



Dandii Boru School

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Unit -8

Major Events of the 16th century Ethiopian Region and the Horn of Africa and their Impacts

8.1. Portuguese and Ottoman Turkish Rivalries in the Ethiopian Region and the Horn of Africa

- ❖ The military conflict between the Christian Highland kingdom and the Muslim Sultanate of Adal led to the intervention of Portugal and Ottoman Turkey. At the time, the two super powers of the world were in acute struggle for economic and political dominance in the Horn of Africa. The Portuguese had already established their influence in the Indian Ocean and Red sea regions, which enabled them to control the trade in the Far East. The Ottomans, on the other hand, wanted to chase the Portuguese out of these areas and regain the trade in the Far East, which they lost to control since 1498. To promote their interest, the rival powers interfered in the military conflict between the Christian kingdom and the sultanate of Adal. They used religion as a cover to support the opposing sides. In this regard, Ottoman Turkey supported the sultanate of Adal, while Portugal fought on the side of the Christian kingdom.

8.2. Conflicts Between the Sultanate of Adal and the Highland Christian Kingdom

- ❖ After Zara Ya'eaob's victory over the army of sultan Ahmed Badley of Adal in 1445, the sultanate of Adal was reduced to a tributary status. However, Zar'a Y'eqob's successors were not strong enough to maintain their hegemony over Adal.

- ❖ In Adal there was strong opposition against the status of dependency. From the very beginning various emirs, imams, shayks and powerful merchants put strong pressure on sultan **Muhammad**, the son and successor of Ahmed Badley, to lead a revolt against the Christian kingdom. However, the sultan continued to pay annual tribute to the Christian state. After the death of the sultan in 1470, a civil war broke out in the sultanate. During the years of the civil war the sultans lost their power. Actual power was held by emirs or Imams who completely dominated the sultans. **Mahfuz** was one of the powerful emirs who strengthened the sultanate and launched a series of attacks on the Christian kingdom from the last decade of the 15th century onwards. Mahfuz's attacks continued throughout the reigns of **Eskindir** (r.1478-1494) and **Na'od** (r.1494-1508). Finally, he was killed in a battle by the army of **Lebne Dengel** (r.1508-1540) in 1517.
- ❖ After the death of Mahfuz, various emirs fought against one another for power. But finally the leadership of the Muslim sultanate of Adal Passed to a powerful Imam called **Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi**, who was commonly known in Ethiopia Highland Christian tradition as **Ahmad Gragn** (the left handed). The family background and early life of the Imam are not sufficiently known. According to his chronicler, he was born to a clan called **Balaw** in Hubat, a place located between Harar and Jijjiga, near the present-day Babile. He served as a cavalry officer of Mahfuz and also married to his daughter, **Bati Dil Wambara**. He was an energetic and a very tactful man. As such, he systematically got rid of his rivals' one after the other and became the Imam of Adal.
- ❖ As soon as he took power in Adal and before launching his campaigns against the highland Christian kingdom, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim tried to consolidate his rule in the lowlands. The Afars had already started to make incursions into the agricultural

highlands. Apart from them, the Somali and other pastoral peoples of the region also began to move, along with their cattle, to the relatively fertile highland regions of Harar. These population movements created violent conflicts among the Muslim communities of the southeast. Thus, after much internal fightings, between the Afar, Somali and Harari, Ahmad was able to restore peace in the area. He persuaded the fighting groups to end up their differences and launch a war against the highland Christian kingdom. By playing the role of an arbitrator, he restored peace in the lowland regions and recruited soldiers from the people of the area. Moreover, he also strengthened his army by instilling the spirit of Jihad into the conflict.

- ❖ It should be noted that the conflict between the highland Christian kingdom and the Muslim sultanate of Adal was not over religious issues. This inter-state rivalry was the extension of the earlier conflict. The conflict was between the Solomonic and Walasma rulers over the basic economic interest. It was to control the lucrative Zeila trade routes and the lands through which these routes passed that motivated the two powers to come into conflict. Besides, the Muslims were fighting to regain the independence which they lost to the Christian kingdom earlier and create a Muslim empire of their own.
- ❖ Ahmad opened his campaigns on the Christian kingdom in 1527. These campaigns were mainly launched along traditional lines of raiding the frontier districts under the Christian control and return to the lowlands with large booties. In this year, Ahmad's forces successfully raided Dawaro, Fatagar and Bali, the tributaries of the Christian kingdom. Emperor Lebne Dengel, who defeated and killed Mahfuz in 1517 and who never expected a serious Muslim threat after Mahfuz's death, responded by ordering **Degelham**, the governor of Bali, to march to Adal. But Degelham was defeated by the

Muslim forces of the Imam in Adal. Since then the Christian forces took defensive position. Ahmad then undertook a series of expeditions which took him further westwards into the highlands. In all these campaigns he faced no strong resistance from the Christian kingdom. This strengthened his confidence and motivated him to launch a conventional war against the Christian kingdom. Finally, Ahmad fought a major battle with the Christian army led by Lebne Dengel in March 1529 at a place called **Shimbra Qure**, near what is today Mojo. At this battle, Lebne Dengele and his army suffered a crushing defeat from which they could not recover. Following his defeat, Lebne Dengel retreated to the center of the kingdom. In fact, many of the Imam's soldiers were also killed or wounded in the battle and consequently, the victorious Imam returned to Harar to celebrate his victory and reinforce his army for the next campaign.

- ❖ Imam Amhad Ibn Ibrahim, unlike his predecessors, wanted to build a big empire in the Horn of Africa. To this end, he fought and defeated the Christian army in the first phase of his campaigns and began to make preparations for the total conquest of the Christian kingdom. Therefore, in 1531 he captured Dawaro and Bali and added them to his domain. He then occupied one Christian kingdom territory after another. As such, from 1531 onwards no part of the kingdom was left untouched. Although Ahmad attempted to capture the retreating king Lebne Dengel, he was unable to do so. Hence, the Imam gave up the idea of pursuing the king.
- ❖ Ahmed began to prepare for another major campaign to control the states and peoples in the southern, south-western and western parts of the Ethiopian region. At the time, the Imam's command centers were **Debre Berhan**, **Waj** and **Dawaro**. From these centers, the commanders of his army moved to the south, southwest and west. The campaign took

a little more than a year and was completed in the middle of 1533. This campaign put almost all states and peoples of the southern half of the Ethiopian region under the hegemony of Adal. **Welayita** was the only state which successfully resisted the Imam's army led by **Wazir Ibn Mujahid**.

- ❖ During the last phase of the Imam's campaign, the northern half of the Ethiopian region was attacked. During this campaign, Debre Berhan had served as a command center. Imam Ahmad's campaign to the northern part of the kingdom was completed in 1535. Finally, the sultanate of Adal established its hegemony over the Ethiopian region and a large part of the Horn of Africa. The new Adal-lead kingdom was divided into provinces which were ruled by governors appointed by Imam Ahmad. At first, the Imam established his center in **Aksum**. Later on, the center shifted to **Dembiya**, near Lake Tana. From this center, the Imam ruled the empire until his defeat and death in 1543.
- ❖ After his defeat at the battle of Shimbra Qure, Lebne Dengle sent a letter to Portugal to request them of military assistance. Prior to this, **Queen Elleni**, the wife of Emperor Zara Ya'eqob and regent of Lebne Dengle sent a letter to the Portuguese to obtain military help in 1512. In 1520, the Portuguese despatched an official diplomatic mission to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia as a response to the Queen's letter. However, Lebne Dengle ignored the mission and they left Ethiopia in 1526, without concluding any agreement. Lebne Dengle did this mainly because of his victory over emir Mahfuz of Adal in 1517. Nevertheless, following his defeat in 1529, he realized that he could not resist Ahmad's forces by himself. Hence, in 1535 he sent **John Bermudez**¹ to Europe with two letters addressed to the pope of Rome and the king of Portugal. Unfortunately,

¹ **John Bermudez** was one of those Portuguese who came to Ethiopia in 1520, but unlike his companions, he stayed in Ethiopia by the order of Lebne Dengel.

the Portuguese help was obtained in 1541; one year after the king lost his life in the monastery of **Debre Damo**.

- ❖ In 1541, Bermudez arrived with 400 soldiers led by **Christopher da Gama**, the younger son of the famous sailor, **Vasco da Gama**. The Portuguese soldiers soon began their way to meet the forces of **Gelawdewos**, son and successor of Lebne Dengel. On their way, the Portuguese soldiers fought several battles against Ahmad's forces. In one of the battles they even wounded the Imam and had been very close to capture him. However, Ahmad received 900 infantry men armed with muskets and canons from the Ottomans. Thereafter, Ahmad defeated the Portuguese and killed their commander, Christopher da _ Gama. The survived Portuguese soldiers retreated to the northwest and met with Gelawdewos' forces towards the end of 1542. Meanwhile, the victorious Imam returned to his former center in Dembiya and sent back most of the Ottoman troops. By doing so, the Imam committed a fatal mistake. The Portuguese were not completely defeated. They were so furious at the death of their commander which they wanted to avenge. Moreover, the Portuguese presence had raised the morale of the Christian army under Gelawdewos. Immediately, Gelawdewos led the combined forces against the army of the Imam in Dembiya. The decisive battle was fought in February 1543 at a place called **Wayna Dega**, near Lake Tana. In the course of the battle, the Imam was shot by one of the Portuguese soldiers. A little later, the Imam died and his army retreated to Adal. The battle of Wayna Dega not only ended up in the defeat of Adal but also heralded the termination of the dominance of Adal over the Ethiopian region and the Horn of Africa.
- ❖ The consequences of the wars fought between the Christian kingdom of the Muslim sultanate of Adal under Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim were as follows:-

- The destruction of several churches, monasteries, religious books and mosques.
- The wars brought about the amalgamation of different ethnic and religious groups.
- The wars between Adal and the Christian kingdom also consequently led to the weakening of both the Christian Highland Kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal.

8.3. The Oromo Population Movement

- ❖ The 16th century history of the Horn of Africa tells of the appearance of frequent wars and population movements. The population movements of the Afar and the Somali as well as the Oromo were the cases in point. In this section we will see in detail about the Oromo population movement.

8.3.1. The Original Homeland of the Oromo

- ❖ There are different views about the original homeland of the Oromo.
 - Some claimed that the original place of the Oromo was the southeastern highlands.
 - Oromo oral traditions, on the other hand, told us that the Oromo original homeland was the south-central highlands.
 - Recently discovered evidences suggested that the east of the Rift Valley lakes, around the course of the Genale River was the original place of the Oromo.
 - **Madda Walabu** was the political and religious center of the Oromo and is found on the Bale-Sidamo borderlands.

8.3.2. Causes for the Oromo Population Movement and Expansion

- ❖ The main factors for the Oromo population movement and expansion were:-
 - The prevalence of war and chaos in the Horn of Africa in the second half of the 15th and the early 16th centuries.

- The changing of the natural environment of the Oromo homeland. For example, climatic changes.
- The growing number of the population of the Oromo.
- The search for pasture for their growing cattle.

8.3.3. Oromo Institutions and Social Organization

❖ The Oromo had their own political, economic, social and religious institutions even before their movement.

❖ The Gada system

- It is the political, economic and social organization of the Oromo.
- According to the Gada system, Gada classes succeed each other every eight years in serving the Oromo people in the military, political, social and religious positions.
- The male members of the society are expected to join the Gada classes and at the same time they are required to pass through a number of age grades.
- The duration of one age grade is eight years.
- People are promoted from one age grade to the next as they advanced in age.
- The young Oromo people obtained trainings in the first five age grades, which serving them as schools.
- The sixth age grade (41-48 years) is known as **gada**, in which political, social, military and ritual leadership is attained.
- The **Chaffe** was the supreme body of the Gada system.
- The head of the Chaffe was elected democratically from among the gade age grade.

- The head of the Chaffe was known under the title **Abba Bokku** or **Abba Gada**.
 - There was also the **Abba Dula** and the **Abba Sera**, who served as the commander of the army and the enforcer of the traditional Oromo laws respectively.
 - A one Abba Gada and other officials will serve for eight years.
- ❖ The economic activities of the Oromo's before the advent of their movement and expansion were as follows:-
- Pastoralism
 - Sedentary agriculture
- ❖ The Oromo had their own traditional religion in which they worshipped one chief god known as **Waq** (sky god).
- According to this religion, the **Qallus** played an important role as intermediaries between the Oromo people and the Waq.
 - The Oromo people highly reputed the Qallus.

8.3.4. Directions and Stages of the Oromo Population Movement

- ❖ Before the beginning of their movement, the Oromo people categorized into the **Barentu** and the **Borana** confederacies.
- Both confederacies were the combinations of smaller divisions and clans.
 - The Borana confederacy comprises Mecha, Tulama, southern Borana and Guji clans.
 - As far as the Barentu confederacy was concerned, it includes Karayu, Marawa, Ittu, Humbana, Akachu, Wollo and Arsi clans.
- ❖ The Oromo population movement and expansion believed to have started around 1522 and lasted until 1618.

- The movement was carried out in two major directions in the Ethiopian region.
- Accordingly, the Barentu spread from north to the south and the Borana moved from north to west.
- The movement also went as far as Kenya and Somalia.
- ❖ The Oromo population movement had two stages.
 - During the first stage which was in the first half of the 16th century, the movement was small and slow.
 - The second stage witnessed a large- scale movement and it took place from the mid- 16th century till 1618.

8.3.5. Consequences of the Oromo population movement for the Ethiopian region and the Horn of Africa

- Following the Oromo population movement and expansion, the Oromo began to settle in the new areas they expanded.
- The appearance of ethnic and cultural intermingling between the Oromo and the conquered peoples.
- The Oromo population movement and expansion resulted in the demise of the kingdoms of Damot, Wollega, Bizamo and Enarya.
- The weakening of the Christian Kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal was also partially attributed to the outcome of the Oromo population movement and expansion.
- As far as the Oromo people were concerned, following their expansion, the Oromo started to run sedentary way of life and became agriculturalists.
- The Oromo's conversion into Christianity and Islam was also evident after their expansion and movement.

❖ The secrets behind the success of the Oromo population movement and expansion were list down hereunder:-

- The Gada system which provided training and military organization.
- The involvement in the expansion of almost the whole society was another reason.
- Moreover, the Oromo were brilliant in utilizing the horse during the course of their expansion.
- The Oromo institutions such as **Medhicha** or **Moggassa** (adoption into a clan of a tribe) and **Guddifacha** (a form of parent adopting a child) can be considered as a factor for their swift success.
- Furthermore, the Christian Kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal were in a position of weakness when the Oromo population movement set off.

“What matters in History is what people believe not what the truth is”

BY David Chapple