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Gondar town has a historic Muslim community. The study of Gondar as the imperial capital of Ethiopia has concentrated on politics, the church and international relations in actual fact, the existing literature portrays that the Ethiopian highlands consist firstly of a solid dominant bloc of Christians and secondly of disparate groups of pastoral lowlands who follow Islam. The literature also regards Islam and Muslims in Gondar as well as elsewhere in the Christian kingdom as embodiments of external menace.\textsuperscript{2} Moreover, traditional Ethiopian historiography assumes that the minority Muslims in the Christian highlands were only objects of conquest and inevitable assimilation by the Christian state.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Gondar as the capital of the Christian kingdom possessed a permanent, indigenous Muslim minority. My intent is not to challenge the long-prevalent prejudices against Muslims of Gondar or Ethiopia in general. As was so frequently the case elsewhere in Africa the ongoing life of Gondarine Muslims was closely connected with trade. They provided luxury commodities needed by a wealthy court in Gondar. In return, the state rewarded and protected the minority Muslims. Muslims formed one of the regiments under the direct control of the Gondarine monarchs. They were segregated in both

\*ETHIOPIA.
residential quarter and social interaction patterns. Muslims, on their part, maintained a religious identity and a high degree of social separation from the Christian state and dominant society. In the main, it was not the interest of the Christian state either to forcibly convert or persecute them. However, Emperor Tewdros II 1855–1868 and Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889) employed religion as a viable method of unification in the Christian highlands. To some degree, therefore, the minority Muslims of Gondar were partially incorporated into the wider Christian society. In this way, the history of Muslims continued to enrich the history of the dominant Christian society.

**Muslim Advent in the Red Sea**

In A.D. 702 Aksumites attacked Hidjaz and the port of Jeddah in Arabia. In retaliation, Muslim Arabs destroyed Adulis, the port of Aksum. Muslim Arabs also established themselves in the Dahlak islands opposite Adulis. In the tenth century, an independent Muslim principality came to be established in the Dahlak islands in what is today Eritrea. This Muslim principality began to play an important role in the commerce and the spread of Islam in the coastal parts of Ethiopia.

Internally, Christian power came to be concentrated in the Ethiopian highlands and its institutions had become thoroughly Christianized in the late first millennium, although there obviously were pagan survivals. Meanwhile, Islam entered the Christian highlands in what is today Tigray, Bagemdir, Gojjam and parts of Wallo by associating itself with trade and nomadic life on the coastal lowlands. Muslim
traders settled in villages along the trade routes leading from the coast to the highlands. They conducted commerce freely throughout the highland areas and performed missionary work. In due course, they produced the first Muslim communities within the Christian state. Muslim traders known as the Jabarti in the highlands became active in commerce and handicrafts. The Muslims of Gondar, like the Beta Israel (Falasha), were almost wholly bereft of landed property and both constituted politically peripheral groups. Massawa and Gallabat maintained brisk trade with Christian Ethiopia. Gondar itself was a market town which attracted Muslims and Beta Israel (Falasha) long before it became the imperial capital in 1632, although it remains difficult to establish the period when Islam spread into Gondar.

Islam also spread from the port of Zeila on the Gulf of Aden to what is now southeastern and central Ethiopia, following the trade routes. In due course, a number of ethnic groups from the coast of the Red Sea up to the Blue Nile embraced Islam. In A.D. 896/7, the first Muslim sultanate, the Sultanate of Shewa in central Ethiopia, was established. Consequently, other sultanates like Adal, Hadya, Fatagar, Ifat, Dawaro and Bali were established. The lucrative commerce of the port of Zeila encouraged King Amde Seyon (1314-1344) to expand the territory of the Christian kingdom towards the south and southeast. Accordingly, relation between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanates became hostile. The latter were able to attract other ethnic groups to Islam as a new ideological force of resistance against the territorial expansion of the Christian kingdom.
Needless to say, however, the Muslims of Gondar simply constituted a politically submerged community, a community which articulated its presence with commerce and weaving. The highest position, through social mobility to which a successful Gondarine Muslim could aspire was to become a Nagadras (head of merchants or customs official) and, thereby, get direct access to the king.\textsuperscript{15}

The nobility of the Christian highlands and Muslim merchants of the coastal lowlands of the Red Sea littoral needed one another. The Muslims from the port of Massawa through Gondar needed direct contact with the Sidamo lands to the south of the Blue Nile which were sources of the most valuable commodities involved in the long-distance trade, commodities like slaves, civet, wax, ivory, gold and coffee. For their part Ethiopian rulers needed Muslim merchants to bring them foreign commodities like silk and linen cloth, carpets and the like.\textsuperscript{16} It becomes apparent, therefore, that Islam was introduced into Gondar as a result of its commercial link with Arabia through the port of Massawa. Trade made its effect in the north-south axis, that is from Massawa on the Red Sea coast across Adwa in Tigray to Gondar.\textsuperscript{17} Later, Islamization became a continuity that passed from generation to generation. Islam and commerce linked the minority Muslims of Gondar with their co-religionists in Arabia and the Sudan. Islam modified the thinking or ways of life of the Muslim minority as they began to read the Qur'an and Hadith (the traditions) of the Prophet
Mohammad. Informants recounted that Muslims of Gondar learned the Qur'an and the Arabic language and they were relatively better educated than the average Christians who could not read the Bible.

Trade and weaving were the major occupations opened to the Muslims of Gondar. Trade, both local and international, was the main occupation of the Muslims. Muslims merchants of Gondar dominated the trade of the wider Red Sea region, were involved in long-distances trade, and thereby came to preponderate in the commerce of Gondar. Perhaps as an extension of their principal role as traders in the cotton that came from Gallabat a good number of the Muslims of Gondar became weavers.

In Gondar, there were Christian merchants who were involved in commerce as well. However, Christians had many other opportunities which were basically closed to the Muslims - farming, the military profession, court and legal appointments etc. In the main, Christians had a general prejudice against commerce. Nonetheless, this did not stop some Christians in the least from taking part in commerce when they wanted to. Yet, it is also true that Muslims, excluded as they were from the magisterial posts in the political life of Christian Ethiopia, enjoyed success in commerce when dealing with their co-religionists at Matamma and Massawa. Muslims were the most important elements of the economy of Gondar. The importation of
foreign goods from the coast and the export of rare commodities like gold, ivory, civet and slaves were in the hands of the Muslim merchants. They played an important role in making Gondar the center of wholesale trade for much of northwestern Ethiopia.24

**Gondar's Commercial Relation with Yemen**

The establishment of Gondar as the imperial capital, during the reign of Fasiladas (1632-1667), coincided with the return of relative peace to a kingdom wrecked for a hundred years by warfare and rebellion. The policy of Fasiladas to collect customs dues and protect the trade routes favored the expansion of trade and Gondar emerged probably as the first true urban center of the Christian kingdom.25 This is clear from an account of a journey to Gondar by the Yemeni Qadi Sharaf al-Din al-Hassan. In response to this visit, Fasiladas sent an embassy to Yemen to negotiate trade relations between Ethiopia and Yemen in 1642. Some five years later, in 1647, he sent a second embassy to Yemen. This time he sent a Gondarine Muslim by the name of al-Hajji Salim b. 'Abd al-Rahim and a Christian whose name was not mentioned.25 Here again, the Christian kings delegated the Muslims of Gondar to establish commercial relations with the Muslims of Yemen.

The Yemeni embassy Al-Haymi noted that the Muslims of Gondar resided in a quarter outside the city, although the inhabitants were not exclusively Muslims.27 Al-Haymi preferred to stay in the house of a Muslim in Gondar.28 The expansion of trade apparently favored the Muslims, who were a significant component of the town's population,29 and
were described as being rich. This gave impetus to the development of commercial activities throughout the highlands. Along with their Muslim peers, there were many well-established Christian merchants in Gondar and elsewhere in the Christian highlands. Hence, while Muslims were generally restricted to trade and generally dominated that activity, they did not monopolize it.

**The Beginnings of Minority Segregation**

Fasiladas's son Yohannis I named "The Just" (1667-1682) made no attempts to pursue his father's foreign policy in relation to Muslims. In fact, he had many religious questions in mind. As a result, he called a council at Gondar. The promulgation of decisions of the Church Council at Gondar in 1668 affected all religious minorities and brought about the policy of "segregation of the Franks, Muslims, Turks and also of the Falasha, called Kayla, who are of the Jewish religion, so that they do not live with the Christians." Emperor Yohannis I also commanded the Muslims of Gondar to eat flesh killed by the Christians. By custom, however, Muslims of Gondar like other Muslims in the Christian highlands, did not eat flesh killed by the Christians.

Yohannis I maintained the supremacy of the Orthodox Christians and encouraged their separation from the Muslims as well as the Falasha. The Franks (descendants of the Portuguese) who came to support Galawdewos in the sixteenth century in his wars with Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim (Grañ, 1529-1543) were asked to leave or else to profess the
local monophysite Christianity. The Falasha minority were also subject to territorial segregation and inferior status.\textsuperscript{35}

The first decree does not seem to have been effective. Ten years later in 1678, Yohannis I reissued a proclamation that in effect separated the Muslims and the Falasha from the Christians.\textsuperscript{36} The Muslims were assigned to live in the territorially segregated lower quarter of the town on the banks of the Qaha river. This Muslims quarter, situated at the foot of the mountain, was called Islamge or Bet al-Islam.\textsuperscript{37} Yohannis's policy of segregation was partly due to his own idiosyncrasies and partly due to his objective of exploiting religion for political purposes as the social interaction among Christians, Muslims and Falashas was increasing as a result of the wider urbanization of the imperial capital. It is important to note also that the 1678 decree of segregation penalized and debarred Muslims and Falashas from owning land in the town.\textsuperscript{38} Muslims of Gondar were also instructed not to marry or hire Christians.\textsuperscript{39}

From 1678 to 1699, twenty-one years elapsed before we gain fresh information on Gondar's Muslims. In 1699, the French physician Charles Jacques Ponct visited Gondar and wrote about the mercantile activity of the Muslims.\textsuperscript{40} He observed that the Muslims resided in the lower part of the town in a separate quarter and that Christians did not eat with them. When a Christian met a Muslim in the streets of Gondar, he saluted him with the left hand which was undoubtedly a mark of contempt. Moreover, Ponct noted that the king in Gondar treated the Muslims as his slaves.\textsuperscript{41} In the main, the general Christian populace despised Muslims

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and the other non-Christian groups. For example, Christians ranked the non-Christian groups of Gondar behind them in the following order: Muslims, Qimant, Falasha, Wayto and the Gumuz slaves.\textsuperscript{42}

Seventy years after Poncet's visit, we have another external observer in 1769 with the coming of the Scottish traveller James Bruce, who reached Gondar by way of Massawa. Bruce estimated that there were about three thousand Muslim houses there, some of which were spacious and good.\textsuperscript{43} The declining power of the emperor at Gondar and the political dissension among the local nobility in the late eighteenth century brought theological controversies in which both the rulers and the people were involved.\textsuperscript{44} Both the theological controversies within the Orthodox Church and the general revival of trade in the 1830s helped the spread of Islam.\textsuperscript{45} In the 1840s, Muslim merchants of Gondar along with their co-religionists from Adwa in Tigray, Darita in Bagemdir and Basso in Gojjam spread Islam to areas south of the Blue Nile.\textsuperscript{46}

By the end of the Gondarine era, most of the merchants, weavers and tailors of Gondar town were Muslims.\textsuperscript{47} Muslim merchants of Gondar dominated the trade in gold and slaves from Gondar to Sennar in the Sudan. They brought slaves from the Sidama and Oromo lands to the south of the Blue Nile and marketed them at Gallabat. They took gold from Ras el Fil in the Sudan which lay on the caravan route from Sennar to Gondar.\textsuperscript{48} In the 1830s, the British traveller, G.A. Hoskins, reported that merchants of Gondar sold their slaves and coffee at Shendy in the Sudan.\textsuperscript{49} In
1860, the German Protestant missionary J. Lewis Krapf gave an eyewitness account of the slave traffic at Matamma which was conducted by the Muslims of Gondar. In 1862, Henry Dufton passed through Egypt and the Sudan and noted that merchants of Gondar took cotton from Gallabat to Gondar. Some twenty years earlier, in the 1840s, the French travellers E. Combes and M. Tamisier reported that weavers of Gondar produced especially fine types of cloth, one of which was known as margaf. Some Muslims who transported cotton from Gallabat to Gondar became weavers as an extension of their role as merchants.

In 1862, Henry A. Stern, who came as a missionary to the Falasha village in Gondar, noted that the merchants of Gondar were wealthy and next to the aristocracy and clergy. He wrote that there were no shops in Gondar as merchants did not want to expose their merchandise to public inspection. Furthermore, Stern observed that Gondar, like everywhere else in the Ethiopian highlands, had been subject to the destruction caused by the rival chiefs of the Zamana-Masafint (Period of the Judges, 1769-1855). Trade was affected by the vicissitudes of Gondar's political and economic position. In time of peace, weekly markets were held. In time of war, merchants had to travel by night. The economic fortunes of the merchants declined because of the depredations of the wars of the Zamana Masafint.

Religious Coercion of the Minority

Things began to take a different turn in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Emperor Tewodors II (1855-1868)
issued a decree in 1864 commanding his Muslim subjects to convert to Christianity or leave his country. Tewodros also commanded his soldiers to sack the city under the pretext that its inhabitants refused to pay the usual taxes. Following this, inhabitants of Gondar, Christian as well as Muslim, fled the town and sought shelter elsewhere. Tewodros’ troops sacked the churches and plundered the merchants of Gondar. By ravaging the politico-economic preeminence of Gondar, he brought to an end the commercial importance of the town which had begun with Emperor Fasiladas who had encouraged a large influx of Muslims, Falashas and Qimants into its immediate vicinity some two hundred and thirty years earlier. The destruction wrought by Tewodros and his attempt at forcible conversion resulted in almost the total temporary abandonment of Gondar. Emperor Tewodros' decree bore heavily on the Islamic population of Gondar. The majority of the Muslims became Christians under duress. Those who did not want to convert dispersed to the outlying regions and maintained their religion and customs. According to the French traveler Guillaume Lejean, a rich Muslim of the name Adem Kourman left for Massawa, leaving behind a good fortune and beautiful wife, both of which were confiscated by Tewodros. Lejean also vividly expressed that "The Islam Bet, center of Abyssinian commerce and a stranger to all revolutions, was sacked and almost destroyed." In the final analysis, Tewodros' efforts to promote religious unity in the empire were ineffective.

Emperor Yohannis IV (1872-1889) employed religion to fortify state authority. Yohannis was not unique. He simply adopted the idea dear to his predecessor Emperor
Tewodros and regarded the unity of religion as a viable method of unification in the Christian highlands.\textsuperscript{64} I May/June 1878, Yohannis summoned the Council of Borumeda to bring an end to the doctrinal disputes which had distracted the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for over a century.\textsuperscript{65} Yohannis proved especially harsh towards Muslims of Wallo, both in the service of his beliefs and as an instrument of political unification. He concentrated his evangelical efforts in Wallo province whose location between Tigray to the north, Bagemdir and Gojjam to the west and Shewa to the south separated the core Christian highlands.\textsuperscript{66}

Four months after the Council of Borumeda, in October 1879, Emperor Yohannis confirmed to Nebura Ed Iyasu, governor of Aksum in Tigray that no Muslim might be allowed to remain in the holiest city of the empire. Yohannis declared that any Muslim who did not want to be baptized, must leave his country. The Emperor also ordered that books about Islamic exegesis should be burned.\textsuperscript{67} On the other hand, the Emperor promised to convert that they would be given inheritable lands property (rist) together with Christians.\textsuperscript{68} Although the offer of inheritable lands to Muslims who were almost wholly bereft of landed property was attractive; Muslims in Aksum and Adwa persisted in their Islamic practices.\textsuperscript{69} In 1881, Emperor Yohannis proceeded to Gondar and razed the mosque at the Muslim quarter. In its place, he built a church.\textsuperscript{70} The Emperor, like his previous declaration in the holiest city-of Aksum, offered the Muslims of Gondar two choices either to embrace Christianity or to leave his domain.\textsuperscript{71} Those who refused to be baptized had to flee to Omdurman in the Sudan and to Wallo where they joined the resistance movement of Shaykh Talha Ibn Ja'far.\textsuperscript{72}
Following the death of Yohannis in his wars with the Mahdist state in March 1889, Minilik II (1889-1913) began to show moderate attitudes towards Muslims. Needless to say however, as Richard Caulk convincingly argued "the apparently moderate attitudes prevailing once Menilik became Emperor in 1889 need not represent a complete break."73 By the turn of the century, a convert from Islam of the name Shaykh Zakaryas began to advocate the primacy of Christianity in Dabra Tabor. His activities troubled the Muslims of Gondar.74 Emperor Minilik issued a proclamation permitting Shaykh Zakaryas to teach in any Muslim area.75 Minilik also granted him one hundred rifles, four thousand Maria Theresa Thalers from the imperial treasury and the fief of Hawarya Abo parish in Bagemdir.76 In such a manner, Minilik also tried to exploit religion for political purposes and encouraged converts from Islam. Nonetheless, Minilik's objective was not so much to promote Muslim conversion as to contain the advance of Islam in his empire-state.77 In Gondar itself, the preaching of Shaykh Zakarya coupled with the attraction of owing inheritable-lands did not bring about a mass Muslim conversion to Christianity.78

Muslims of Gondar adapted to a code of strict social control within their community and were able to manipulate the acculturation process of the Christian state. Their control of acculturative influences enabled them to resist the shocks and troubles of Gondar’s political upheaval in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their economic importance to the Christian state in time of peace allowed them to maintain the integrity of their Islamic institutions. Moreover, they withstood the religious coercion launched by Emperors
Tewodros and Yohannis. Generally, under Emperor Minilik II (1889–1913), Muslims of Gondar like other Muslims elsewhere in the country were ignored which, hence, gave them the freedom to survive and even flourish in their occupational specialization of commerce and crafts. Finally, they were able to survive because the state did not perceive them as a threat to the Christian kingdom. However, the state, and generally more its Christian populace found a mechanism to segregate them territorially and ostracize them socially.
Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Spring Symposium of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on "Popular Islam in Twentieth Century Africa: The Muslims of Gondar 1900-1935", April 2-3, 1984.


4. Ibid.


14. Ibid. See also his "Islam in East Africa", p. 205.

15. Informants: Aligaz Yimar, Garima Taffara, Mitiku Kasse, Nure Ambaw and Yussuf Ahmad. Aligaz was an excellent local historian. He was interviewed at Dabra Tabor on 5 March 1982 and was 87 at the time of interview. Manuscript in the hands of Abba Garima Taffara. The late Abba Garima compiled the manuscript in 1978. He was a major local historian in Gondar. He kindly made the typed manuscript available to me, while I conducted my research in Gondar in the summer of 1979. The manuscript had a wealth of information on Gondarine politics, the church, trade and crafts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mitiku and Nure were merchants interviewed at Addis Zaman on 16-17 Sept. 1979. Mitiku was 80 and Nure 82 at the time of interview. Yussuf was a merchant and an outstanding historian. He was interviewed at Gondar on 14-15 Sept. 1979. He was 61 at time of interview. I had the opportunity to interview him at Gondar on 10-15 January 1988 and at Addis ababa 17-30 June 1990. See also Grottanelli, p. 154.


17. For trade routes frequented by merchants of Gondar in the nineteenth century, see Antoine d'Abbadie, Geographie de L'Ethiopie. Paris: Gustave Mesnil Editeur, 1890, pp. 52-53.


19. Ibid. It is important to note, however, the few Godnarine clergy had mastered the learning of the Christian exegesis.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


27. A Yemenite Embassy to Ethiopia 1647-1694. p.61. For a parallel that the Muslim quarter of Adwa was not exclusively inhabited by Muslims, see Merid Wodle Aregay, p. 61.


30. Ibid., p. 10.

31. Ibid.


37. Informants: Garima Taffara and Yussuf Ahmad, cited supra. See also Richard Pankhurst, "Notes For the History of Gondar" *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1969, p. 209. Simon D. Messing, "The Abyssinian Market Town" in Paul Bohannan and George Dalton (editors), *Markets in Africa*. Northwestern University Press, 1962. p. 391. referred to the Muslim quarter as "the Muslim ghetto". He also mentioned that its name at the time he wrote his article was Addis Alam (New World). Informants: Garima Taffara and Yussuf Ahmad, cited supra attested that the Muslim quarter was renamed Addis Alam, but they did not know of the time that the name change was made.


40. Charles J. Poncet, "A Voyage to Ethiopia in the Years 1698, 1699 and 1700" in William Foster (editor), *The Red Sea and Adjacent Countries At the Close of the Seventeenth century*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1949 p. 110 also relates that the term Jabarti has some connection with the Ge'ez term Gäbir which means servant.

41. Ibid.

42. Quirin, p. 110. For a cogent analysis that the Qimant and the Wayto survived into the present because they did not pose military threat


47.Informants: Garima Taffara and Yussuf Ahmad, cited supra. See also Quitiu, p. 97-98.


53.Informants: Garima Tafara and Yussuf Ahmad, *cited supra*. See also Quin, p.100.

54.Henry A. Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia*. London: Wertheim, Makintosh And Hunt, 1862, p.238. Plowden, p.43, mentioned that there were Nagadrases (chiefs of customs) at Gondar, Yajjube, Darita, Saqota,Dabarq and Adwa, p. 130.

55. Stern, p. 238. For the wars of the *Zaman Masafint*, see Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*.


60.Pankhurst, p. 54.

62. Ibid. p.168. See also L. Fusella, "Le Lettere del Daedara Assaggakhan", *Rassegna Di Studi Etiopici*. Rome: Vol.XII, 1954, p.82. also indicated that the Muslim quarter in Gondar was noted for its commerce, p. 83.

63. Markakis, p. 67.


68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., p.29.

71. Caulk, p.28. See also Simon David Messing, "The Highland Plateau Amhara of Ethiopia" Ph.D. dissertation in Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1957. pp.184-85. mentions that the Amhara Christians considered the Muslims in the midst of the highlands as foreign as Arabs. Ethiopian Muslims, on their part, referred to Amhara Christians as "Kaffir" to mean infidels.


73. Caulk, p. 41.


75. Crummey, p. 61.

76. Ibid. pp.63-64, 66.

77. Ibid., p.64, Caulk, p. 41.
