

Gambella Border Trade, 1904-1935 and its Significance in the Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan

RUFFO YASIN MOHAMMED

In the early twentieth century Gambella became the most important venue of Ethio-Sudanese trader. Gambella developed from an obscure village to the most important commercial emporium in western Ethiopia (Bahru Zewde, 2008, 149). The legal basis of the Gambella trading post emanated from Article IV of the treaty of that was signed by Menilek and the British mister, Harington, in May 1902 delimiting the boundary between Ethiopia and British Sudan (Leonard Woolf, 1920, 202-203; Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 5; Bahru Zewde, 1976, 204).

Emperor Menilek consented to lease to the British to an enclave in the area of Itang for the establishment of commercial post. At the time, this concession aroused little interest being dwarfed by Article III, which guaranteed British interests in the western of the Nile, and the Article V, which provided for the right of railway connection across Ethiopia between the British colonies of Uganda and the Sudan. Indeed, the enclave was a potential station on the projected Sudan-Uganda railway than as a trading post that would thrive on its own (H.H. Austin, 1901, 20; Bahru Zewde, 1976, 234; Boniface Obichere, 1971, 266-267).

The Itang enclave itself was short lived. It was too far away from Ethiopian plateau. This was the main factor behind the transfer of the post from Itang to Gambella. The Ethiopian authorization for the transfer came on 8 October 1904 (Bahru Zewde, 2008, 152). By the beginning of the following month, a site had been chosen at the western angle of the junction of the Baro river and its tributary, the Jajjabe. This was to become the permanent site of

trading post; the eastern angle of the junction became the site for an Ethiopian village which grew in an uneasy counter position to what in effect became a foreign settlement. The transfer brought the post nearer the plateau (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 10-12; H.H. Austin, 1905, 30).

With respect to export trade items ivory had been the major attraction of the southern Sudan to northern traders from the days of Mohammed Ah. of Egypt (P.M. Holt, 1967, 62-63). The increasing demand of Ivory attracted local governors to establish a virtual monopoly over the trade. For instance, Jote of Qllem, *Ras* Tassama of Gore and *Ras* Wolde Giorgis of Kaffa had a complete control over ivory trade. (Informants: Birhanu Mamo, Abebaw Zelalem, Henery Darly, 193, 10-15).

In particular, *Ras* Tassama governor of Illubabor took advantage of the commercial importance of Gambella trade. He monopolized ivory trade and controlled its movement on his own account for his own benefits (Birhanu Dibaba, 7, 1973; Informants, Itana Agamso, Abdissa Futa). He employed spies and prohibited any one from engaging in selling and buying of Ivory. *Negadras* Birru was the agent of *Ras* Tassama to buy and store ivory and to sent to the Gambella (Yasin Mohammed, 2010 53; Informants, Chanyalew Kumsa, Abate Bula).

Rubber was also one of the exported trade items in the Gambella border trade. Nevertheless, it was again subjected to monopoly. Rubber grew wild in the border regions of Illubabor, Wallaga and Jimma (May Ydlibi, 2006, 76). Plenty of it was seen by Landor in 1906 around Baro river (A.H.S. Landor, 1920, 210). In 1908, Kelly reporting on the general economic value of the area, while traveling from Gore to Andaracha noted that the great value of the

districted he passed through was that it was immense quantities of rubber, which he said existed in the hardly penetrable forest (F.O 141/423 Kelly report 2.3.10). The native method of obtaining the sap was simple and crude. They made notches in the rubber tree and caught the resultant sap in gourds, without regard to the possibility of a future yield and the latex was collected and was brought for sale in a very dirty conditions, mixed with dust, pieces of wood and other impurities. The raw product was smoked and washed with hot water or heated to coagulate it. At the time, it thereafter appeared in European markets with all impurities (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 35-36; Informants: Abdisa Abdu, Gezahegne).

A provincial capital of Illubabor, Gore was a centre of rubber trade. The whole, export was to Europe through Gambella. In 1905 Emperor Menilek granted a concession for the purchase of rubber to Khartoum based Kordofan Trading Company in 1905. Nevertheless, the company failed to succeed. Later, the Imperial Rubber Company was founded by a Syrian Hasib Ydlibi. The concession was concerned with the rubber trees in the forests of southwest (Illubabor, Wallaga and Jimma) and was especially active in the Baro river area, with a payment of 20% of the produce to the royal treasury (May Ydlibi, 2006, 29-36).

Coffee was the most important trade item that was exported through Gambella to Sudan and then Europe. However, the coffee trade had its own troubles as well. The most chronic was the exactions of local rulers like *Dajjazmach* Ganame and *Dajjazmach* Kabada in the collection of the government royalty on coffee. (Bahru Zewde, 2008, 152-153. Informants, Abshiru Roba Adam Fedhessa). In 1914, *Dajjazmach* Ganame even instituted the odious practice of demanding tax on the fallen berries, which had traditionally been exempted. This was against the interests of the local peasants. The peasants then sent a ten member delegation headed by

Tufa Nagaw to Addis Ababa from Illubabor and protested against the new tax burdens. The delegates appealed to *Ras* Tafari the then heir to the throne and their demand was accepted favourably (Yasin Mohammed, 2010, p. 57; Birhanu Dibaba, 1973; Informants: Adam Guyo, Addisu Faja). *Dajjazmach* Ganame summoned to Addis Ababa was told to withdraw his new taxation policy on coffee. As a result *Dajjazmach* Ganame refrain from over taxing the peasants (Yasin Mohammed, 2010, p. 72). His successor Kabada made an equally injurious proclamation forbidding the sale of coffee before May, thereby leaving only a month for transport to Gambella before navigation seasons began in June. This had the effect of creating a hold up in the coffee trade. This result in hoarding, smuggling which led to corruption by the local rulers (Richard Punkhurst, 1962, 35; Informants: Bakala Tafara, Banti Utama).

The other exported item through Gambella was bees wax. It passed exclusively in transit to Europe (Richard Punkhurst, 1968, 152). Imported item were liquor, cotton goods, metal wear, empty sacks, soap and salt. The Sudanese government imposed restrictions on the liquor trade. Nevertheless the merchants arduously campaigned for relaxation of the restrictions on what they considered to be a lucrative trade. (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 42). Cotton goods constituted the part of imports. Italy and USA were the chief suppliers of cotton goods until later period they faced competition from Japan (Informants: Birhanu Mangasha, Bula Urgessa).

Salt was the only commodity that was directly imported from the Sudan. In view of value as currency in its bar form (*amole*), the idea was once even entertained of making the salt into bars and selling them profitably in western Ethiopia (H.H. Austin, 1938, 125; Admasu Etafa, 1982, 12-15).

In May 1930, the Ethiopian government granted a monopoly on the salt trade to a Franco-Ethiopian company in which the government quite held 40% of the shares. This had an adverse effect on salt imports from the Sudan in particular and on Gambella trade in general, as Sudan traders could no longer bring bags of salt to exchange for coffee (Richard Punkhurst, 1965, 126). The British objected the Franco-Ethiopian company and attempted the galvanize the European powers represented in Ethiopia into audited opposition to the monopoly. But the idea was not accepted by the French (Baharu Zewde, 1981, 25-26).

Gambella border trade was dominated by expatriate border trade was dominated by expatriate. The traders were primarily Greeks and Syrians. Two firms reveal the success of the Syrians and the Greeks. Gerolimato and Co. for the Greeks and John Nicholas and Co. for the Syrians. Timoleon was agent of the Greeks, while Majid Abud was for Syrians. (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 40; Bahru Zewede, 1976, 136).

Majid Abud was a Syrian, began his work as rubber trader in western Ethiopia and ended up as the most energetic agent of central government of Ethiopia in and around Gambella. Geolimato was British vice consul in Harar and enjoyed great respect in Sudan government circles. He was by then establish a firm which became rival of John Nicholas and co. (Bahru Zewde, 1981, 35-36).

Two firms that involved themselves in the Gambella border trade were Sectarian and co. who worked as agent in western Ethiopia for the Franco-Ethiopian company and Messrs. J. and S. Tabet. (C.F. Rey, 1927, 36). The Greek merchants in particular agreed among themselves to drive down the price of coffee and inflate that of imported items like salt and *abujedid* (cotton

sheeting). The Ethiopian seller was looking from one purchaser to another in vain for a fair price for his coffee. Expatriate traders had placed Ethiopians in helpless position to secure the best returns for their native products(Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 68; Informant: Birhanu Mamo).

British officials and traders not only resented the Greeks and the Syrians in their business ethics but also in their capacity to win the hearts and minds of local Ethiopian officials. Timoleon was successful in ingratiating himself with Ethiopian officials in Gore (Bahru Zewde, 1976, 148). Although, the British could not match the Greeks in either integration or ingratiation, they were not to totally oblivious to the promotion of Gambella trade. They focused their attention on *Ras* Tasama of Illubabor and *Ras* Wolda Giorgis of Kafa, whose provinces were very near to Gambella. In particular *Ras* Tasama province Illubabor had direct jurisdiction ones Gambella (Informants: Bula Urgessa, Birhanu Mangash).

The development of Gambella border trade gave an impetus to the emergence of small interior markets of Bure, Gore, Matu, Supe, Nopa, and Hurumu in Illubabor. Gore by 1905 was described by Landor as, “the significance administrative town in Illubabor,“ economically it had began to draw the attention of foreign traders (Landor, 1905, 30; Yasin Mohammed, 2010, 165). G. Montandon reported in 1911, exported a large quantity of ivory and rubber to both Djibouti and Gambella. While most the coffee and wax were exported through Gambella, civet was exported through both routes (G. Montandon, 1911, 36-37).

Matu was next in importance to Bure and Gore. It was an important coffee collection center. It was connected by telephone with Addis Ababa and there were eleven foreign merchants who were active in soap and coffee trade. Bure was another commercial center between Gambella

and Gore. All products of Illubabor region found its way to Gambella through this town, and imported items before reaching Gore was also stored there (Bahru Zewde, 1976, 135; R. Pankhurst, 1965, 65-68).

In Bure, a considerable trade in ivory, civet, wax, honey, coffee, raw cotton, hides and skins, sorghum, maize and *teff* as well as imported beads of all kinds was conducted. The house of European traders, agents of Rubber Company, Angelo Capato, and Gerolimato brothers were grouped near market place of Bure. The town had increased in importance in the 1920s and 1930s. There were a number of commercial houses and foreign merchants. Before the motor transport company had constructed a road up to Baro Qalla river. Bure was connected with Gambella by gravel routes, which was used by porters and donkeys. The porters popularly known as *kurcourse* on their way between Gore, Bure and Gambella faced hardship because of the existence of tse - tse -fly porters tell victim to malaria (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 70-78; Yasin Mohammed, 2010, 162).

The use of donkey was then largely limited to the plateau stretch of the routes particularly between Gore and Bure. After some grading work was done on the Guma escarpment, mule transport was extended from Bure down to Baroqala. But the strain of descending the escarpment took a huge toll of animals. Those mules and donkeys that did venture to arrive at Gambella could rarely make the trip more than once. (Thomas, Lambe, 1943, 38-39).

There was communication problem between Gambella and the plateau. Geographically, a precipitous escarpment raising to about 1000 feet separated Gambella from Sayo in the northeast and Bure and Gore in the east (Informants: Birhanu Mamo, Chanyalew Kumsa). In

addition to escarpments that need grading and paths that needed clearing, there were rivers to bridge. The Sako on the Sayo route and the Berber Baro, Baroqala and Bonga on the Bure Gore one. The British undertook the task of building bridges that was during the governorship of *Ras* Tasama. He had an interest to improve communications in cooperation with the British. *Ras* Tasama agreed to provide labour and local material like wood for construction of a bridge ones Baroqala river (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 72).

The porters on their way between Gambella and Gore were made to put down their loads and were forced to do a few hours of manual work on the bridge before they resumed their journey. Baroqala bridge was completed in June 1913 (Bahru Zewde, 1976, 146).

Regarding the communication between Gore and Gambella, a remarkable venture was launched with the construction of a motor road linking Gambella with Bure. The concession to build the road was given by *Ras* Tafari to a Greek businessman, Donalis and his consul and business partner, Zervos in July 1927. The plan was for the construction of a motor road to link Matu and Gore with Gambella. A British firm, Gellately Hankey and Co. Ltd. started the actual construction of the road. At initial stage, the scheme was not carried effectively due to shortage of labour (Bahru Zewde, 1981, 165).

The road was completed up to Bonga in 1929. The second section reached Seriti in 1933. The third section which reached Baroqala river was completed in 1935. The final plan to join Bure-Gore with Matu, the center of coffee in Illubabor was not successful. The building of roads had greatly reduced the number of porters and pack animals dying from hardship and disease (Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, R. Pankhurst, 1965, 35; Yasin Mohammed, 2010, 172).

To conclude, between 1904 to 1935, Gambella was the main outlet of Ethiopia's export and import items. Gambella's historical importance was greater in its emergence as the most important medium of trade between Ethiopia and the Sudan replacing thereby the older routes of Matama and Kurmuk. Of the two Matama could not recover from the damages that the combined scourge of Ethio-Mahdist hostility and the famine that the closing decades of the nineteenth century had brought on it. (Bahru Zewde, 1976, 138; Birhanu Dibaba, 1973, 78; Atieb Ahmed Dafala, 1973, 163; Alessandro Triulzi, 1981, 10-15).

Thus one can indeed argue that Gambella boarder trade represented a new era in the development of Ethiopia's foreign trade involving local politics of global economy. The emergence of Gambella border trade was a period of established commercial firms in palce of traditional mule caravans. Gambella trade was the means in which Ethiopia was drawn into the then international global capitalist market. However, up to 1935, the trade was in the hands of expatriates none of the local people took part in it till after 1941 except serving as porters and employees.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Written Sources

Atieb Ahmed Dafalla "Sheik Khojele Al-Hassan and Bela Shangul 1825-1938". B.A. in History. Addis Ababa University, History Department, 1973.

Bahru Zewde "Relations Between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier, 1898-1935," Ph.D Dissertation in History, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976.

_____. Society, State and History, Selected Essay, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University press, 208

_____. "The Fumbling Debut of British Capital in Ethiopia. A contrastive study of Abyssinian corporation and the Ethiopian Motor Transport Company Ltd." Proceedings of the seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies." Uppsala East Lansing, 1981.

Austin, H.H. "A Glimpse of Western Abyssinia," in *Journal of African Society*. V.37 London: Macmillan, July 1938.

Boniface I. Obichere. West African States and European expansion New Haven, 1975

Birhanu Dibaba. "A Historical Study of Trade in Northeastern Illubabor and South Western"

B.A thesis in History, Addis Ababa University, 1973.

George MONTandon. AU pays Ghimira, Recit de mon voyage a traverse le massif ethiopien

(1909-1911). Paris, 1911.

Gwyn, C.W. "A Journey in Southern Abyssinia," *The Geographical Journal*, v. 39. London,

1911.

Triulzi Alessandro, Salt Gold and legitimacy prelude to the history of no man's land,

Belashangul Wallaga. Ethiopia (Ca. 1800-1898), Naples 1981.

P.M. Holt, *A Modern History of the Sudan* London 1967.

C.F. Rey, *In the country of the Blue Nile*. London, 1927

_____. *The unconquered Abyssinia*. London, 1934

Pankhurst, Richard. "The Trade of Southern and Western Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean Ports

in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*.

V.11. No. 2. 1965.

_____. *The Economic History of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa, 1968.

Darly Henery. *Slave and Ivory. A Record of Adventure and Exploration in the Unknown Sudan and among the Abyssinian Slave Raiders.* London, 1935.

Lambie, Thomas. *Boot and Saddle in Africa.* New York, New York press, 1943.

A.H.S. Landor. *Across Widest Africa an Account of the Country and the Peoples of Eastern Africa as Seen During a Twelve Months Journey from Djibouti to Cape Verde.*
London, 1920.

W. Leonard. *Empire and Commerce in Africa a Study in Economic Imperialism.* London, 1920.

Admasu Etafa. "The Greek Communities in Dembidollo(Sayyo), Wallaga" B.A. thesis in History, Addis Ababa University 1982.

Ydlibi, May. *With Ethiopian Rulers. A Biography of Hassib Ydlibi.* Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2006.

ii. FO Documents

FO (*Foreign Office Record*), at the *Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University*
microfilmed.

- FO 141/423 Kelly report 2.3.10

- FO /371/ Walker to The singer 10.4.8. Walker was a British consul at Gore (Illubabor)

- FO 371/989, memo on Gambella 6.3.35

III. List of Informants

No.	Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
1.	Birhanu Mamo	65	14/4/2010	Gambella	He had served as a government employee in Gambella <i>warada</i> now resides in the town. He is a well known oral informant on Gambella trade.
2.	Abebaw Zelelew	68	15/5/2010	Gambella	He is currently trader in Gambella. A well known informant the Gambella-Gore trade.
3.	Chanyalew Kumsa	67	20/4/2010	Gore	He formerly lived in Gambella now resides in Matu. He well known oral informant on import and export trade in the area.
4.	Abdeta BUla	60	16/5/2010	Gambella	He is a well known oral informant on the foreign merchants in Gambella.
5.	Abdissa Dibaba	63	14/4/2010	Gambella	He is a well known oral historian on the trade of the area.
6.	Abdu Gezhagn	64	13/3/2010	Matu	He is a well known oral historian on the society of trade items.
7.	Abshira Roba	75	14/3/2010	Matu	Now reside in Matu, claimed that his great grandfather served as porter between Gore and Gambella. He is well informed about the general condition of Gambella trade.

8.	Adam Fedhesa	75	15/3/2010	Bure	He had lived in Gambella for many years. Now reside in Bure. He claims that his great grandfather was an employee of Greeek traders in Gambella. He is a good oral historian on the Gambella trade.
9.	Birhanu Mangasha	66	14/3/2010	Matu	He had served in the Gambella <i>warada</i> court. Now lives in Matu. He is a good oral historian on the Gambella trade.
10.	Bala Urgessa	78	15/5/2010	Gambella	His great grandfather had served as porter between Gore and Gambella. He is well informed oral historian on Greek merchants in Gambell, Gore and Bure.