king's grant of his own *rist* land to the monastery with no specification on the nature of the grant. However, cognizant of the typical nature of land grants of medieval kings and powerful lords to various churches and monasteries, King Sayfa-Arad's land grant could likely be either *rist-gult* or *gult* lands. Debre-Dibba is perhaps one of the oldest rock-hewn churches in Wadla-Delanta. Although we are not able to find a corroborative documentary source, oral information together with a copy of the hagiography of *Abune Mussie* found in the Monastery of Tirtireya-Geyorges, in Delanta, underline that the monastery was built by *Abune Mussie* (Gedle Abba Mussie, n.d., fols. 14v-15r), who lived roughly between the last two decades of the thirteenth and the first half of fourteenth centuries (*Sinksar: Meskerem Iske Yekatit*, fols. 12r-14r).

Beside the charter of King Sayfa-Arad, mentioned above, the hagiography contains many land grant charters to the monastery issued by several other kings. It is apparent that Debre-Dibba was one of the important religious institutions in the area during the medieval period and after. The first of its major grantor, King Sayfa-Arad liberally endowed Debre-Dibba giving many lands including Teshat, Quant and all the land bounded by rivers Zigba, in Wadla-Dawunt, and Tekazie, in what is now North Gondar and South Tigray (*Sinksar: Meskerem Iske Yekatit*, fol. 16v). Debre-Dibba continued to draw the attention of 'Solomonic' kings during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For instance, *Atse Gelawdewos* (r.1543–1559) gave extensive *gult* lands to the monastery that stretched between Mekane Qirqos, in Delanta, to Sindid Melqemeya, in Wadla and Dawunt, and as far as Tanbale, a place located in Ibinat *Wereda*, in what is now South Gondar (*Sinksar: Meskerem Iske Yekatit*, fol. 14v). Kings, Suseniyos (r.1607-1632), Yohannis I (r.1667-1682) and Iyassu I (r.1682-1706) reconfirmed the lands of Debre-Dibba was a strong consideration to the persistent significance of the church well into the Gondarine period (1632-1769). The specific purpose of the grants of Sayfa Ar'ad and Gelawdewos was for the support of their *tezkar* (commemoration feast) and through that to perpetuate their legacy, while other charters do not specify the purpose of the grant (Gedle Abba Mussie, n.d., fols. 14v-15r).

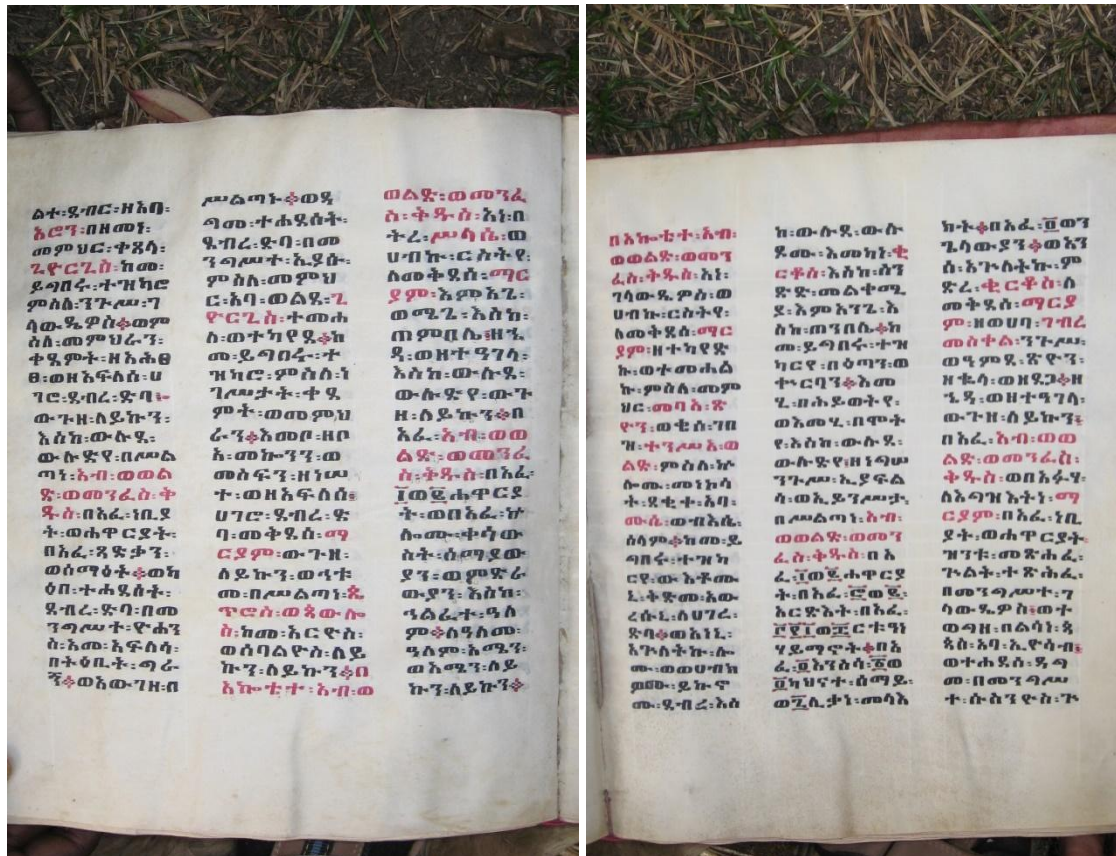


Figure 2. A copy of the hagiography of *Abune Mussie*, in Dawunt—revealing land grant charters to the monastery of Debre-Dibba Meqdesa Mariyam—discovered and found in the Monastery of Tirtireya-Geyorges.

The terms of the grant document or the nature of property right to Debre-Dibba involved in the grant is vague. However, it is possible to draw a picture of the land tenure that was practiced in the area in old times by piecing together the information contained in these charters. Perhaps, the first point that should be noted here is that the two most important property terminologies that appear in the grant documents are *rist* and *gult*. This points to infer that Wadla-Delanta signifies one of the earliest localities where the dominant land systems in Ethiopia in the past called *rist* and *gult* evolved first. In his remarkable work, *Land and Society*, covering many centuries and many provinces of the Ethiopian state, Donald Crummey defines *gult* in a broader context as a method of *tribute appropriation* though acknowledging its property in land character (Crummey, 2000). Although defining *gult* right as one of “tribute appropriation” covers its other meanings, we will adopt such meaning for it exceedingly fits the meaning recommended by the early grants to the monastery of Debra-Dibba. Hence, when the several kings of historic Ethiopia were granting land to Debra-Dibba, it means that the church was granted the right to collect tribute from the people living on the land. In actual fact that the confirmation of Debra-Dibba’s lands continual renewal suggests that *gult* right was frequently granted permanently and in perpetuity.

Beside to institutional grant orders, it is important at this juncture to add the early land grant orders tradition to individuals. Although we are lacking sufficient confirmations, it appears necessary to deduce that the royal practice of land grants to individuals seems to have developed parallel with institutional grant. Specifically dealing with this issue, by referring private records Zergaw Asfera—who wrote a groundbreaking job on the ethno-history of medieval “Amhara/Wallo”—states one such oldest individual land grant to a certain notable, Marqorewos from Dawunt, that he “received eleven *dabir* □□□□ as [“] fief [”] (ጉልት) [*gult*]” from Atse Gelawdewos (Zergaw, 1973). The exercise of individual grant orders in Wadla-Delanta later chosen in intensity and pace during the reigns of such later kings as Atse Fasiledes (r.1632-1667) and Atse Tewodros (r.1855–1868)—who granted hereditary *rist* landed properties to persons—for which there are many archival sources (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1960 E.C.; informant: Hailu Tesemma). Thus, both *gult* and *rist* founded the two major forms of lands tenure in Wadla-Delanta in its early history.

Under the typical *rist* forms of tenure peasants who had hereditary land use right were openly accountable for the land that they tilled. Thus, persons who were granted tribute collection in the *gult* tenure type did not claim land right on hereditary *rist* property. In general, we have layers of rights over a piece of land that the monarchy and its subordinate officials it surrogated over it. Officials as *gult*-holders, therefore, acknowledged the peasants' right on their hereditary *rist* tenure as long as the latter met their tribute payment's duty meticulously and offering corvée labor for the former (Hoben, 1973; Crummey, 2000).

The *rist* land system described above had showed important changes during the eighteenth century under the guidance of the local political developments in Warra-Himano (Wollo). Since the end of eighteenth century, when the Warra-Himano's Prince Kolase Amade incorporated Wadla-Delanta into his domain, *gult* grants proliferated and became the dominant land tenure forms in the area. Although sources are not definitive on this, Kolase's land policy is said to have introduced the new land terminology of *galla-maret* used to refer to state (government) land, which served as the foundation of the socio-political power of the social elites and the soldiery. According to informants, this *galla-maret* was originally created from the *rist* lands of the peasants. The most recipients of these numerous *gult* grant orders were Kolase's soldiers—who actually were peasants hired from different districts of Wollo—and officials who subordinates him in his scheme for political reputation in northern Ethiopia. Oral information and historical investigations suggest the increase in the dues and obligations of peasants as the result of Kolase's land policy, which reduced many of the former *rist*-holding peasants to the status of *gabbars*. Through his *gult* grants Kolase allowed his peasant *militias* and officials to an enormous share of the peasant's cultivated land (Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, Alene Geremew, and Negash Molla; Ali, 1983).

Some writers, such as Asnake Ali, interpreted Kolase's period as decisive phase in the spread of the forms relations of production as exploitative. This forms of relationship between peasants and the soldiery in Wadla-Delanta worsened during the nineteenth century and fully flourished during the reign of *Nigus* Mikael. The later nineteenth century political and religious progresses more complicated the property system and added to the confinement of an intricate land tenure system in Wollo at large. This is suggested by the more widespread use of the relatively new and distinct legal terminologies designating different categories of property such as *galla-maret* and *gabbar-maret*, both of which are believed to have been introduced into the area by Kolase. Yohannis IV was responsible for the spread of these forms of landholding. He did so by granting a significant amount of land to old and new churches and monasteries built during his reign in the form of *gabbar-maret* and *galla-maret* for their support (Ali, 1983; Crummey, 2000).

In the first two quarters of twentieth century, the word *maderiya* employed commonly signify *gabbar-maret* and *galla-maret* granted to soldiers and officials in that way more expanding the terminologies in the legal system as practical for landed property (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955, 1956; Mahiteme Selassie, n.d.). Even though diverse expressions were employed to denote to similar kind of property holding in land, it give the impression, yet, that the usage of different terms to represent possessions signifies the presence of perplexing as well as intricate land tenure and its multiple status. Nevertheless, in the middle of the first half of the 20th century, in refining the land tenure and the socio-economic relationships derived from it, the state often announced decrees. These proclamations legitimately negated collection tribute of the early period. This was besides the abolished corvée labor which was imposed on the *gabbars* for so long. An effort was made to change the form of tribute extraction from kind to cash (Mahiteme Selassie, n.d.).

Likewise, with the Italians tight grip of Ethiopia in 1936, they discovered that the property arrangement was confusing as well as outdated that required to be wiped out. Hence, they eliminated the *gabbar*-system highlighted above. All forms of corvée services were laid off. Moreover, such lower level governors as *abba bedra*—who were delegated by higher officials and entrusted with the task of collecting tribute—were abolished as well. However, the Italian policy on land relieved the church and a variety of this *gabbar*-system continued alongside with the Italian tenure system of administration (Informants: Hailu Tesemma, and Tesfaye Mezmur).

Upon liberation, i.e., 1941, the restored government of Ethiopia, with the intention of centralization of power and unifying taxes, resumed its prewar policies that intentionally renewed land as economic resource rather than a political means. For example, the state redefined the strategy that legitimately kicked off the provision of labor services and payment of tribute. State dignitaries and armed forces were designated for payments in cash by way of salary rather than collected tribute from the peasantry (Gebre Weld, 1948). Below a thorough discussion is made on the basic types of property arrangement obtained in Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja* (sub-province), which the government

directed to abolish later in the 1940s and 50s by means of series proclamations so as to make a rational landholding system in the country at large.

3.2. Major forms of Land Tenure (1941-1974)

When discussing the predominant forms of land tenure that were once extensively practiced in Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja*, the following can be identified: *gabbar-maret*, *rist-gult* and *zemach* lands, church (*semon*) and government (*galla*) lands. This triple division of the principal tenures in the *Awrajja* is based on the different rights and obligations associated with each types of tenure, particularly regarding the extent of possession rights exercised by individual holders. Accordingly, holders of *gabbar-maret*, *rist-gult* and *zemach* lands enjoyed extensive property rights, whereas *semon-maret* and *galla-maret* granted holders only limited, subordinate rights (Mahiteme Selassie, n.d.). Within each of these major tenure systems existed other varieties of tenure that sometimes corresponded to the primary forms but retained distinct characters, as discussed below.

It is also important to briefly consider the customary units of land measurement that were locally acknowledged and later adopted by the imperial regime. Although sources on the origin of land measurement in Ethiopia are scarce, Mahiteme Selassie Welde Mesqel, in one of his authoritative works, “Sile Ethiopia Ya-maret Sirit”, clarifies that land measurement practices in Ethiopia ostensibly began during the Gondarine period (1632-1769), specifically during the period of Emperor Iyassu (r.1682-1706). Nonetheless, Mahiteme Selassie assures that land measurement became widespread ever since the reign of Emperor Menilek II (r.1889-1913). He provides a practical explanation of the methods and errors in land measurement that persisted through the postwar period (Mahiteme Selassie, n.d.).

Concerning land measurement, in Wadla-Delanta, there is relevant and reliable evidence, primarily in the form of legal and property documents, such as land measurement records and title deeds, produced by both by private individuals and the local-regional authorities. These sources serve as the most authoritative references for identifying the various customary units of land measurement and the many forms of tenure operating in the *Awrajja* (Teqlay Gizat, 1950-1961 E.C; Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, Department of Land Tenure, 1968).

In most cases, these documents use distinct terms to indicate land size, while in other instances, they employ hybrid terms that combine the type of tenure with the size of land held by an individual (Wallo Teqlay Gizat, 1950-1961 E.C; Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, Department of Land Tenure, 1968). For example, beside to its obvious ethnic connotation, the term *galla* was used as a unit of land measurement. According to the testimony of an experienced informant, the size of “*anid-galla-maret*” (one *galla*-land) was approximately equivalent to half a hectare (Informant: Tesfaye Mazmur). Here, the hybrid term *anid-galla-maret* refers to both the size and the nature of holding involved in this type of landholding.

However, since the size of one-*galla-maret* was not standardized, it varied from place to place. Other technical terms were also used to specify land size, including *timmad*, *qan*, *qedama*, and *tilm* which correspond approximately to 0.16, 0.8, 0.04, and 0.02 hectares, respectively. Land survey teams and government officials sent to Wadla-Delanta in 1944/5 and 1949/50 adopted most of these terms to define land size for tax assessment purposes while introducing finer units of measurements, such as *mulu*, *santim*, and *milim*. One *mulu* is approximately equals to one-third of a *gasha*, with one *gasha* equivalent to 40 hectares (Informants: Hailu Tesemma, Tesfaye Mazmur, and Alene Geremew; Dasse Planning and Programming Service, 1988; Mesfin, 1970).

Although the two terms *gabbar* and *rist* signify different values and ideas, it should be reiterated that holders of *gabbar* land and *rist* land exercised similar rights and obligation within the system of tenure described in the postwar documents. In an effort to establish a standardized tenure system in Wollo, including Wadla-Delanta, and to facilitate systematized tax collection, the restored imperial government justified the use of these terms to denote similar forms of land tenure. Consequently, the expressions *rist* land and *gabbar* land were used interchangeably to refer to heritable land over which the holder had the right to sell, bestow and rent (Informants: Hailu Tesemma, Tesfaye Mazmur, and Alene Geremew; Dasse Planning and Programming Service, 1988; Mesfin, 1970).

Nevertheless, as in other Ethiopian peasant societies, *gabbar* land holder in Wadla-Delanta were subject to certain burdensome obligations to the government or government authorities, such as performing labour on government land known as *hudad*. One of the defining features of *gabbar* land is its heritable nature, that is, the right of children

to share their parents' *gabbar* land at various stages following the latter's death. Conventionally, however, parents could restrict this bundle of customary property rights for their children, although such rights were later recognized by the Civil Code. In short, *gabbar* land was the most common form of land tenure and played a vital role in the system of social organization in Wadla-Delanta. Prior to the end of the imperial era, the majority of the local peasantry was generally organized under this tenure system (Informants: Hailu Tesemma, Belete Alamu, Alene Geremew, Negash Molla, Tesfaye Mazmur, and Teshome Ayalew; Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja*, 1960 E.C.).

Since *gabbar-maret* constituted the fundamental form of social organization for the peasants of Wadla-Delanta, *gult* and its variant, hereditary *rist-gult*, locally known as *beta-rist* represented the most significant land tenure system for the local social elites. This form of tenure became widespread in the post-liberation period, when the government granted extensive tracts of land in the form of *gult* to numerous individuals. A typical *gult* or *rist-gult* land could sometime encompass quite a lot of parishes defined by unclear natural land marks such as valleys, rivers, and mountains (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955). Dealing with this issue, and while commenting on the land tenure system of Ethiopia and its socioeconomic implications, Francisco Alvarez chaplain of the Portuguese diplomatic mission to Ethiopia in the first quarter of the 16th century A.D remarks that a definitive *gult* land grant, in the form of large estate, was made by Atse Libne Dengil (r.1508-1540) for his two sons, Gelawdewos (r.1543-1559) and Menas (r.1559-63), who succeeded him consecutively. Alvarez also noted the existence of the king's own *gult* lands adjoining those of his sons' *gult* land, located in the vicinity of Amba Gishan the medieval royal prison which, as he himself indicated, formed part of Angot/Wadla-Delanta. Therefore, in accordance with the common practice of the medieval period, holders of *gult* typically exercised the right to appropriate tribute from the peasants cultivating the land (Alvarez, 1961).

Here, it usually appears that the land over which *gult* rights were created and imposed could likely be over the local peasants' usufructory *rist* lands. However, as rulers and powerful local elites gradually and systematically granted *gult* or *rist-gult* lands to their officials, these tenure forms were also established over other types of land, such as *galla*, *gabbar*, and *semon* lands which were widely instituted throughout Wadla-Delanta. *Gult* and *rist-gult* tenures were concentrated in several villages and localities namely; Aseem Tekle Haiymanot, Genchira, Agonat and Yewetet, in Wadla-Dawunt *Wereda*, and Tardat and Semerna, in Delanta *Wereda*. With the exceptions of Aseem Tekle Haiymanot and Yewetet, which were the *rist-gults* of the *ichage* and Li'ul Ras Kassa Haylu, respectively, all of these lands were held by *Nigus* Mikael of Wallo, and, after his death, by his inheritors (Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, Hailu Tesemma, and Teshome Ayalew; Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955-1956 E.C.).

As confirmed by actual practice, *gult* land could be inherited, transferred, and, in some cases, sold. Accordingly, Empress Menen (consort of Emperor Haile-Selassie) and the Crown Prince Asfa-Wesen, the grand-daughter and great grand-son of *Nigus* Mikael respectively, came to hold *rist-gult* lands in Wadla-Delanta during the 20th century, prior to the 1974 Revolution (Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, Hailu Tesemma, and Teshome Ayalew; Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955-1956 E.C.).

Gabbars residing on *rist-gult* land commonly paid one-third of their agricultural produce, although this arrangement changed in the post- liberation period. During this time, they were obliged to pay a fixed amount of cash specified by the regime. Usually, there was little direct interaction between *rist-gult* owners and the *gabbars* residing on their lands. Instead, the former received tribute and tax from the latter through local representatives known as *wekkils*, who were authorized by the *rist-gult* owners to collect income derived from the land and were usually remunerated from the revenues they collected (Goodnow, 1969). This tributary relationship between *rist-gult* holders and *gabbars* persisted throughout the period covered by this research. Nonetheless, with the enactment of the Land Tax Amendment Proclamation N° 230 of March 7, 1966, the regime no longer recognized *rist-gult* tenure. The decree required *rist-gult* holders to pay land taxes directly to the state. The proclamation also granted *rist-gult* holders who had no *gabbars* residing on their land, the right to retain land- use rights, but they were required to pay taxes in the same manner as *gabbars* (Informant: Hailu Tesemma; *Negarit Gazeta*, 1966).

Moreover, as the eminent historian Donald Crummey has pointed out, towards the twilight of the imperial era, and as part of its effort to homogenize the land tax collection, the regime abolished the role of *wekkils* or intermediaries between *rist-gult* holders and *gabbars* (Crummey, 2000). These and other related measures undertaken by the imperial regime marked a major break in the complex system of tax collection under the *gult/rist-gult* tenure. As a result, *gult* gradually lost its socio-economic significance in Wadla-Delanta, although the government was unable to completely dismantle the region's longstanding tenure arrangements. In addition, property practices resembling *gult*

tenure *namely ye-zemach* tenure discussed above and elaborated by the historian Shiferaw Bekele, persisted until the mid-imperial period (Shiferaw, 1995).

Like *gult*, *ye-zemach* tenure was also heritable. As the term itself suggests, *ye-zemach-maret* refers to soldierly land and denotes a group of related tenures arrangements. This form of landholding *ye-zemach-maret* primarily assigned to peasant *militias*—is known by various terms throughout Wollo province. It appears to have been deeply rooted in the land tenure system of Wadla-Delanta. Customary tradition traces its origin to Emperor Fasiledes (r.1632-1667), who is said to have granted land to his peasant *militias* under this tenure arrangement. Fasiledes's land grants to his soldiers are well remembered in Wadla-Delanta and are commemorated by the term *Fasil-zemach* (Shiferaw, 1995).

It was apparently following this precedent that Kolase Amade later granted land to his soldiers during the 1780s and 1790s. The lands granted by Kolase in parts of western and central Wollo came to be known as *Qechie-zemach*. This historical practice explains the frequent references to *qechie-zemach* land in twentieth century land documents from Wadla-Delanta (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955 E.C.).

Similarly, Ali I of Yejjju, during his rule in Gondar (r.1784-1788), is also said to have granted land to his soldiers in the same manner; such lands are referred to as *Ali-zemach*. From the late eighteenth century onwards and well into the first half of the 20th century, Wadla-Delanta formed an integral part of Yajju. Consequently, *Ali-zemach* land appears to have evolved from this historical tradition. Like *Qachie-zemach* and *Fasil-zemach*, *Ali-zemach* is also attested in twentieth century property documents from Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja* (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1956; Informants: Hailu Tesemma, and Tesfaye Mezmur).

Militias granted *ya-zemach-maret* military land were exempt from the payment of tribute and taxes as well as from offering corvée labor. Their primary obligation, however, was military service. When there was no war, they assisted the régime as tax collectors, guards, and messengers (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1956; Informants: Hailu Tesemma, and Tesfaye Mezmur). Moreover, later in the twentieth century, they were required to pay one-tenth of their agricultural production in the form of *asrat* (tithe) as well as Education Tax introduced in 1947 and Health Tax introduced in 1959. *Ye-zemach* land could be transmitted to descendants, together with the duties to be fulfilled and the rights attached to the land. Failure to meet these obligations could result in eviction from the land (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1956 E.C.).

Following the restoration of the imperial regime, the heirs of *militias* in Wadla-Delanta—long organized as *zemachoch* (campaigners) were incorporated into latest newly structured *militia* known as *nech-lebash*. In 1958, the *nech-lebash* developed into the Wollo Territorial Army. Subsequently, by a special edict of Emperor Haile-Selassie, the descendants of *militias* were compensated for their long history of military service by the conversion of their ancestral *zemach* land into *rist* land. This conversion granted them formal freehold rights, subject to the payment of land tax at a rate of 32 *Birr* per unit of land. In addition, the government resolved to provide the soldiers with a monthly salary of 15 *Birr* for their military service (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955 E.C.), a measure that significantly altered the long-established land tenure arrangements of Wadla-Delanta.

The third common form of land tenure, known as *semon maret*, was assigned to individuals who served church institutions either directly or indirectly through their *wekkils* in various capacities. *Semon maret* encompassed of *ye-diqunna*, *ye-dibtirina*, *ye-qisina*, and other categories of land. These types of *semon* lands attested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries church documents as well as in post-1941 property documents of the *Awrajja* were hereditary and shared the basic characteristics of *rist maret* (Fita Negest, n.d.; Gedle Hawariyat, n.d.; Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja*, 1968; Mahiteme Selassie, 1942 E.C.; Informants: Nega Zelelew, Hailu Tesemma, and Shume Nigatu).

On top of such *rist* form of lands, there was *gult maret* allocated for the livelihood of individuals serving church institutions. One such category, designated for the *gebbez* (church administrator), was known as *ye-gibzina maret*. *Ye-gibzina maret* mentioned by informants and in a twentieth century church manuscript from Wadla-Delanta could neither be sold nor transferred to others, including inheritors (Gedle Hawariyat, n.d.; Informants: Nega Zelelew, Shume Nigatu, and Hailu Tesemma).

By contrast, holders of other types of *semon marets* could transfer their lands to inheritors, provided that the prescribed duties attached to the land were fully fulfilled. If inheritors were unable to perform these services themselves, they could delegate the responsibilities to *wakills*. In return, the *wakills* were compensated with a

portion of the land's produce from the land holder (Gedle Hawariyat, n.d; Informants: Nega Zelelew, Shume Nigatu, and Hailu Tesemma).

In addition to rendering various services to the church, *semon* land holders were required to pay *asrat* (tithe), Education Tax and Health Tax, to the regime. Usually, these taxes were collected by the relevant government representatives from *semon maret* holders and then remitted to the church institution. From the mid-1960s onwards, however, the Health Tax collected by local government agents from *semon* land holders was transferred directly to the state treasury (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955 E.C.; Informants: Hailu Tesemma, and Teshome Ayalew).

Even though regional nobles and rulers actively granted land to church institutions such as churches and monasteries, the primary donator of such land was the royal majesty. These grants were often made in perpetuity; and the administration of church institutions was exempt from secular interference. While the sovereign status of many churches and monasteries was rarely challenged by nobles and rulers (Crummey, 2000), secular authorities generally respected their independence. Kings frequently refrain from interfering in the affairs of church institutions and issued orders to their officials and subjects to uphold land right of churches as established by the grants. Grant property documents often use a standardize expression to emphasize the absolute and inviolable nature of these donations: “ፈረ ሣት መካከሉ ገነት” (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955 E.C.) which literally means “[a land] bounded by fire but the center is a safe heaven”.

As indicated in the introductory section of this paper, the monastery of Debre-Dibba was a major recipient of land in Wadla-Delanta. In addition, numerous other churches in the region held extensive *semon maret*. For example, the church of Aseem Tekle Haiymanot received a *gult* land from Atse Fasiledes. This grant comprised a relatively small tract of land extending from the village of Waliya to the Genjja River, in Delanta (Wengele Ze-Werq, n.d; Informants: Hailu Tesemma, and Tesfaye Mazmur).

However, the scale of church landholdings expanded significantly during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Among the most important benefactors of churches and monasteries in the *Awrajja* were Ras Walie Bitul, Nigus Mikael and Emperor Yohannis IV. Ras Walie's most important *gult* grant was made to the church of Wegel-Tena Kidane Mihiret, located in the capital of the *awrajja*, Wegel-Tena. Under this grant, all the lands extending from Hu'āyit to the extensive plain of Gosh Medda, in Delanta, were transferred to the church (Terike Negest, n.d.).

Informants further attest that, in addition to granting numerous plots of land to individual clerics, Yohannes IV entitled the churches of Wadla-Delanta to *irbo* (one-quarter) of the produce of *gabbar* lands. The establishment of new church institutions and the allocation of land for their support continued after liberation. A report written in 1964/5 by the Governorate General of Wollo to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) reveals that, during the post liberation period, more than 250 *galla marets* holdings were converted into *semon* lands and granted to various churches in Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja* (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1957 E.C.; Informants: Lema Demamu, and Tesfaye Mazmur).

It is evident, however, that numerous individual donations to churches were not included in this report. For instance, a record preserved at the Monastery of Tana-Geyorges, in Delanta *Wereda*, documents individuals who donated portions of their *rist* land to the monastery to support its clergy (Gebre Himammat, n.d.).

Several factors lay behind the granting of land to churches by ordinary individuals, one of which being Christian piety. In addition, individuals often converted their *rist* land into *semon* land because the duties and obligations associated with church tenures were less burdensome than those attached to none-clerical tenures. For example, aside from offering labor and tribute, usually in the form of *sinde-gibir*, *gabbars* residing on church lands were exempt from working on government lands and from paying land tax. These conditions encouraged private individuals to transform their *rist* holdings into *semon* holdings within the locality (Informants: Lema Demamu, Teshoma Ayalew, and Hailu Tesemma; Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, Department of Land Tenure, 1968). As a result, two categories of *gabbars* emerged: those subject to government dues and services, and those obligated primarily to the Church.

Although the church and those connected to its landed property enjoyed differential treatment for a long period, imperial land policy eventually extended to church lands as well. For example, *gabbars* under religious landholders, like those under secular holders, were required to pay Health Tax and Education Tax (Informants: Lema Demamu, Teshoma Ayalew, and Hailu Tesemma; Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, Department of Land Tenure,

1968). Consequently, the obligations of peasants living on church lands and those under secular tenure became somewhat equivalent. This process, in turn, contributed to the gradual expansion of a more homogenous tenure system at the regional level, a development actively promoted by the imperial government.

In addition to standardizing tenure arrangements, imperial land policies introduced changes in terminology used to describe different forms of landed property, without necessarily altering their substantive characteristics. For instance, the term *gult* increasingly came to be used to denote *galla* land, a practice that was prevalent in the province of Wollo (Wadla-Delanta Awrajja, 1960 E.C.). It should be emphasized, however, that unlike other forms of landholding—such as *semon*, *zemach*, *rist-gult* and *gabbar*—*galla-maret* could not be transferred to inheritors. Rather, *galla* land was a temporary grant allocated by the regime to officials as *maderiya* in return for services rendered. Upon the death of the holder, or if the holder became unable to fulfill the associated duties, the regime exercised its prerogative to reassign the land to another individual capable of performing those duties (Wallo Teqlay Gizat, 1957 E.C.; Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, and Hailu Tesemma).

The rights and obligations of recipients of *galla* land varied according to the specific forms of landed property encompassed within this tenure category. The two most important types of *galla-maret* were *qwame* (permanent) and *teneqay* (removable). *Qwame-galla*, as the name suggests, was granted to beneficiaries on a permanent basis. Most commonly, this form of tenure was created through the conversion of *rist* lands of the peasants into the holdings of churches or soldiers, variously known as *melkegna* or *tiklegna* or *abba bedra*. Such conversions meant that peasants lost all claims to their former *rist* holdings once the land was transformed into *qwame-galla* and granted to other individuals. Consequently, the status of the *gabbars* shifted markedly from relatively autonomous landholders to landless peasant-tenants. This process occurred in several localities of Wollo province during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dispossessed peasants either abandoned their land or continued to work under *maderiya* holders as *tisegna* (landless-tenant) (Gebre Weld, 1948; Mahiteme Selassie, 1942 E.C.).

To name but one example, Wegel-Tena Kidane Mihiret Church, as pointed out above, received considerable amount of *qwame-galla* land in perpetuity. According to the manuscript records of the church, *gabbars* were dispossessed of their land for failing to meet tribute obligations; their holdings were classified as *gibre-tel* (refusal to pay land tribute) and subsequently granted to the church by Ras Wellie. Part of the land confiscated from the *gabbars* was later used by Ras Wellie to establish the town of Wegel-Tena (Gebre Weld, 1948; Mahiteme Selassie, 1942 E.C.).

Not all dispossessed *gabbars*, however, suffered complete loss of livelihood. Some were resettled on the government land known as *ye-genna-memcha maret*. In rerun for land use rights on this land, *gabbars* were required to provide *tella* (traditional Ethiopian beer) and food as *gibir* (banquet) during *ye-genna-chewata* (traditional Ethiopian festivities) held in the area. Apart from this, informants report that subsequent to the dispossession of peasants in Delanta, Muslims, mostly recruited from Warra-Himano, were settled by Ras Wellie to work as tenants to the grantees (Tarika Nagast, n.d; Gebre Weld, 1948; informants: Lema Demamu, and Tesfaye Mazmur). This practice appears to have intensified the expansion of *tisegninet* tenancy relations in the area.

As mentioned above, *qwame-galla-maret* was created by the regime through the appropriation of *gabbar* lands, with little regard for peasants' inherited rights over their *rist-maret*. Nevertheless, the régime employed specific justifications to validate the dispossession of peasants from their landed property. Most commonly tax or tribute evasion and alleged offenses committed by *gabbars* were invoked as grounds for confiscation. The second type of *galla-maret*, known as *teneqay-galla-maret*, was primarily constituted from the lands of *gabbars* who failed to fulfill their tribute and tax obligations or who were accused of political offences (Gebre Weld, 1948; Informants: Teshoma Ayelew, Dasalegn Gebeyehu, and Samuel Nigatu). Lands held by members of the Territorial Army (*nech-lebash*), as well as *yetur*, *ye-qeleb-temelash*, *hudad*, *megazo*, *maderiya*, *ye-megua* and *ye-zefagn* lands, all fell under the category of *teneqay-galla maret* (Wallo Teqlay Gizat, 1955 E.C.; Mahiteme Selassie, 1942 E.C.).

In the post-liberation period, the large portion of *teneqay-galla* land in Wadla-Delanta was appropriated by local peasant soldiers (later renamed Territorial Army) that was officially acknowledged as *ye-nech-lebash maret* since 1937 (E.C.), when *ye-nech-lebash* armed force was established in the region. As pointed out above, in 1958 the *nech-lebash* were reorganized into the Territorial Army; however, the land designation, *ye-nech-lebash maret*, and its substantive features remained unchanged (Wadla-Delanta Awrajja, 1951 E.C.).

Accordingly, members of the Territorial Army- including former *zemach* peasant *militias* incorporated into this newly structured defense force—received this form of *galla* land in return for military service, which included safeguarding government revenue and administrative institutions. Members of the Territorial Army bore no additional obligations beyond these services. They were exempt from land tax payments, except for *asrat* (tithe), and, later, Health and Education Taxes (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1956 E.C.).

When the *maderiya* land of Wollo Territorial Army were converted into *rist*-land in the mid-1960s, the soldiers became liable to the full range of taxes required of *rist-maret* proprietors, although they continued to provide military service. Recognizing that income from the land alone was insufficient to sustain them under the new tenure arrangement, the regime introduced a monthly salary of 15 *Birr* to recompense for losses incurred as a result of this new tenure rearrangement and the expanded responsibilities of the army (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1956 E.C.).

Despite these changes, the regime retained residual rights over the *nech-lebash* property and could dispossess holders for valid reasons. Nevertheless, so long as they fulfilled their duties effectively, members of the Territorial Army exercised substantial land rights, including the right to transfer land to their inheritors (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1957 E.C.; Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, and Atsede Yimar).

As mentioned earlier, *yetur-maret* and *qeleb-temelash* were also granted from government land. Recipients of *yetur-maret* were commonly individuals a long record of government service or members of noble families. This form of landholding was granted as an allowance. *Qeleb-temelash*, by contrast, was allocated in lieu of a monthly salary. The size of land granted under *qeleb-temelash* varied according to the recipients' salary grade. Like other forms of state land, the regime retained reversionary rights over *qeleb-temelash* holdings (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1957 E.C.; Informants: Tesfaye Mezmur, and Atsede Yimar).

Of these tenure types, *hudad* was the predominant form of government land in Wadla- Delanta. It was cultivated by local *gabbars* under the supervision of the *mislane* and the *chiqa-shum*, who acted as the government *wekkils*. In the post-1941 period, these lands were commonly rented out to individuals in the locality. Likewise, *meggazo* (literally leased land) referred to land allocated to peasants under sharecropping or cash-rent arrangements, with lease payments remitted to the state treasury at the local level (Wallo *Teqlay Gizat*, 1955 E.C., 1957 E.C.; Mahiteme Sillase, 1942 E.C.; Informants: Getachaw Fenta, and Teshome Ayalew).

The last two tenure systems subsumed under *galla* tenure *ye-megua* and *ye-zefagn* lands—which were believed to have been peculiar to Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja*. *Ye-megua maret* was granted to individuals who supplied pots of honey annually to the government or local *balabats*. *Ye-zefagn maret*, on the other hand, was a land allocated to individuals who performed traditional songs for local *balabats* during occasions of *gibir* (banquet). In cases where recipients were unable to fulfill their obligations, the regime retained the right to dispossess them and relocate the land to others capable of providing the required services. As a result of this and other related issues, former landholders could be reduced to landlessness. In that way, the Local population reacted to the whole reform package both peacefully and violently that continued until the demise of the regime by the eruption of the revolutionary volcano in 1974 (Informants: Samuel Nigatu, Alene Geremew, Lema Demamu, and Tesfaye Mezmur).

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

The structure of land tenure in Wadla-Delanta *Awrajja* shows a complex and shifting relationship between land ownership, political control, military service, taxation and religious institutions from medieval times to the Revolution of 1974. The evidence shows that the local land tenure system was based on two significant types: *rist* and *gult*, with other types of land tenure being added and developed later, such as *gabbar*, *zemach*, *semon*, and *galla-maret*. These systems were not isolated, but overlapping and giving rise to several sets of rights and obligations on land. Not only was land used for living, it was also an important tool of power for rulers, officials, soldiers and the religious elite to exert control over the rural population.

The study also reveals that the rights of peasants were being encroached upon as the areas under the control of *gult*, *zemach*, church and government expanded. Specifically, the conversion of *rist* holdings to land under granted category *galla-maret* might make the cultivators who are relatively autonomous into the *gabbars* or landless tenants.

Military and ecclesiastical landholding also established unique connections between land rights and services and responsibilities. The Wadla-Delanta tenure system therefore cannot be described as a single type of property ownership, but rather as a combination of customary, political, fiscal, military and religious claims.

In attempt to reorganize and rationalize these arrangements, the post-1941 imperial government sought to alter taxation, eliminate some intermediate authority and progressively modify or eliminate earlier categories of tenure. The Land Tax Amendment Proclamation of 1966 was a significant milestone in this process, especially in the retraction of government recognition of *rist-gult*, and by lowering the number of intermediary agents. However, the reforms did not immediately remove the structures and relationships of the past related to the holding of land. Despite the persistence of various tenure systems and associated obligations, the strength of locally embedded land relations can be seen in the persistence of these tenure systems. In general, the pre-Revolutionary history of Wadla-Delanta is a story of continuity and change: the state increasingly worked towards rationalization and centralization of the land administration system, but at the same time, traditional land ownership structures and social inequalities continued to shape rural life until the final phase of the imperial regime.

4.2. Recommendations

1. Given the results of this historical study, some recommendations can be made. Firstly, future land policies and land-administration in Wadla-Delanta should more seriously consider the historical evolution of local landholding institutions and customary land-use rights. It is important to understand the historical origins of the concept of *rist*, *gult*, *zemach*, *semon* and *galla-maret* in order to avoid policies that ignore localized land use agreements.
2. Secondly, efforts should be made to document and preserve historical land records, church records, royal charters, tax records, and local property records. These sources are vital to the reconstruction of the history of landholding in Wadla-Delanta, and to understanding the origins of competing or overlapping claims to land.
3. Thirdly, more in-depth studies of the experiences of peasants, women, tenants, soldiers, religious groups and local authorities should be undertaken. Special emphasis should be placed on the impact of tenure change on access to land, taxation, labour requirements, tenure and rural social relations. Comparisons with other areas of Wollo and Ethiopia would also help to identify what was locally unique about the features of the Wollo's tenure system, and what showed broader patterns in Ethiopia.
4. Last, but not least, future works on the history needs to remain a synthesis of archival documents, church records, legal records and oral sources. The integration and critical cross-checking of these sources can be used to gain a more complete picture on the evolution of land tenure and its ongoing socioeconomic importance in Wadla-Delanta.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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List of Informants

No	Full Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
1	Alene Geremew (Ato)	92	14/06/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a farmer and articulates the customary <i>gult</i> and <i>rist</i> tenure systems, land measurement and the reaction of the local population on the whole imperial land reform packages of the Wadla Delanta <i>Awrajja</i> .
2	Getachaw Fenta (Ato)	88	15/06/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a farmer and describes the institutions of <i>gabbar</i> and <i>chiqa shum</i> in the district.
3	Hailu Tesemma (Abba)	94	16/06/2017 E.C	Addis Ababa	He is a clergy. He is knowledgeable on customary land tenure and land measurement in the area.
4	Lema Demamu (Shaleqa or Major)	84	16/06/2000 E.C	Addis Ababa	He is retired soldier and articulates about the church tenure, tenancy relation, including <i>irbo</i> tenancy and the reaction of the local population on the whole imperial land reform packages in the <i>Awrajja</i> .
5	Nega Zelelew (Ato)	79	17/06/2017 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a farmer and has detail information about the church tenure, <i>semon maret</i> of the area.
6	Samuel Nigatu (Ato)	87	17/07/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a retired civil servant and articulates about the old institution of tenancy and the reaction of the local population on the whole reform packages in the area.
7	Shume Nigatu (Ato)	78	17/07/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a farmer and articulates the church tenure of the district.
8	Tesfaye Mezmur (Shaleqa)	94	17/07/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a retired soldier and articulates the tenure system of <i>galla</i> , the institution of <i>gabbar</i> land measurement system and the reaction of the local population on the whole imperial land reform packages in the area.
9	Teshome Ayalew (Qes)	80	17/07/2000 E.C	Wegel Tena	He is a priest and articulates the institution of <i>gabbar</i> , the local royal landholdings, <i>qechie zemach maret</i> , and <i>semon maret</i> in the area.

Appendix: Folder and File Numbers of the Archival Collections used as Government Archives in the Study

Appendix I: The Manuscript Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) of the Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

Folder No.	File No.
11-13	A13/005
	A13/009

Appendix II: The Welde Mesqel Archive (WMA) or Archival Collection of the IES of the Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

Folder No.	Folder No.
2116	2075
	2075/44