



Power of Politics, Patterns of Dynastic Marriage and Elite Family Integration in Ethiopia: The Experience of Gondarine Period, 1636-1769

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pattern of dynastic marriage that linked the royal court with various provinces during the Gondarine period (1636–1769), ultimately resulting in elite family integration and ensuring state continuity. This inquiry seeks to shed light on the significance of dynastic marriage in maintaining the power balance and cohesion of the elite family integration state during the period under study. The Gondarine period was a remarkable time in which a state successfully sustained its power and territorial integrity through strategic dynastic marriage arrangements and ensuing elite family integration. This traditional practice, which involved political alliances between monarchs and provincial chiefs, served as a means of balancing power, managing common interests, and fostering unity among the royal classes. Throughout the periods under study, various Gondarine emperors such as Fasiledes (1632-1667), Iyasu (1682-1706) and Mintiwab (1728-1767) established political marriage alliances with various provincial ruling classes such as Eritrea, Tigray, Begemidir, Gojjam, Wollo, Gojjam, Lasta and Wag. Dynastic marriage was a significant political instrument, and it played a crucial role in maintaining the power and influence of the ruling classes. It was not just a civil union between male and female, but a strategic alliance between ruling classes that served to strengthen their positions and maintain power. It was a way for the ruling classes to secure their claims to the throne, consolidate their power, and maintain their influence over different regions. In maintaining the continuity of the royal lineage, dynastic marriage also played a significant role in shaping the social and economic landscape of the kingdom. By marrying into other powerful families, royal couples were able to access new resources, expand their networks, and increase their influence over different regions. In producing this article, I consulted relevant literature, traveler accounts and chronicles. Traveler accounts and chronicles are contemporary primary sources written during the period under study. Both traveler accounts and chronicle sources are carefully examined and cross-checked against other secondary sources.

Key words:-Dynastic marriage, elite family integration, state continuity

INTRODUCTION

Power and politics are state-crafted instruments that could determine the continuity of the state, territorial integrity and ethnic integration in any state. Power is all about the “ability to influence the behavior of others to get a desired outcome” (Nye, 2008). It is also “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber, 1947). The

influencing power of politics could be manifested through a win-win approach, violence, and the use of force. Politics is an instrument applied by the state to meet certain expectations, make laws, and amend general rules under which the people live.

Located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is known in ensuring the tradition of state continuity by establishing and indigenizing administrative skills and the hierarchy of power relations between the

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central monarchy and provincial governors. The legitimacy of state power and governance had been characterized by the existence of old kinship and religious-oriented administrative structures. As state authority was derived from *Fitha Negest* (the law of the kingship), monarchs exercised absolute power and below them, they appointed their own loyal chiefs to different administrative positions. The hierarchy of power and trends of governance were religious-oriented, and the system does not permit spaces for secular issues. Any opposition against the practice of kings was considered as an act of heresy. The king was the principal lawmaker and responsible for church and state affairs.

The tradition of kinship based governance was very common during the early and late medieval periods. For instance, Emperor Zara Yacob (1434–1468) was known for appointing his family members over various principalities, thereby placing entire provinces under his kinship rule. As stated in his chronicle (2007: 6), the emperor appointed his sisters such as Dilsemera, Bahir Mengesh, Sofia, Amete Giyorgis, Rome Geneyale, Medhin Zemeda and Abalemariam over Tigre, Angot, Gidem, Yifat, Menz, Damot and Begemedir, respectively. Though networks of governance was dominated by kinship with little spaces of check and balance, public services and loyalty to the people were governed by certain sets of moral ethics. “ድኻ እንዳይበደል፤ ፍርድ እንዳይጓደል” (don’t victimize peasants, don’t favor while offering justice) were the most common moral ethics that the ruling classes used to alarm the appointed chiefs to offer fair administrative justice to the people. The moral ethics let local chiefs serve the people equally. For instance, while notifying Be’ada Mariam (1468–1478) to be his successor, Emperor Zara’a Yacob (1434–1478) advised him to implement the following ethical principles:

- ከሰዎች መግለጃ ገንዘብ አትቀበል:-
- በምትሰጠው ፍርድ ሁሉ ጠንቃቃ ሁን:-
- መልካምና አስተዋይ ሁን (Alemu, 2007:2)::
- (Do not receive money from the people for reward)
- (Be careful while offering justice)
- (Be faithful and sensible)

The hierarchy of power relations and nature of governance in the Gondarine period was not a new trend; rather the continuity of an age-old tradition. The basis of administrative structure and principles of state governance in the Gondarine period were similar to those in the Aksumite and early medieval periods. Like in the Aksumite and early medieval periods, the power of the king was unquestionable, appointment was kinship, and the legitimate power was derived from *Fitha Negest*. The church

constantly encouraged the state to expand administrative territory and preach the gospel (Tadess, 1972: 90; Tadese, 1988:14–16). The Church appointed monks, while the state provided military support. In explaining the continuity of power relations, James Bruce (1790:280), who had been in the capital, Gondar for brief periods, wrote that “kings of Abyssinia are above all laws, supreme in all causes, ecclesiastical and civil, land and persons of their subjects are equally their property.” The ruling classes had the privilege to appoint and promote their own family members and legible loyal chiefs to different administrative units, following the pattern of marriage arrangements. This was done to defend the power and position of the monarch, but the trend paved the way for elite family integration and the continuity of state survival in Ethiopia.

The administrative bases of the Gondarine kingdom interconnected three social classes: peasantry, nobility, and royal families. Peasants, which comprised the majority of social classes, were unprivileged groups subjected to paying different kinds of taxes and labor exploitation. In the middle, there were nobilities, appointed to different levels of positions, including provinces. The provincial governors were hereditary chiefs, recognized by the central monarchy as rulers of the local dynasty. At the top, there were royal families. The emperor was the ultimate power holder, responsible for overseeing religious and political matters. The palace and high-level state affairs were run by church-educated courtiers, who had different titles such as *tsehafi tizaz*, *ras bitwoded*, *raq maserie* and *bilaten geta* (Tekele Tsadiq, 1953: 282-283). Similarly, lesser courtiers or nobilities of the provincial governors with different titles such as *dejazemach*, *asrat*, *azaj*, *fitawrari*, *qegnazmach* and *bejrond* run middle level position. Patriarchs (*abun*), *aka’ebe se’at*, *tsiraq maserie*, *liqe kahinat*, *abe’a minet* and *emäininet* were titles exclusively given to church leaders. Relations between the monarchy and lesser chiefs depend on loyalty. Lesser chiefs could stay in their positions as long as they respected orders from the monarchy. Personal attachment, military career, ability to submit the expected amount of tribute and willingness to accept orders from the monarchy determine one’s stay in the position. Frequent court visits, commonly called *dej tinat*, were also an instrument used to elevate individuals to certain positions.

The Gondarine period (1636–1769) was an exceptional time, where resilient state power and territorial integrity were maintained through dynastic marriage arrangements and the resultant elite family

integration. The tradition of defending state power and checking territorial expansion through traditional political marriage arrangements and resultant elite family union was an old-fashioned practice, but the pattern was widely practiced during the Gondarine period. The elite marriage was a political instrument that central monarchs and provincial chiefs used to manage common interests, maintain power balance and promote family integration between royal classes.

The central objective of this paper is to explore the pattern of dynastic marriage, which interconnected the royal kingdom with various provinces resulted in elite family integration in Ethiopia during the Gondarine period, 1636–1769. This inquiry seeks to shed light on the significance of dynastic marriage in maintaining the power balance and cohesion of the elite family integration, status of royal women and their property right during the Gondarine period. It is evident that the Gondarine period and its political dynamics are focal themes relatively studied in Ethiopian historiography. The late historian Professor Merid is a renowned scholar who studied the Gondarine period. However, his paper focused on state politics and elite political dynamics, while the patterns of dynastic marriage, elite family integration and their role in the continuity of state survival were overlooked. Similarly, Bairu Tafla (1972), Richard Pankhurst (1997) and Heran Sereka (2002) produced insightful works on the dynamics of dynastic marriage in Ethiopia. However, Bairu's work was limited to Shewa during the reign of Menelik II (1889–1913), while Pankhurst focused on the post-medial period. Heran's PhD dissertation is exclusively limited to elite marriage and the politics of ethnicity in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the pattern of dynastic marriage and its role in transforming elite family integration during the Gondarine period are not sufficiently studied.

From a methodological standpoint, this article is based on gray literature, traveler accounts and chronicles. Traveler accounts are contemporary sources written by various European travelers and missionaries, who witnessed the tradition of dynastic marriage and the influencing role of ruling houses. Likewise, chronicles are the primary sources that help us understand the issue in time and space. Both traveler accounts and chronicle sources are consulted with great care and cross-checked against other secondary sources.

State Politics and Challenges of Post-War Reconstruction

The establishment of Gondar as the seat of the royal court is associated with Emperor Fasiledes (1632–1667), who shifted the royal court from the Lake Tana area to the present site in 1636. The shift of the royal capital from the Lake Tana area to Gondar seemed necessitated for strategic reasons and human settlement. Oral traditions in Gondar argue that Fasiledes selected Gondar as a seat of the royal kingdom for its strategic location and human settlement. As Gondar is bounded by mountains, it was chosen for defense and security purposes. The town is also situated at a strategic site, where long-distance trade routes bypass Gallabat and Massawa. As Gondar is situated at a meeting point for traders coming from southwestern Ethiopia, Gallabat and the Red Sea regions, the need to control trade and trade routes might have motivated the king to shift royal capital. As compared to the Lake Tana area, Gondar is a healthy place, where periodic malaria epidemic outbreaks do not regularly occur. This seemed to inspire the king to make Gondar a royal capital. Malaria was the major killer disease in the Lake Tana area.

Fasiledes came to power at a very complicated time. He faced multifaceted challenges in reconstructing state politics, relations between state and society, state and provinces and state and church. Notably, he publicly criticized his father, Susenyos, for imposing Catholicism on the kingdom. In a series of family discussions, Fasiledes famously asked his father, "ለምን የገዛ ህዝብዎን እርስ በርስ ያስተላልፏል?" (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 260-261) ("Why do you let your people fight each other?") Amidst the kingdom's struggles with a bloody religious civil war, Fasiledes prioritized re-establishing the monarchy, restructuring provincial administration, restoring the ancient Orthodox faith, reconfiguring foreign relations, and addressing other pressing issues.

In order to renew the relationship between the monarchy and the peasants, the emperor appointed Orthodox nobility over territories that were ruled by Catholic chiefs. Provincial governors, who were missing to submit arrear tribute to the central kingdom during the chaotic periods were forced to resubmit in new form (Berry, 1976: 9). Some of the provincial nobilities that failed to submit the previous tribute were replaced by new loyal chiefs. In some areas, where Catholicism was strong, the emperor dismantled the old administrative system and restructured the local governance in a new form. Catholic defected royal families and suspected nobles were removed from their positions and replaced by old-faith supporters. New governors were appointed

over Semien, Lasta, Wag, Tigre and principalities adjacent to the Tekeze River. In Tigre, nobilities, who were removed by Susenyos because of their refusal to accept Catholicism were reinstated. Royal families, who were potential threats to the throne were imprisoned in remote areas of Gojjam and the Islands of Lake Tana.

On the other hand, administrative measures taken by Emperor Fasiledes created challenges for his new government. In some provinces, like Tigre and Lasta, chiefs refused to pay tribute and revolted against the new administration of Fasiledes (Merid, 1971: 530). Za-Mariam, the Catholic-minded governor of Tembein and other local chiefs welcomed the Catholic bishop, Alfonso Madaez and his followers. They attempted to provide them protection and were determined to fight the new monarch. They attempted to mount an anti-Fasiledes movement and frequently asked the Portuguese government to send them military support. Similarly, series oppositions against the kingdom of Fasiledes came from Lasta (Wudu, 1995: 27). In 1634, the emperor personally led a campaign against Lasta and succeeded in killing the rebel leader, Me'alaka Kirstos. However, Lasta declined to pay tribute to the Gondar and the revolt against the kingdom of Fasiledes was continued by Melkamariam. In the early 1650s, Lastan forces atrophied most territories, including Gondar itself, as the emperor was preoccupied with the campaign to fight Oromo in Damot and Agaw Medir, south of Lake Tana. In the late 1650s, the emperor launched a series of military campaigns against Lasta and Wag and devastated the territories. However, at last, the conflict between Lasta and Gondar was settled through dynastic marriage. Mediated by the churchmen, the Lastan chief, Melkamariam was submitted in 1658. To normalize the relations between Gondar and Lasta and build trust and cooperation, Fasiledes married his daughter, Tawkelya to Melkamariam (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 274-275).

As part of his administrative readjustment, Fasiledes also introduced new reforms in church-state relations. Basically, Fasiledes came to power with the strong support of the clergy and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. The support of clergy to Fasiledes to assume the throne was commonly known as “ፋሲል ይንገስ፤ የእስክንድርያ ሀይማኖት ይመለስ” (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 261) (let Fasil assume throne, may Alexandrine religion restore). However, relations between Fasiledes and the Orthodox Tewahido church were not always smooth. Some extremist clergy, monks, and Egyptian bishops, who

didn't want to see peaceful interfaith dialogue with *Qibat* (unction) challenged the emperor. Unlike Jesuits, the emperor followed a “policy of toleration” and reconciliation towards *Qibat* sects (Berry, 1976: 11). He preferred peaceful interfaith dialogue and debate; instead of using force. When conservative clergies, monks and Egyptian monks resisted him, the emperor dissolved their power and position. To consolidate the position of the church over *Qibat* and the Jesuits, he brought moderate bishops from Alexandria and renowned church scholars from the monastery of Debre Libanos, Shewa. In the late 1630s, a new center of religious teaching and debate was established at Azezo Saint Tekle Haimanot Church, where a series of discussions between courtiers and clergy also took place. After a series of debates and dialogues chaired by the newly imported Egyptian bishops, a decision was passed to burn the Catholic copies of the books and translations deposited anywhere.

However, relations between the Fasiledes and *Qibat* sects continued to upset state politics. Some provincial rulers, *Qibat* clergies and monks developed independent religious doctrine and challenged the old Orthodox doctrine. When the debate between the *Qibat* and Tewahido sects became a hot issue, Fasiledes passed religious decrees in 1654 and 1667. The decision condemned *Qibat* sects as heresies. Additionally, Tewahido extremist groups that refused peaceful debate and favored coercive measures against *Qibat* were punished. Some extremist Orthodox Tewahido monks, who refused peaceful religious debate with *Qibat* sects were forced to abandon the Church of Tekle Haimanot. These groups, who were not happy with Fasiledes's approach towards the *Qibat* sect, attempted to instigate the emperor's little brother, Gelawdewos to revolt against him in 1638. Similarly, backed by ardent Tewahido sects and courtiers, who were unhappy with the emperor's liberal approach towards *Qibat* sects, Dawit II revolted against his father in 1666 and 1667 (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 274; Berry, 1976: 14). The plot was, however, discovered.

In the face of a continuing domestic political and religious crises, Fasiledes died in October 1667, even before designating a successor. The death of Fasiledes was kept secret until his son Yohannes I took the throne and potential power contenders were detained at Wuhni Amba, royal prison. Keeping the death of Emperor Fasiledes secret, *Bilaten Geta* Melka Kirstos, who was a closer advisor of the emperor, held a secret meeting with key courtiers such as *tsahafi tizaz*, *aka'ebe se'at*, *liqe mamihiran*,

echege, etc and approved Yohannes's (1667–1682) ascending to the throne (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 275). The death of the emperor was hidden for two reasons. One was to avoid possible power struggles among the royal families, while the second was to safely collect tribute from tributary kingdoms and maintain smooth relations between the center and provincial territories. It was feared that provincial nobilities might revolt and refuse to submit tribute if the death news of the emperor became public.

In his first years of reign, the new emperor made *shum-shir* (promotion and demotion). *Bilaten Geta* Melka Kirstos, who played a key role in the enthronement of Yohannes, was elevated to the position of *reisa mequanint*. Moreover, he released most political prisoners imprisoned by his father, except royal power contenders who were imprisoned at Amba Wuhni. He tried to promote friendly relations between the monarchy and provincial governors, church and society. Furthermore, he attempted to normalize relations between the central monarchy and disputed territories by canceling arrears. However, Yohannes I declared harsh religious law that favored only Tewahid doctrine, while *Qibat*, Muslim and Judaic followers were marginalized. The emperor also issued marriage and settlement laws, which banned inter-religious marriage and mixed settlement between Orthodox and non-Orthodox societies. Under this law, marriage union between Orthodox and Muslim/Bete Israeli (Judaic) followers was banned (Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 276).

These harsh religious policies continued to survive until they were canceled by Iyasu I (1682–1766). Unlike his father, Emperor Iyasu seemed to be a moderate and non-conservative leader. He removed conservative courtiers from both the capital and provinces; instead appointed liberal-minded officials. His sister, Elleni was appointed as governor of Semien, while *Dejach* Enistasyos was appointed over Damot. In Agaw Medir, Iyasu appointed a local Agaw chief named Chihuay. Similarly, conservative chiefs in Gojjam and Begemidir were removed; instead, *Fitawrari* Fiseha Kirstos and *Agafari* Asrat were appointed, respectively. Some conservative clergymen, who were known for encouraging Yohannes I to take harsh measures against non-Orthodox followers were replaced by moderate minded officials. For instance, *Abba Za-Kirstos* was replaced by *Echege* Hiriyaqos, while Aka'ebe se'at Qustentinos was ousted and in his place, *Abba Asere* Kirstos was appointed ((Tekle Tsadiq, 1953: 276).

The reign of Iyasu I also witnessed a revival of commercial and friendly relations between the Gondarine kingdom and the neighboring Muslim countries, which declined during the reign of Yohannes I. Iyasu also improved relations between the central monarchy and merchant societies. In order to normalize relations between the kingdom and merchant classes, the emperor introduced new tax reforms. Accordingly, the number of customs posts and checking points in each province, where traders were forced to pay customs duties was reduced. To promote trade, the emperor appointed more experienced foreign officials over customs officials. An Armenian born, Murad was appointed as head of the Red Sea customs office, while Egyptian Haji Ali was appointed over Metema-Gallabat border customs post (Monroe, 1935: 111).

However, domestic politics and foreign relations faced a new crises following the illness of Iyasu I. Domestic political crises appeared due to power struggle among his three sons: Dawit, Tekle Haimanot and Bekafa, born from three different wives, Qidistie, Melkotawit and Mariamawit, respectively, turned the country into chaos. The situation was exacerbated by the revival of religious controversy. *Qibat* followers, who established a strong hold in Yibaba, Gojjam revolted against the center and threatened the position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Girma and Merid, 1964: 86–87). The power rivalry for succession affected the economic status and political stability of the kingdom. The kingdom was weakened and failed to effectively control trade and trade routes and collect tribute from different provinces. Relations between the kingdom and church, the emperor and royal families, the monarchy and provincial nobilities were characterized by mistrust and suspicion. Disputes between the central monarchy and provincial nobilities repeatedly appeared due to disagreements over revenue sharing, tax collection, delay or failure in submitting expected amount of tribute, religious debate, hereditary position, territorial claims, etc. Excessive love for authority, absence of a clear power transition in the kingdom and lack of a well-defined hierarchy of power relations between courtiers lead to conflicts and instability.

Pattern of Dynastic Marriage and Elite Family Integration

It is evident that marriage is a culturally recognized union between male and female that determines the continuity of generation. Unlike civil marriage, dynastic marriage was derived from the mutual political and economic concerns of the ruling classes.

It was practiced to check political loyalty, avoid suspicion, and promote trust and cooperation between the ruling classes. Dynasty is “a kinship-based political organization promoting the interests of a family across generations, which claims a right to power ground in the medieval nation of lineage and inheritance,” while dynastic marriage is “a cross-generational [alliance] of individuals constituted by land ownership and sovereign rights, and whose members married partners of equal rank and social standing to maintain and expand their existing and power political positions” (Curtis, 2013; Liza, 2015:45)

Dynastic marriage had been serving as a political instrument not only in medieval Ethiopia, but also in most European countries during the medieval and late modern periods. The ruling houses in England, Spain, Germany and Austria practiced dynastic marriage for political and economic motives in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For instance, the Catherin of Aragon (Spanish) and English Tudor monarchs practiced dynastic marriage for common political and economic purposes. In Austria and Germany, Habsburg monarchies managed to build vast Holy Roman Empire through dynastic marriage in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Fichtner, 1976: 243-244).

In Ethiopia, dynastic marriage seemed as old as the state itself. In its long history, it was practiced between culturally and ethnically different groups for political and economic motives. Marriage was arranged by the respective parents to meet their political and economic expectations, while the interests, physical maturity and age limits of spouses were insignificantly considered. Dynastic marriage had different patterns and connected royal families with various provincial and local governors across the region. Royal families never gave more than one daughter to the sons of the particular noble family; rather, daughters were married to different provincial chiefs or their sons across the country. This was made to extend the networks of political attachment and increase the course of political alliances. The trend had played its own role in promoting not only trust and common alliance between the ruling classes but also creating elite family integration.

Several ruling elites practiced political marriage even with traditionally marginalized communities, violating established cultural and religious norms. It is evident that religious differences and social factors determined marriage union in the Christian society of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, medieval political elites

moved beyond these traditional bindings and maintained political marriages with those communities that were ethnically, culturally and religiously unrelated. In explaining the practice of political marriage between inter-religious groups in the 16th century, contemporary eyewitness, Portuguese traveler, Francisco Alvares (1961:193) wrote that medieval Ethiopian emperors had “always five or six wives,” mostly married from local Muslim families in the southern Ethiopia. They married the daughters of local Muslim chiefs to control trade and trade routes, collect tribute, Christianize society, avoid mistrust and promote a common alliance. Likewise, Pankhurst (1997: 445) argued that dynastic marriage was an important political weapon that most Ethiopian medieval royal classes used to avoid mistrust between each other, instead strengthen mutual political and economic benefits. Moreover, Bairu Tafla (1972: X) stated that dynastic marriage was beyond economic and political significance; rather, it played a significant role in transforming the cultural landscape, religious affiliation and ethnic integration.

Across different geographic regions, several Solomonic ruling classes practiced dynastic marriage for economic and political reasons. For instance, Emperor Ba’eda Mariam (1468–1478) married Zan Jella, a daughter of *Garad* Mohammed, chief of the Islamic sultanate of Hadiya. This political marriage was deliberately made to safeguard the trade route and collect tribute in gold, coffee, slaves, ivory and incense resources. Muslim background, Jan Zella was baptized and renamed Elleni. She became a very influential woman and played a significant role in placing the Sultanate of Hadiya under the Christian Highland Kingdom. She managed to influence the *garads* of Hadiya to terminate paying tribute to the Sultanate of Ifat, instead strengthening ties with the central monarchy (Abir, 1965:205-219; Heran, 2002:75). In order to integrate Hadiya with the Christian Highland Kingdom, Elleni arranged several marriage unions between the daughters of *garads* and the sons of royal families of Christian Highland Kingdom.

Similarly, Emperor Sarsa Dingel (1563–1577) married Harago, a woman of Judaic background and sister of Gedion, chief of the Bete Isaeli community in Semien. The emperor married this woman from a culturally, ethnically and religiously unrelated community to avoid the possible attacks of the Bete Israeli community against his newly established court at Guzara, Enfranz (Pankhurst, 1997:446). This political marriage, made between different ruling

houses that had different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds left far-reaching consequences in elite family integration, linguistic and religious affiliation. Eventually, the Judaic-Bete Israeli communities converted to Orthodox Christianity. Their language and culture were affiliated with the royal monarchy of Gondar. Additionally, as the emperor had no male son from his principal wife, Mariam Sena, his four sons, born from the Bete Israeli woman (Harago) named Yacob, Za-Kirstos, Meteko and Kifile Mariam, got an opportunity to get involved in royal politics. Yaco, with a half-Judaic background, was enthroned for brief periods. Some Bete Israeli chiefs, who were politically integrated into the royal court played a key role in the emperor's military expedition towards different peripheries.

In the north-central highlands, the Oromo clans succeed in establishing their own dynasty through intermarriage with the existing local chiefs. Following the expansion and settlement of Oromo in Wollo, they expanded their territory using intermarriage with local chiefs. Various Oromo clans intermarried with the pre-existing people and founded a new dynasty called *Mammadoch*, meaning Imams. It was notably founded by Mohammed Ali, also known by his horse name Abba Jiboo (Taye, 1964: 63; Asnake, 1983:1; Husein, 2001: 17). His successors, especially Amede expanded the administrative territory of *the Mammadoch* dynasty as far as Dawunt and Dellanta, using political marriage with notable local chiefs as instruments. In the early 1660s, *the Mammadoch* dynasty was threatening Gondarine rule over Begemidir. The *Mammadoch* ruling classes managed to preserve their administrative territory in Wollo using political marriage as a device until the rise of Kassa Hailu in the second half of the nineteenth century.

However, the pattern of dynastic marriage and elite family integration was widely practiced between the Gondarine kingdom and various provincial governors. Successive Gondarine emperors, including Fasiledes himself established frequent dynastic marriages with the provincial chiefs of Lasta, Tigre, Wollo, Hamassen (Eritrea), etc. Fasiledes (1632-1667) and Emperor Iyasu I (1682-1706) established political marriage with the ruling classes of Hammasen. Fasiledes married his daughter to Hab Sellus, chief of Hamassen, while Iyasu I married the daughter of Hamassen chief Walata Tsion in 1683 (Pankhurst, 1997: 207–202). Fasiledes recognized Hab Sellus's rule over Hamassen and empowered him to collect tribute from the coastal lowlands of the Red Sea and safeguard the trade route

passed to Mawassa. In response, the chief of Hamssen agreed to recognize the overlordship of Fasiledes and cooperate in expelling Jesuit missionaries from Ethiopia. Both Fasildes and Iyasu I maintained marriage relations with the chiefs of Hammasen to control the strategic sites of the Red Sea region. They knew that friendly relations with the chiefs of Hamassen determined their commercial and political relations with neighboring Muslim countries and the Red Sea region.

Likewise, Emperor Fasiledes established dynastic marriage with the nobilities of Lasta and Wag as a major strategy to settle disputes and incorporate territories into the Gondarine kingdom.¹ As stated above, Lasta and Wag frequently revolted against Fasiledes. The dynastic marriage was one of the political instruments that he used to settle conflicts. The emperor married his daughters to various local chiefs of Lasta and Wag, who ruled sub-districts such as Mekeit, Chccheho, Wadla and Dehana. Besides, local chiefs, who served the emperor in his military campaign in Lasta were given daughters for marriage. For instance, one of the emperor's daughters was married to Za-Sellasie, a local military commander who led successive campaigns of Fasiledes in Dahna district, Wag (Heran, 2002: 79; Wudu, 1995: 21). Successive marriage ties between the two ruling houses had their own implications for integrating the Agaw-speaking communities of Wag and Lasta into the Gondarine kingdom. In stating the implication, Wudu (1995:87) argued that Agaw language speakers of Lasta were subjected to a greater degree of linguistic assimilation. As stated above, the time that Emperor Fasiledes came to power was very difficult and complicated due to the policy of Catholicization. In the meantime, most rural people and nobility revolted against the center and refused to pay tribute. In such a complex period, the dynastic marriage that he had maintained with the families of different provincial nobilities played a significant role in restoring peace in the kingdom and creating elite family integration between the center and peripheries.

Glorious dynastic marriages during the Gondarine period were witnessed during the era of Minitwab (1728–1769), wife of Bakafa (1721–1730). Born in

¹As argued by Wudu (P. 21), various Solomonic monarchs, including Yikuno Amlack (1270–1285), Amede Tsion (1314–1344), and Libne Dingil (1508–1540), married the daughters of Lastan nobilities or gave their daughters to them or their sons for economic and political purposes.

Quara and well versed in traditional knowledge and skills of administration, Mintiwab was a prominent woman who dominated imperial politics for nearly four decades and connected the Gondar kingdom with various ruling classes through political marriage. She started the practice of political marriage alignment from her family members in Quara. When married to Bakafa, she convinced her husband to recognize her father's position over Quara and appoint her Quaran brothers to various administrative positions. Minitiwab began her involvement in royal politics in 1728, but after the death of Bakafa in 1730, she emerged as a dominant force in Gondarine politics. By putting her symbolic child, Iyasu II (1730–1755) on the throne, she exercised real power and consolidated her central position by establishing dynastic marriages with the families of powerful provincial nobilities. *Dejach* Nicolawos (later *Ras*), brother of her grandmother, Yoliyana was appointed over Semien, who eventually established a series of marriage arrangements with the local chiefs of Simien, Tegedie and Wolqait. Eventually, he was brought to the capital, Gondar and became viceroy.

Mintiwab also appointed her Quaran relatives to different levels of positions in the capital and provinces. Her brother, *Ras* Wolda Leul, who was appointed as viceroy after the death of Nicolawos was the real power defender of the royal court until his death in 1767. The pro-Quaran appointment policy of Mintiwab caused disappointment and stiff resistance from non-Quaran royal classes. For instance, *Ras* Elias and Mamo Tensie, who were not happy with Iyasu's ill leadership revolted against him. They wanted to enthrone Hizikiyas; instead of Iyasu II, but the plot was aborted by *Ras* Wolda Leul (Tekle Tsadiq, 1981: 36).

In the faces of critics against Minitwab, she used dynastic marriage as an important political device to maintain power balance in the capital and provinces. She managed to link her royal families with different provincial nobilities in Begemidir, Wollo, Tigre and Gojjam. Surprisingly, all of Mintiwab's families, relatives and descendants were intermarried with the families of politically important nobility.

Mintiwab established dynastic marriages between her family and the governor of Begemidir. Her daughter, Aster Iyasu (nicknamed Milmil) was married to *Dejach* Yemariam Baria, Governor of Begemidir. In establishing marriage relations with notable local chief Begemidir, Minitwab managed to create not only elite family integration but also build her popularity in Begemidir. Similarly, Mintwab

connected her royal family with the local ruling chief in Gojjam. Walata Israel, her daughter, was married to *Dejach* Yosediq, the local governor of Gojjam. Mintiwab arranged this dynastic marriage between the ruling houses of Gojjam and Gondar to avoid threats posed by *Dejach* Yosediq. The political marriage shaped the relationship between Gondar and Gojjam. The Gondarine princess, Wala Israel became an instrument in introducing the Gondarine style of land grant system, property rights, inheritance law, and church painting in Gojjam. She established Mota Giyorgis Church in 1766, which eventually became a great learning center (Habtamu, 2011: 146). She continued to play an influential role in the politics of Gojjam even after the death of her husband, *Dejach* Yosediq in 1758. Her son, Haile Iyesus (later renamed *Ras* Hailu I), took the throne, while she continued to play an active role in granting land to churches and church painting in Gojjam. In later periods, her descendants became influential in Gojjam. Her son, *Ras* Hailu I (1775–1795), and his successors were very influential hereditary chiefs, who ruled Gojjam until 1932.

Furthermore, Mintiwab was known in arranging dynastic marriage ties between Wollo Oromo, a Muslim-ruled house and her royal family. Wollo Oromo chiefs, who established a strong base in the heartland of Yeju and sections of Begemidir, including Debre Tabor were a threat to Mintiwab's position in the province. Using her personal skills and experience, she managed to reduce the threat by arranging a political marriage between her family and the ruling chief of Wollo Oromo, Amizo. Accordingly, the daughter of Amizo named Wubit (later baptized as Bersabeh) was married to her son, Iyasu II. Mintiwab maintained this marriage ties with the Muslim and Oromo families, ethnically and religiously unrelated for political purposes.

The dynastic marriage between the Wollo Oromo family and the royal classes of Gondar left far-reaching consequences in creating elite family integration, political, religious and linguistic affiliation between Amhara and Oromo elites. The Oromo chiefs who were intermarried with the ruling classes of Gondar speak both Afan Oromo and Amharic languages. As witnessed by James Bruce (1790: 662), the Afan Oromo language was spoken in the capital, Gondar, though its service was limited to secret communication. Indeed, Wollo Oromo chiefs got an opportunity to get involved in the politics of Gondar, which in the meantime had been dominated by *Quaregnoch*. On the death of Iyasu II in 1755, his son, Iyaos (1755–1769), born from an Oromo

background, Wubit took the throne and appointed his Oromo kinsmen to different administrative positions. James Bruce (1790: 662), who was a contemporary eyewitness, stated that Iyaos favored Wollo Oromo chiefs in the appointments to different positions. He brought his two uncles, Lubo and Birlie from Wollo and gave them high positions. Lubo was brought to the capital, Gondar and appointed as a viceroy, while Birlie was appointed as governor of Begemidir, removing Yemariam Baria (Tekle Tsadiq, 1981: 40).

Furthermore, Mintiwab arranged dynastic marriages between her family and the ruling class of Tigre. Her younger daughter Alitash was married to Wolda Hawariat, son of Michael Sehul. This political marriage created an enabling political space for the ruling classes of Gondar and Tigre to cooperate on mutual issues. Michael, who had previously served in Hamassen became politically influential over Endarta, Tämben, Adwa and Aksum in 1754 (Ismail, 1972:82). To get recognition in these territories, Michael approached Mintiwab cordially. On her side, she sought Michael's support. As Michael's territory was strategic, where a long-distance trade route crossed to Massawa, he became important in checking the interest of Gondar in the region. When revolt appeared following the death of Emperor Iyasu II in 1755, he supported the empress military to pacify internal political crises. With the military support of the Tigrean chief, the crises in the capital was pacified and Iyaos (1755–1769) was appointed as a symbolic monarch. As Michael's importance to Gondar became significant, Mintiwab married her daughter, Aster Iyasu (nicknamed Milmil) to him. Aster, who was formerly married to Yemariam Barria was remarried to *Ras* Michael Sehul of Tigray.



Fig. 1: Aster Iyasu
Source: James Bruce, (1790, Vo. I)

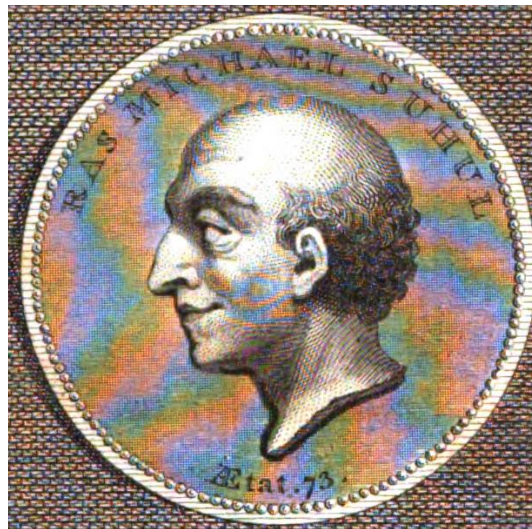


Fig. 2: *Ras* Michael Sehul
Source: James Bruce, (1790, Vo. II)

The dynastic marriage between Gondar and Tigre served as a political instrument to balance the power struggle between Wollo and Gondar. Mintiwab used *Ras* Michael as a political instrument to balance her power and weaken the influence of Wollo Oromo chiefs in the capital, Gondar. Iyaos, who had an Oromo background, challenged the old political legacy of Minitwab. In explaining the challenge of Iyoas against Minitwab, Teklestadiq wrote that--- እንግዲህ በቃሽ አሁን ተራው የእናቴ ነው---” (Tekle Tsadiq, 1981, 40) (Hereafter, yours is enough; now it is my mother's turn.) He challenged her old policy of appointing *Quaregnoch*.

Mintiwab brought him to Gondar and appointed in place of *Ras* Wolda Leul. *Ras* Michael started exercising real power at the expense of the Iyaos and Wollo Oromo chiefs. Eventually, Michael instigated anti-Iyaos forces in the capital to revolt against him. In May 1769, Michael eliminated Iyaos and instead enthroned Yohannes II, aged, one-handed, and incompetent leader. For brief periods, Michael continued to build political alliances with some provincial chiefs using the age-old culture of dynastic marriage. Like Mintiwab, he married his daughters to potential nobility or their sons. For instance, his daughter, Walata Sellasie was married to the new emperor, Yohannes II. Similarly, Princess Alatish, the daughter of his grandson, Wolda Hawariat was married to *Dejach* Wondwoson, who was appointed as governor of Begemidir. Michael also married his daughter to *Dejach* Goshu of Gojjam, while Walata Sellasie (the daughter of his granddaughter) was

married to Fassil Waragna. With this arrangement, Fasile Waragna was appointed over Mecha, Agaw Medir and Damot (Heran, 2002: 85).

However, anti-Michael movements flared in various provinces, including the capital itself. The provincial nobilities who were married to his daughters could not tolerate him. In the first place, Yohannes II got little acceptance among the royal families and the church. As he was ceremonial, physically handicapped (one-handed) and lacked administrative skills, the church and royal families were not happy with him. Eventually, Yohannes II was assassinated and replaced by fifteen-year-old Tekle Haimanot II (1769–1777). Moreover, provincial nobilities in Lasta, Gojjam, Wollo and Begemdir, who were not happy with Michael's political maneuvering revolted against him. *Dejach* Goshu (governor, Gojjam), *Dejach* Wondwoson (governor, Begemdir) and Lastan chiefs jointly defeated him in 1771. He was placed under house arrest at Dibiko (located between Gashena and Lalibela) for a year, kept by *Dejach* Mondwoson (Tekle Tsadiq, 1981: 42). In 1772, *Dejach* Wondwoson released Michael and let him go to his early base, Adwa, where he stayed for the next seven years. In spite of the defeat of Michael, the central monarchy declined economically and politically.

Royal Women

It is evident that females in Ethiopia were marginalized in social, political and economic aspects for centuries. Marginalization against rural women in particular was very common in land holding, property administration and property sharing when divorce took place. Unlike rural women and common civil marriage, royal females during the Gondarine period enjoyed privileges. They had privileges in property rights, inheritance land and administering inherited properties. In this regard, Crummey (1981:445) argued that women of the royal families were “treated as equal to the males of her class.”

Empress Mintiwab and her daughters, who were married to different provincial chiefs made extensive land grants to the royal women. For instance, Mintiwab owned eleven *gasha* of land, while her daughters, Walata Israel and Aster were granted fourteen *gasha* of land each. Moreover, the royal women who were married to different provincial chiefs and their sons had the right to inherit slaves, sale and grant lands to churches and individuals (Habtamu, 2011:128; Crummey, 1981b; 453 & 464). Royal parents granted slaves, cattle, rifles, mules, and home utensils to their daughters when they got married. For instance, Mintiwab granted twelve

gasha of land to her daughter, Aletash, when she got married to Wolda Hawariat, while *Ras* Michael Sehul provided his son with one hundred guns, thirty swords, one hundred slaves, one thousand cows and two hundred oxen (Crummey, 2000: 111, 125, and 190). However, spouses separately own and administer land and properties offered by their respective families. A husband had no ground to claim the personal property of his wife, granted by her family. Similarly, a wife had no right over the properties of her husband. Regarding property administration between the spouses of the royal family, Pankhurst (1990:69) wrote that “lands after marriage were kept wholly separate,” where neither a husband nor a wife could claim. Divorced spouses took their own properties, like land, slaves and other movable personal properties.

Royal women served as instruments for satisfying the political and economic interests of the ruling elites. They were forced to get marriage, divorce and remarried by her family, or the third bodies. Marriage, divorce, and remarriage were made without the will of daughters and women. As conflict and mistrust between the royal families were very common, divorce was also common in political marriages. The marriage breakup commonly appeared due to missing loyalty, family pressure, dissatisfaction and quarrels between the royal classes. If one of the couple's family members or couple's themselves are missing political loyalty, marriage would be ended with divorce. The divorced women would be remarried to other potential ruling elites.

CONCLUSION

The power dynamics and governance structures during the Gondarine period (1636–1769) exhibited remarkable continuity with earlier times, specifically the Aksumite and early medieval periods. Its administrative framework and principles of state governance were characterized by an absolute monarchy, kinship appointments of officials and a sacrosanct notion of divine right, rooted in the concept of *Fitha Negest*. The ruling elites possessed the prerogative to appoint and promote family members and loyal chiefs to various administrative positions, following the pattern of marriage arrangements. The Gondarine period (1636–1769) was a remarkable time in which a state successfully sustained its power and territorial integrity through strategic dynastic marriage arrangements and ensuing elite family integration. This traditional practice, which involved political alliances between monarchs and provincial chiefs, served as a means of balancing power, managing common interests and fostering

unity among the royal classes. Throughout the periods, Gondarine emperors such as Fasiledes (1632-1667), Iyasu (1682-1706) and Mintiwab (1728-1767) established a series of political marriage alliances with various provincial ruling classes such as Eritrea, Tigray, Begemidir, Gojjam, Wollo, Gojjam, Lasta and Wag. Upon ascending to the throne, Fasiledes faced a complex array of challenges in reconstructing the political landscape, reconfiguring relationships between the state and society, the state and provinces and the state and the church. While revitalizing the relationship between the monarchy and provincial ruling classes, Fasiledes used dynastic marriage as one of the key political instruments to maintain territorial integrity and elite family integration. The pattern and practice of dynastic marriage were largely implemented during the time of Minitwab, the wife of Bakafa. Born in Quara, Minitwab was a prominent woman who established a network of alliances with various ruling classes through political marriage. She managed to link her royal family with different provincial nobilities in Begemidir, Wollo, Tigre, and Gojjam. She used dynastic marriage as a political instrument

to maintain power balance in the capital and provinces.

In conclusion, Dynastic marriage was a significant political instrument that played a crucial role in maintaining power balance, ensuring territorial integrity, creating elite family integration and creating common alliances between the center and provincial nobilities. Dynastic marriage was not just a civil union between male and female, but a strategic alliance between ruling classes that served to strengthen their positions and maintain power. It was a way for the ruling classes to secure their claims to the throne, consolidate their power, and maintain their influence over different regions. The practice of dynastic marriage had far-reaching consequences in elite family integration and linguistic and religious affiliation. However, the royal women served as instruments for achieving the political and economic interests of the ruling elites. Females at an early age were often forced into marriages without their consent. Marriage was seen as a means to achieve political and economic goals rather than a union between two females and a male.

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