
Introduction

Abdussamad H. Ahmad¹

Scholars in the discipline of history have come to learn greatly about the periphery of Bela-Shangul of Ethiopia through the extra-ordinary *magnum-opus* of Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a No-man's Land Bela-Shangul, Wallagga, Ethiopia: ca 1800 – 1898. Napoli: 1981*. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a number of Watawit *Sheikhdoms* dominated Bela-Shangul in the northwestern Ethiopian – Sudanese borderlands. The Watawit families were the descendants of Sudanese-Arabs, who had come to Bela-Shangul as traders and preachers of Islamic religion. These Sudanese-Arabs established their ascendancy over the native Berta people. They, then, intermarried with the local ruling elite of the Berta.

In due course, the political and economic supremacy of the Sudanese-Arabs helped them to safeguard their autonomy and expand their territory at the expense of the Mao and Komo. During the period of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881 – 98), the Baqqara Arabs from the Sudan raided the various peoples of the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands such as the Berta, Burun, Gunza, Ingessana, Jum Jum, Mao, Komo, Meban, and Uduk. In the process, Bela-Shangul became incorporated into the slave trade of southern Nubia in the Sudan. The slave trade routes from the Mao territory of Beggi led to Fadasi, Bufudiyo, Famaka, Fazugli and then to Wad Medane in the Sudan.

Three Watawit rulers – *Sheikh Khojele al-Hassan of Aqoldi (Asossa) (1897 – 1938)*, *Sheikh Mahmud of Khomosha*, and *Sheikh Abdal-Rahman Khojele of Bela-Shangul proper (Qebesh)* – dominated the Ethiopian –Sudanese borderlands. The three Watawit rulers were engaged in internal feuds which brought about serious political unrest in the region. In 1897, *Ras Mekonnin*, governor of Hararge in southeastern Ethiopia led a military expedition west into Bela-Shangul that brought most of the Berta and some of the so-called black-Arabs into the empire state of Ethiopia. Emperor Minilik II (1889 – 1913) succeeded to annex Bela-Shangul by exploiting the traditional enmity of the three Watawit *Sheikhdoms* and he was able to ensure their subordination to his central imperial palace in Addis Ababa.

Meanwhile, the British led military expeditionary force from Egypt took over Omdurman and Khartoum in the Sudan in 1898. The Sudan came to be called

¹ Associate Professor, Department of History, Addis Ababa University

Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Four years later, in 1902, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia delimited the borderlands between them and Bela-Shangul and Fadasi passed into Ethiopia. The delimitation process of the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands divided the Berta people between Ethiopia and the Sudan. The Berta, who were most directly affected, by the border delimitation, like other border peoples in colonial Africa (1885 – 1960) had little say on the outcome of the border negotiations between imperial Ethiopia and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. For such dubious statuses of the Berta of Bela-Shangul and the Añuak and Nuer of Gambella, one could consult the superb work of Bahru Zewde, “Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier 1898 – 1935,” Ph.D. thesis, University of London, May 1976.

With the new demand for tribute in slaves, gold, and ivory at the imperial palace in Addis Ababa during the first three and half decades of the twentieth century, *Sheikh* Khojele al-Hassan of Bela-Shangul revived slave raiding, hunting, and gold mining activities by using the Berta, Mao, and Komo slave-laborers. Most often, large number of the Berta shifting-cultivators and cattle-herders were forced to mine gold as a result; faced with the superior military power of Khojele from the Sudan and his Shāwān Amhara overlords from imperial Ethiopia, they had little opportunity to resist. Slaves, meanwhile, came mainly from the Omotic Mao and Nilo-Saharan Komo ethnic groups.

Khojele’s regional leadership in the periphery of the empire state of Ethiopia and wealth in gold and slaves allowed him great influence at the imperial court in Addis Ababa. The extension of the imperial government influence and power over Bela-Shangul facilitated Khojele’s expansion against the defenseless Mao and Komo. Just as Khojele at Asossa, capital of Bela-Shangul was a vassal to the imperial court in Addis Ababa, so also the Mao and Komo became dependent chiefdoms of Asossa. Khojele had come a long way from the periphery to the center of imperial Ethiopia to cajole himself as a member of the Shāwān Amhara absentee landlords, who possessed large tracts of lands in much of southern Ethiopia and had come to build grandiloquent residential houses in Addis Ababa. As a symbol of periphery-center relations of Bela-Shangul and imperial Ethiopia, Khojele built a magnificent palace in Gulāle in Addis Ababa, which came to convey his name in a somewhat corrupt wording, Amharic, *Shāgole Sāfār* to date.

Alexander Meckelburg in his remarkable contribution of this special issue of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. LIV (No. 1), June 2021 entitled, “The Palace of *Sheikh* Khojele in Addis Ababa: A Symbol of early 20th Century Center-Periphery Relations” discusses the connection between the

architectural symbolism of the palace of Khojele in Addis Ababa and the historiography of Bela-Shangul as the periphery on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border.

Sophie Kuspert Rakotondrainy in her interesting investigation of the Mao and Komo entitled, “Who Are the ‘True’ Mao? A Contested Identity in Mao Komo *Liyu Wārāda*” offers the contemporary debates on the identity of Mao Komo. This research work deals with the recent period of the 1990s. From the Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census, 2008, she gives the total number of the Mao and Komo to be 43, 535 and 6, 464 respectively. The Mao Komo special sub-district capital to-day is Tongo. The low population of Mao and Komo was, perhaps, due to the depletion of their villages as a result of the historic slave raiding activities of the military class of *Sheikh* Khojele al-Hassan of Bela-Shangul, in the period (1897 – 1935).

Teferi Mekonnen’s inspiring research with the title “The Benishangul-Gumuz Region: A Brief Political History, 1991 - 2001” provides an overview on the recent merge of the historic Bela-Shangul, now called, Arabic Beni-Shangul, literally children of Shangul and the Gumuz to the south and north of Abbay river. His analysis is on the brief period of a decade (1991 – 2001), since the establishment of the Beni-Shangul Gumuz Regional State. Historically, King Täklä Häymanot of eastern Gojjam (Gojjam proper), Damot, and Agāwmidir (1881 – 1901) conquered the numerous Gumuz chiefdoms between Agāwmidir and the Bālās river in 1898. These Gumuz were pre-state communities and too weak to counter the military threat of their Amhara and Agāw neighbors. The Amhara and Agāw military class continued to raid the Gumuz villages to fetch child slaves in the period (1898 – 1935).

The other Gumuz between the Bālās river and Bumbode (now Bambodi) on the Ethiopian-Sudanese frontier, however, had established a border enclave known in history as the Islamic polity of Gubba. Gubba continued to be ruled by *Manjil* Hamdan Abu Shok (1898 – 1938), a seventh generation descendant of the Funj kingdom of Sennar in the Sudan. Täklä Haymanot incorporated Gubba to his kingdom in 1898. For the uncertain status of the Muslim Gumuz in both Ethiopia and the Sudan, one could refer the work of Peter P. Garretson, “*Manjil* Hamdan Abu Shok (1898 – 1938) and the Administration of Gubba” in Joseph Tubiana (ed.), *Modern Ethiopia: From the Accession of Menelik II to the Present* (Rotterdam, 1980), 197-210. In 1902, when Ethiopia and British-Sudan delimited the border between them, Gubba passed into Ethiopia and the Muslim Gumuz became devided by the new delimitation. The other

Muslim Gumuz are to be found on the hills to the southwest of Roseires in British-Sudan (1898 – 1956). Unfortunately, the Gumuz between Agāwmidir and the Islamic polity of Gubba as well as the Gumuz to the south of the Abbay did not receive due attention by serious researchers in the fields of studies of geography, history, anthropology, and linguistics.

Takele Merid's thought-provoking article with the title "Changing Trend of Livelihood Strategies in Beni-Shangul Gumuz Region: A Reference to Berta People, Northwestern Ethiopia" deals with the historic gold mining activities of the Berta people. The Berta populous are generally engaged in shifting cultivation. Some Berta with mercantile occupation took gold from Asossa to Wad Madane in the Sudan. Following the entry of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front to the palace in Addis Ababa in May 1991, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia had been established. Accordingly, the Beni-Shangul Gumuz Regional State came to being in the 1990s.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia set out with new ideas of investment projects to allot the tracts of lands of the pastoral and semi-pastoral peoples in the peripheries. Consequently, wealthy individuals in Addis Ababa, who had political connection to the state began to borrow money from the government-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia as well as from a number of private banks. These individuals with investment projects proceeded to squander the traditional land holdings of the Berta people in the periphery. As a result, the Berta inhabitants began to lose their traditional lands of livelihood in the 1990s. The capital intensive projects of wealthy individuals from Addis Ababa dispossessed the Berta much of their land holdings. To make matters even worse, there had not been even a single individual among the Berta, who had taken land as an investor.

Although the lack of statistical data does not allow Takele Merid to state the number of investors from Addis Ababa as well as to specify the ethnicities these investors belong to, common familiarity with the region of this study suggests most investors had been Tigreans, followed by some Amhara and Oromo individuals. In the final analysis, the Berta lost large tracts of lands. Investors in their own accord came to consider the Berta traditional land settlement structure in the periphery as "no man's land." Worse still, having lost their lands, the Berta were forced to carry out villagization processes in numerous locations known as, Amharic *māndāroch*, literally villages. Statistics has it that at one particular time the Berta households numbering 89,120 were forced to move from their traditional settlements to the new

resettlement centers numbering 239. Sadly, the defenseless Berta households, who had lost their possession of lands and forest areas, did not get proper compensation.

Girma Mengistu Desta's exciting linguistics inquiry with the title "The Pronominal System of Omotic Mao Languages" makes an attempt to explain the pronominal system of three of the four Omotic Mao languages. He portrays to characterize as well as classify the three Omotic Mao languages and interpret their variations and similarities from the perspective of linguistic comparative study. It is interesting to note that Dr. Klaus-Christian Küspert in his authoritative linguistic study of the Mao Komo entitled, "The Mao and Komo Languages in Begi-Tongo area in Western Ethiopia: Classification, Designations, Distribution," *Linguistic discovery*, 13 (1). pp. 1- 63 describes the Mao Komo language as Gwama. He also gives reference of the Komo language as a member of the Nilo-Saharan language family. Girma Mengistu Desta, on his part, quite rightly classifies the Mao language as a member of the Omotic language family.

Tadesse Berisso's tantalizing exhaustive study entitled "Comparative Study of Villagization under Two Regimes in Ethiopia: Case Study of Guji-Oromo and Mao-Komo Areas" assesses the lofty villagization project under the governance of the *Dārg* regime (1974 – 1991) and under the succeeding governance of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991 – 2018) of Ethiopia. These settlement projects in new locations of the peripheral and semi-peripheral peoples brought about significant long and short term negative impacts on the political, economic, social, and environmental lives of the Guji-Oromo in Jam Jam, Amharic *awraja*, literally district and the Mao-Komo special *wārāda* (sub-district) in Beni-Shangul. The two consequent regimes, the *Dārg* and EPRDF had come to record poor achievements in their economic and environmental development objectives among the Guji-Oromo and the Mao-Komo settlement locations. Villagization programs in Guji-Oromo and the Mao-Komo special zone in Beni-Shangul, in general, brought the two subsequent administrations of Ethiopia greater control of the peasant farming populous. Unfortunately, the two administrations came to register failure in their planned objectives to bring about the so-called "rapid rural transformation." These villagization projects did not encourage the grass-roots participation of the Guji-Oromo and the Mao-Komo farming peoples. To begin with the implementation processes of the villagization programs did not consider the voluntary participation of the farmers. The villages were scattered so much so that the administrative employees of the two administrations became unable to provide social and

infrastructural services to the farming populous and to make efficient use of resources such as land and water. In the final analysis, villagization programs turned out to be major causes for the economic decline of the farming populations among the Guji-Oromo as well as among the Mao-Komo in Beni-Shangul.