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Inter-Ethnic Relations
on a Frontier:
Mätakkäl (Ethiopia), 1898–1991

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Physical and Geographical Setting

Until the end of the first half of the twentieth century, the term *Mätäkkäl* was applied to a locality named after one of the *La nata Awiya* (The Seven Houses of Agäw) clans who settled there. The vast low-lying territories along Ethiopia's border with the Sudan to the north of the Abbay River were placed within Agäw *Mädər* and *Bägemädər awrağğas*. The coffee and gold-rich district of *Wänbära*, the former Muslim state of Guba, and the districts of *Dangiğa* (Dängäb), *Dangur*, *Zigäm* and *Mätäkkäl* were governed by Agäw or Amhara chiefs with their seat at *Sigadi* (later it was moved to *Čagəni*) although sometimes Guba and *Dangur* paid tributes to the *Bägemädər awrağğa*. After 1948 the whole region was restructured – *Mätäkkäl* being upgraded to *awrağğa* status, with the whole district regrouped eventually into six *wärädas*: *Dangur*, *Dəbaṭi*, *G^wang^wa*, *Guba*, *Mandura* and *Wänbära* within the *Goğğam* administrative region (see map 2). The seat of administration was moved from *Sigadi* to *Čagəni*¹, which played an important role until 1992 when most of the *awrağğa* was placed under *Beni Šangul-Gumuz National Regional State* and the administrative centre shifted to *Pawi*. *Čagəni*, however, continued to play an important role as a socio-economic centre of the region because of its strategic location. Above all it was (and still is) a very attractive commercial centre for traders coming from almost all of the *wärädas* and played a key role in supplying transportation facilities.

In the past, *Bulän* was part of *Wänbära* and all the territories up to the *Šar* River were traditionally administered under *Wänbära* chiefs. It was one of the sixty-five *qäbäles* of *Wänbära* and it was in 1997 that *Bulän* was given a separate *wärada* status. Thus *Mätäkkäl* became one of the three zones of the *Beni Šangul-Gumuz National Regional State* bounded to the north and north-east by the *Amhara National Regional State*, to the south by the *Abbay River* and to the west by the *Sudan*. By the end of 2000, its capital, *Pawi*, was replaced by the adjacent newly founded *Gəlgäl Bäläs* town, which is 546 kilometres away from *Addis Ababa*.

The total area of *Mätäkkäl* zone is estimated at 22,028 km², characterised by a hot lowland environmental zone covered with undulating plains and thick tropical forest with a heavy rainfall. The altitude ranges from below 600 m above sea level along the *Sudan* border to 2,731 m above sea level at *Bälaya*

1 “*Goğğam Ṭäqlay Gəzat*”, Manuscript Number 2153, Institute of Ethiopian Studies p. 16; *ADDIS ZĀMĀN* (Yäkkatit, 21, 1973 A.M.), pp. 8-9; Interview: *Taddäsä Ğämbäre*, 74, September 1996 and January 1997, *Čagəni*.

Mountain and 2488 m at Dangur Mountain. Much of it is lowland which is 74 % flat plains, 16 % hilly and plateaus, 6 % valley bottoms and 4 % mountainous land. Climatically the zone is classified as 82 % lowland, 10 % temperate and 8% highland. The region is 79 % tropical forestland with little cultivable land. The annual average temperature ranges from 16.2 °–32.5° C with annual mean rainfall of 1,607.8 mm while the annual rainfall months vary from May to October.²

Surrounded on its eastern and southern rim by spectacular mountains like the Bälaya, Diimtuu and Gungum, and to the south by the Abbay River, Mätäkkäl forms a huge circular depression.³ It is broken here and there by numerous streams, the most important of which are Alaltuu, Ardii, Bäläs, Dindir, Durra, Dondor, Qarsaa, and Šar which are tributaries of the Abbay. In addition there are various other tributary streams, which either decrease their flow or dry up during the dry season. Moreover, Mätäkkäl is known for its rich natural resources, which invited various aggressions from both the Sudan and Ethiopia. Most of its cultivable soils are fertile, and there are diverse flora and fauna composed of natural vegetation with various tree types and bamboo forest, shrubs, and grasses that serve several wildlife species as natural habitat. However, most of the area is infested with Malaria and *trypanosomiasis* (Cattle disease).⁴ Malaria in particular poses a serious threat to the region as a result of meagre medical facilities.

1.2. The Main Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are the following:

- To examine the nature of ethnic and societal relations, assimilations and co-existence between the Gumuz, Agäw, Šinaša, Oromo and Amhara in Mätäkkäl.
- To bridge some of the historical gaps in the study of the frontier communities, while contributing to the advancement of historical approaches to the study of frontier peoples and cultures.
- To show how the Oromo and the Šinaša lost their identities to the dominant Amharic- or Agäwña-speaking societies in many parts of Goğgam.

2 WOLDE-SELASSIE ABBUTE, “Gumuz and Highland Resettlers: Differing Strategies of Livelihood and Ethnic Relations in Metekel, North-western Ethiopia”, PhD Dissertation, University of Göttingen, 2002, p. 3.

3 DESSALEGN RAHMATO, “Resettlement and the Indigenous Population of Metekel”, in: *The Proceedings of the Workshop on Famine Experience and Resettlement in Ethiopia*, Institute of Development Research, Addis Ababa University, 1988, p. 3.

4 TSEGA ENDALEW, *Conflict Resolution Through Cultural Tolerance: An Analysis of the Michu Institution in Metekkel*, Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa, Addis Ababa, 2002, p. 2, p. 2; for details see WOLDE-SELASSIE ABBUTE, pp. 100-101.

- To examine the ways and means used by Oromo and Šinaša to preserve their identities in Mätäkkäl.
- To show how the region was 'ruled' by both the Sudan and Ethiopia until eventually incorporated by the latter.
- To show how the traditional African principles of conflict resolution played an important role in the ethnic relations and maintained their solidarity long before the colonial period.
- To draw the attention of scholars to the study of Ethiopian history from a frontier perspective.

1.3. The Significance of the Study

The research work, it is hoped, will make a significant contribution in revealing the history and cultures of the frontier communities, their assimilation, forms of rule and incorporation. Since little has so far been done on this subject, the research will contribute to the understanding of the peoples and cultures of the Ethiopian-Sudan borderlands, to aggression and the domination of minorities, to inter-ethnic relations, to conflicts and their resolutions in Ethiopia in particular and in Africa in general.

The study also provides major recommendations for protecting the rights of minority groups in this peripheral region of Ethiopia. First, to avoid discrimination based on skin colour, occupation, social status, way of living, religion, state organisation and general level of development. Second, to render balanced services to minorities including access to rural roads, clinics, schools, water supply, electricity, and other infrastructures. Scholarly studies must also be undertaken to indicate the problems that such ethnic groups with peripheral status have to appeal to the international community for various kinds of help. For instance, the Gumuz live in unhealthy spots always victims by various types of tropical disease with no or only limited access to clinics, hospitals, schools, and other basic facilities. These lacks have contributed to their low level of development as compared to the other highland peoples of Ethiopia.

The study also attempts to contribute to the understanding of territorial competitions and border problems between Ethiopia and the Sudan as well as enabling us to understand the political developments along Ethiopia's north-western frontier. Moreover, the study attempts to offer insights into the role of trade on both sides of the Abbay and the international boundary. I hope, therefore, that the present study is directly relevant to the present ethnic conflicts, societal relations, assimilations and changing societies around the world.