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# Historical survey of land tenure system and women's right to resource access in Northern and Central Ethiopia

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This article attempted to examine how the evolution of land tenure system in north and central Ethiopia historically resulted in unequal resource accesses as far as gender relations are concerned. The article is an outcome of historical research and the researcher has employed a qualitative research method. Accordingly, written historical documents related to the study were consulted carefully and important secondary sources were also referred to. Having analyzed the historical evolution of land tenure system, the study also tried to indicate that the question of access to land had not only been an economic issue, but also a political and cultural one at the state level for many centuries. As this study unraveled, in Ethiopia for at least two millennia, both the acquisition and inheritance of land had been highly patriarchal because the state mobilized the military who usually happened to be men to expand its territory. Hence, land was occupied and defended mostly by men. As the usual habit of the patriarchal system elsewhere, the claim to possession of land was based on belonging to a descent line of an original father who happened to be the first to occupy the land. Since unlike men, women usually did not get the chance to participate at the line of military confrontations that were launched for territorial expansions and land acquisitions, they were deprived of the right to land access. Consequently, this land tenure system in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia resulted in the creation of a deep rooted gender biased socio-political structure that denied women the access to important economic, political and social privileges.

**Key words:** Land tenure, *sirit*, gender relations, *rist*, *gult*, militarism, Ethiopian women.

## INTRODUCTION

In agrarian society like Ethiopia, landed property is by far the most important kind, because access to productive land was the basis of livelihood for most of the country's citizens and because access to the product of the land was essential to the survival of the country's ruling class (Crummey, 2000). As part of the society, no matter how important for their livelihood, historically, Ethiopian women have been the most disadvantageous social group as far as access to land is concerned. For rural women, the major indicator of their material deprivation can be traced

to their lack of land, the most significant livelihood-sustaining asset (Zenebework, 2000).

Nonetheless, these days, women's land rights issue has gained focus in the gender discourse and is considered as mechanism for enhancing women's empowerment at household and community levels. However, land tenure discourse is lagging behind in ensuring women's access to and control over land (Almaz, W, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, MA Thesis in Gender Studies). In spite of substantial global advancements and policy

considerations in women's equal rights, their equal right to land is not ensured in most settings in Ethiopia. Achievement is even less in ensuring women's control over land (Ibid). In view of this, gender-transformative policies, such as the provision of independent right of land, would require a multiple and simultaneous points of intervention (Zenebework, 2000). One form of the involvement is the historical study of the age old land tenure in northern and central Ethiopia through the concept of gender relations. In this region, historically, since there were no fundamental differences in the basic structure of land tenure among the peoples such as the Agäw, Tigray, Amhara and some section of the Oromo (Wällo and Šäwa), attempt is made to discuss the gender biased land tenure in these provinces in a homogeneous way.

Defined as the rules and regulations about the holding and use of land in society (Bahru, 1998), the historical studies of land tenure in northern and central Ethiopia has attracted the attention of scholars for about a century. In fact, the initial concern was altogether a result of colonial aspiration. The scholarship of land tenure began with Italian observations on the conditions prevailing in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, a tradition which continued under British occupation in the 1940s (Crummey, 2007). After 1950s, a number of scholarly writings that focus largely on land tenure in north and central Ethiopia have been published (Huntingford, 1965; Pankhurst 1966; Berhanu 1971; Hoben, 1973; Mantel-Niecko, 1980; Crummey, 1981, 2000; Pausewang, 1983; Merid, 1986; Dessalegn, 1994; Shiferaw, 1995; Crewett et al., 2008). As some of these works are compilations of charters of land grants and lists of types of land tenure, others are scholarly attempts to analyze the essence of land tenure through decades and centuries.

In their approaches, the literature on Ethiopian land tenure can be categorized into two groups. In the first category, which represents the majority of the literature, three terms i.e., *Gult*, *Rïst* and *Gultä-rïst* have occupied predominant positions and become key conceptual frameworks. Whereas in the work by Shiferaw (1995), it is the concept of *Sirit* that is employed essentially to analyze the Ethiopian land tenure system. By and large, the writings that approach the study of land tenure utilizing terms such as *Gult*, *Rïst* and *Gultä-rïst* mainly explain the differences among these three types of land tenure institutions and their major parameter to categorize them is the very presence or absence of the right of inheritance in subsequent generations in the holding and use of land. Thus, the essential point in the discussions of all these writings is to conceptualize the *Rïst* (land-use) right as permanent rights exercised by the members of the descent group and *Gult* (fief-holding) rights as temporary ones exercised by individuals upon whom the state conferred for their services as intermediaries (Merid, 1986). *Gultä-rïst* is analyzed as a land right which used to be the combination of *Gult* and

*Rïst*. Though these scholars, in relative terms, do not consider issues related to the benefits and the duties of the holders of these institutions as conceptual frameworks, they do discuss them quite reasonably.

When Shiferaw (1995), taking into consideration the very views and assumptions of Ethiopian scholars (Gebrewold, 1956; Mahtemesellassie, 1950; and Desta 1970) on the country's land tenure, employs the concept of *Sirit* in his analysis of the evolution of land tenure system during the imperial era in Ethiopia, he emphasizes issues related to the obligations attached to a piece of land of any kind. In order to understand the complex institutions of the holding and use of land, Shiferaw (1995) argues one must first study the obligations that were attached to a piece of land, the reason why obligations were attached, in what manner and under what circumstances these obligations were put into practice etc.

Regardless of their distinct perspectives, the contributions of the above mentioned writings in historical knowledge production on Ethiopian land tenure are very considerable. However, except Crummey (1981), no historical study has tried to see land tenure system through gender relations. Other studies that deal with issues related to Ethiopian land tenure from gender perspective merely deal with the post 1974 revolution development; hence their analysis is only synchronic (Zenebework, 2000; Dessalegn, 1991; Pankhurst, 1992; Ritu, 2007; and Almaz, W, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, MA Thesis in Gender Studies).

Consequently, much is not known about women's land rights that pertain to the time before and after 1974 due to little scholarly articles in Ethiopia. The problem is more critical for the period prior to 1974. The available literature, by no means, can provide comprehensive and detailed picture of Ethiopian women's status, their property rights in land, and other related matters (Yonas T. University of Tromso, Norway, Masters of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies). One of the objectives of this article is to fill this gap. It is needless to state here that land tenure in Ethiopia is a result of historical processes that cannot be reduced to a onetime phenomenon. Land tenure, as a social reality, is the result of complex forms of human action and interaction. Questions, hence, such as how did the gender biased land tenure in Ethiopia come to be constituted as it appears are crucial.

Crummey (1981), having examined the land charters published by Rossini (1909), Oriental manuscripts collections of the British Library as catalogued by Wright and the land transaction material in Add. 1570, a *Gi'iz* manuscript in the library of Cambridge University, attempts to examine the position of women in the period from 1740-1850s. He argues that even though women did indeed hold extensive rights in land, no roles in the various processes of land transfer-whether as givers, recipients, buyers, sellers or guarantors-were male monopolies. According to him, the evidences refute the view that

Ethiopian “noble” women consistently enjoyed a relationship of parity with men. Ethiopian society, he notes, in the period under review was clearly patriarchal in its organization, and women of the ruling class suffered accordingly (Ibid). Since this historical study is mainly based on the textual analysis of documents which dealt with only *Gult* from the view point of gender, it does not examine the basic nature land tenure system in Ethiopia in connection with women land rights.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To undertake this research, the researcher employed a qualitative research method. Hence, written historical documents related to the study subject are consulted carefully and important secondary sources were also referred to. Since this study aimed at examining two themes i.e., land tenure and the position of women within it, two appropriate frameworks are employed. In conceptualizing land tenure in Ethiopia, the concept of *Sirit* addresses more issues related to the evolution of resources (land) access than the terms such as *Gult*, *Rist* and *Gultä-rist*. As a rule, there is no land-use or fief right that the concept of *Sirit* does not sort out. In other words, *Rist* and *Gult* were used as forms of *Sirit* and, according to Shiferaw (1995), there was no land without *Sirit*. Thus, *Sirit* is an all-inclusive framework. Furthermore, it is only through the concept of *Sirit* that one can infer that the obligations attached to any kind of land and fief rights were the top priorities of the state in its very functions (conquest and land acquisitions, consolidation, religious evangelization, arbitration etc) for centuries. These top priorities of the state had been determining and strengthening the patriarchal nature of land tenure in Ethiopia. Hence, in dealing with the evolution of land tenure in Ethiopia, *Sirit* as conceptual framework was used.

Since the objective of this article is to scrutinize the position of women in the evolution of Ethiopian land tenure, it is needless to stress the aptness of gender relations as conceptual framework. It is apparent that concern with gender relation as analytic category has emerged only in the late twentieth century. It is absent from the major bodies of social theory articulated from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scott, 2000). Gender, in this sense, is a conceptual realm of varieties of studies on women. Among these studies, the writing of women’s history is worth mentioning. Beginning in the United States in the 1970s, women’s history has probably done more than any other recent radical innovation to modify the shape of the discipline, enlarging its subject-matter and influencing its modes of explanation (Tosh, 2000). The reality in Ethiopian historiography is far from this phenomenon. While in many African countries the stage has been reached where works of synthesis and more sophisticated gendered analyses are being carried out,

the Ethiopian scholarly scene remains largely devoid of works that explore the historical experience of the country’s women (Belete, 2002).

## Land by Conquest, *Sirit*, and the Position of Ethiopian Women

Northern and central Ethiopia has been the venue of historical developments which have brought about the evolution of different economic, social and political formations. One of the institutions which underwent important changes in the central highland is the land tenure system (Bahru, 1998). Since land has occupied vital position in these societies, this historical juncture seems to have its own entrenched ramifications on the evolution, if not on the origin, of gender relations. Hence, the historical development of the important base of the political economy (land tenure system) of the region is focused on.

There are three clear instances of the dynamics of conquest and occasions for rulers to reward their followers with grants of land at work: the first period of Solomonic rule in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the expansion of the Šāwan kingdom in the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, and Emperor Mīnilik II expansion of the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Crummey, 2000). In the first instance, the Christian kingdom brought many provinces under its control. In the second and third occasions, according to Addis (1975), feudal centralization-expansion, annexation and administration of territories-had started earlier in Šāwa than in the surrounding area. As partial continuation of this regional process, the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a ferocious process of conquest, annexation, incorporation and subjugation of peoples and territories (Ibid). The last process of expansion was in fact without parallel in the history of Ethiopia. Emperor Mīnilik II pushed the frontier of the Ethiopian state to areas beyond the reach even such renowned medieval empire builders as *Nigusä Nāgäst* Amdä Tsiyon (r.1314-1344) (Bahru, 1991). Since all these occasions of expansion did not have significant changes with respect to the position of women and their access to land, this historical survey, instead of following the conventional chronological narrative method, will merely focus on conceptualizing the major themes in the subject matter.

Historical studies show that the lands on which the state distributed among his followers designating various privileges and obligations were occupied by war of conquest. At the time of its emergence in the last quarter of 13<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, the Solomonic state ruled a narrow strip of territory on the eastern, highland edge of the Great Rift Valley escarpment, running from approximate area of today’s Addis Ababa north as far as parts of Ethiopia (Crummey, 2000). As Taddesse (1972)

explains thoroughly, in the consecutive two centuries there were dramatic changes in this regard:

The vast tracts of land that had recently come into their possession by conquest provided Amdä TSION and his successors the real bases for their political and military power. In this they were merely following the precedents of earlier dynasties of the Christian kingdom. All the Christian provinces in the north were originally acquired by wars of conquest. It is apparent that every such conquest was followed by allotments of land being distributed in fief among the king's followers and heavy dues being imposed on the conquered people (ibid).

Though it is very challenging to figure out the changes and continuities of similar traditions of the conquests and allotments of lands among the followers of the sovereign since the period of Axumite kingdom, there is an argument that all the Christian provinces in the north were originally acquired by wars of conquest. This seems to be very clear from the inscriptions of the early Aksumite kings, particularly that of Adulis, first reported by Cosmas Indicopleustes in his *Christian Topography* (ibid). The state mobilized the military to expand its territory for about two millennia (Bahru, 2008). It is due to this fact that, for instance, the traditional titles of the northern and central elites were full of designations such as *Ras*, *Azmač*, *däjäzmač*, *fitawrari*, *grazmač*, *qäñazmač*, etc. These have been political-cum-military titles and the administrators and judges in times of peace readily became commanders in times of war (ibid). Since 13<sup>th</sup> century, land was, thus, occupied and defended mostly by force. Furthermore, it is clearly identified that in historic Ethiopia, for centuries the state was run by land rather than by money. This is because revenues from arable land were insufficient to run the state, for this reason, the land itself was allocated [by the sovereign] to people who would give various services (Gebrewold, 1956).

Hence, the economic basis for the power of the Christian monarch lay in his traditional right to distribute fiefs in return for military or other services. The ideological background for this was ultimately derived from the theory that all land within his dominions belonged to the king (Tadesse, 1972). When Tadesse gives historical examples, he states that

*In his famous conflict with the monastic leaders..., Amda Siyon is also said to have demanded their absolute obedience to him because they lived on the land of the king. His son and successor Sayfa Arad is also said to have made the claim that 'God gave [all the] land to me. A more practical example of this royal prerogative over land is furnished by the abundant records of land grants made by the kings and in their name to churches and individuals (ibid).*

Referring to the numerous 'land charters' that deal with grants of land to churches, monasteries and individuals by some thirty kings, local rulers or other personages of former times, Huntingford (1965) writes that they reflect

the workings of a very basic historic institution: the power of the monarchy over the land. A closer look at the records of Gebrewold (1956) and Mahtemesellassie (1950) too, which are authoritative sources on fundamental nature of Ethiopian land tenure during the imperial era, indicates that the very allocation of land (*Sirit*) by the king/ruler was almost determined by the services that the sovereign in need of.

The fact that the monarchs of the northern and central Ethiopia had spent their time in the conquest and consolidation of the provinces since the 13<sup>th</sup> century indicates that militarism and monasticism were the two major predominant ways of life in the region. To be a soldier, to bear arms, was a sign of manly distinction. The evolution of the meaning of the term *Çäwa* is in itself indicative of the high prestige that attached to the soldier's profession....In more recent times, the acquisition of firearms has been a matter of utmost pre-occupation to every Ethiopian, particularly in the northern part of the country (Bahru, 2008). Seen through this context of militarism, it is not difficult to observe that land tenure in Ethiopia has been a male-dominated institution historically.

It is estimated that there are about 800 monasteries in Ethiopia and some 22 in Eritrea (Kaplan, 2007). The *Gult*-holdings of monasteries were an integral part of Ethiopia's land tenure system and administration. A monastery often received land from the emperor or local ruler upon its foundation (ibid). On all *Sämon* lands and the *Gult*-holdings of monasteries, the obligations imposed were church services which were in turn almost entirely patriarchal in their nature. Hence, from the very inception of the evolution of land tenure, women's access to resource (land) was near to nothing. Consequently, both militarism and monasticism had direct impacts on the evolution of Ethiopian land tenure as far as gender relations are concerned. Before dealing with how women were marginalized in the evolution of land tenure, let us focus first on the concept of *Sirit*.

It is noted in the above lines that the concept of *Sirit* is a key toolkit to understand the evolution of the Ethiopian land tenure system. According to Shiferaw (1995), basically *Sirit* had four meanings. The first denotes obligation. On any piece of land one or another service or tribute obligation would be attached. There was therefore no land without some kind of obligation attached to it. The second meaning denotes ownership. A particular piece of land with the obligations could be given out in perpetuity (*Rišt*) or temporarily (*Madäriya*). These decisions are made at the time when obligations are attached to the land, or even later (ibid). The third meaning of *Sirit* is tribute imposition. A lord or king would impose on a district, or even a province or provinces tribute to be paid in, say, honey or closes or horses or grain, etc. The fourth meaning of *Sirit* is billeting. Soldiers and lords are spread among the people of an area in accordance with their land (ibid). In all these meanings of *Sirit*, it is

important to emphasize the fact that the very agent was the state which was busy since 13<sup>th</sup> century in annexation and consolidation of new territories.

When we scrutinize the role of women in period of conquests which were the major means of land acquisition, historical sources tell us that women in Ethiopia were not mobilized at the line of confrontation in war fronts until very recently. However, there is no doubt that women were present in most military engagements. From the *Pagan Inscription of Ezana* and chronicle of Emperor Amda Tsion in 14<sup>th</sup> century, we learn that women were camp followers in the wars of conquest and raids. The later document, for example, mentioned the presence of queens and concubines in the courses of wars (Huntingford, 1965). This reality continued in the consecutive centuries.

Innumerable women invariably accompanied the court and army. Emperor Lebna Dingel's camp, according to Alvarez, thus included many camp followers, mainly women, who carried "pots for making wine and porringers for drinking," and was also the site of numerous tents assigned to the "kitchens and cooks", as well as to the Amaritas, or courtesans who may be considered the Ethiopian equivalent of Japanese geisha girls (Pankhurst, 1990).

As camp followers, along with their importance in cooking and fulfilling the sexual desire of warlords and soldiers, most of the time, women were involved in kindling the military moral of fighters in actual battles. This role of women was unrelenting in the subsequent centuries. Women in the early nineteenth century continued to play a by no means insignificant role in warfare. They often called their men folk to arms, accompanied them to battle, and incited them to fight with valor (Ibid). However, there were some exceptional cases in which women involved in campaigns in similar manners as the men did. In late 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to Pankhurst (1990), for instance, one of the chronicles reports that women began to ride on mule-back, spear in hand with their belts tightened, and their *Sämmas*, or togas, draped over their heads. The "unlady like" behavior incurred the displeasure of Emperor Iyasu I who accordingly issue a decree, in 1691, ordering the practice to cease.

What is interesting in the status of women in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century is that females became fief-holders, because they had previously mobilized their dependants for war. Unfortunately, Ras Mikael Siñul insisted that females should actually join their soldiers in wars. James Bruce writes that all those, whether women or men, who had fiefs of the crown, were obliged to furnish certain numbers of horse and foot. The women were seldom obliged to personal attendance, till Ras Mikhael made it a rule, in order to compose a court or company for *Woizero* Esther (Bruce, 1790 IV). By the late Gonderine period too, there is evidence of a significant number of women landowners in and around the city, as well as a noble-women buying and selling land, giving estates to the church, and acting as witnesses for land sales

(Crummey, 2000). One strong woman personality that calls the attention of scholars in Gonderine court politics and land issues in 18<sup>th</sup> century was Mentewab. Crummy notes:

*Gender has not been a prominent theme in this book up to this point. Political power in Ethiopia was monopolized by men, and the church, the institution through with the sources dictate that we approach the study of gult, was also heavily male. Women appear primarily on the margins of the records on which our story so far has been based. Mentewab breaks this mold. Her chronicle treats her gender ambiguously (Ibid).*

Though these are exceptions in the male dominated evolution of Ethiopian land tenure, these stories clearly show us the strong link between access to land and masculine behavior. In conquest, it was not only land that was allocated mainly among the military chiefs and their followers but also other properties of the conquered people. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance, plunder enriched the members of the victories armies and their families. The royal court controlled this process of violent redistribution, which took goods from enemies and meted them out to friends, supporters, and allies, in such a way as to reinforce social hierarchy and inequality. In later times, kings monopolized booty in cattle, which then used to feast their retainers and followers (Crummey, 2000). Once the development of the political economy of the state and societies dictated by patriarchy for scores of centuries, women could not have options save submission and resistance.

As attempt is made to conceptualize the institutions of *Sirit* in the previous pages, the agent of *Sirit* was the state which was busy since 13<sup>th</sup> century in annexing and consolidating new territories. Almost always, the monarch used to distribute land and grant land related rights to his followers for their services they would give him in return. According to the list of Gebrewold (1956) and Mahtemesellassie (1950), for instance, we can infer that the kinds of lands on which a certain obligation imposed could be accessed only by persons who were able to give those services. These were either military or church services.

Gebrewold (1956) could list down about forty-two types of land on which a certain kind of obligation/s were imposed. Similarly Mahtemesellassie (1950), in his part, could record about eighteen major types of land which had been arranged in similar fashion. Among these, seen through the concept of gender relations, *Sirit* were highly patriarchal. Except for the *Sämon* (church) land, obligations of military services were common over the majority of lands. These military services, in fact, were various in the *Sirit*. The granting of a piece of land, for example, to a soldier who gave service by transporting tents during campaigns and then taking part in the ensuing battles, mean that an obligation to give carrier and fighting service is imposed on that piece of land (Shiferaw, 1995).

The obligations attached to the lands (*Gult*, *Rīst* and *Gultä-rīst*) were mainly military services during the time of the campaign that were almost exclusively patriarchal. Consequently, military and militarism which is a telling feature of patriarchy, took a central position for centuries in Ethiopia land tenure system. It is obvious that in historic Ethiopia, for instance, the measuring unit of land is known as *gaša* (shield). A glance at the etymology of the name of this measuring unit as stated in Ethiopian sources illustrates this point most. As Gebrewold writes:

ገሻ ማለት በባህር ውስጥ ከሚገኝ ጉማሬ ከሚባል የአውሬ ቆዳ ተሰራ ነው፡፡ የዚህም አገልግሎት በቀድሞው ዘመን የነበረው ጦርነት ጦር እየወረወረ ወደ መውጋት ስለሆነ ለጦሩ መመከቻ የተሰራ ነው፡፡ ከዚህም በቀር የፈረስ ሜዋታ ሲደረግ ለሚወረወረው ዘንግ መመከቻ የሚያገለግል ማከላ ከያ ገሻ ነው፡፡ ... ይህንን ግምት ሁሉ መናገር ያስፈልገው የገሻን መሬት ምክንያት ለመዘርዘር ስለሆነ ለወታደር የሚሰጠው መሬት ሲዋጋ በሚመክትበት ስም ገሻ ይባላል፡፡ (ገ/ወልድ እንግዳ ወርቅ, 1948).

*Gaša* (shield) means a weapon made up from hide of hippopotamus. Its service was to defend oneself from spears because in ancient times spear was the major weapon of attack. In addition to this, *Gaša* (shield) was used as defensive tool in games with horses. These all descriptions are provided to explain why land is measured in *Gaša*. Land given to a soldier was named after the word *Gaša* by which he defends himself (Gebrewold, 1956).

As sources since Aksumite period indicate, large tracts of land came to be under the control by the state through wars of conquest. The military power was exercised by organizing male soldiers. The implication is that women were marginalized in the land allocation. It seems pretty probable why we do not have a term *äqñi inat* (original mother), for instance, in the discourse of *rīst*. As Hoben (1973) identified in his study, the claim to *rīst* possession is based on belonging to a descent line of *äqñi äbat* (original father) who happened to be the first to occupy the land. He is known as the *äqñi äbat* (original father) or *Wanna äbat* (main father) (*Ibid*). What traditional titles given exclusively to men such as *fitawrary*, *däjäzmač*, *grazmač*, *qäñazmač* etc. imply also is that wars of conquest which resulted in land acquisition and plunder were significantly male dominated. Even *Gaša*, the traditional measuring unit of land, as stated in the above lines, symbolized masculine power in its elemental form, force. A number of sources indicate that the above mentioned tradition has been practiced until the twentieth century. Provinces had been governed by military chiefs and they used to allocate lands to their respective soldiers (Hailesellassie, 1937). It is needless to note that *Sämon* land on which obligations related to church services imposed was male dominated land tenure.

It is apparent that the *Sirit of Rīst* is both ancestral descent claim and effective possessions of land. The contradiction between descent claim (that is descent based) and effective possession (that is individual) is the

foundation of the people-land and people-people relations in the *Sirit of Rīst* system (Teshale, 1995). The result was the development of suspicious and antagonist personality among common descents. Intra-kin killings were not abnormal and the basic source of conflict was the contradiction between descent claim and effective possession of the *Sirit of Rīst* land (Hoben, 1973). Thus, the *Sirit of Rīst* land needs not only who cultivate but also safeguards it from potential contenders.

The peripheral position of women also is seen in the right of land inheritance even by claiming common descent of *äqñi äbat* (original father). Teshale (1995) explains that in *Rīst* rights, men had advantage over women since women could not trace *Rīst* claim/ possession through their husbands while men did through their wives. In other words, men had three lines of claims-through their father, through their mother, and through their wives-while women had only two, father's and mother's. What is important in *Rīst* land is that women did not have equal access to its effective possession and this can be partly explained by the gender division of labor wherein men were identified as the food providers, the tillers of the soil, while women's role was perceived as one of rendering help (*Ibid*). This shows that land tenure in Ethiopia had been both a cultural and political issues.

**‘Land to the tiller’ under peasant associations**

It is apparent that one of the root causes of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution was the oppressive land tenure system that was devised to safeguard the interests of the few for a number of centuries at the expense of the economic security of the majority of rural population. Hence, there was optimistic view among the proponents of the Revolution when the land reform of 1975 was proclaimed. However, a gender-aware reading of the land reform proclamation clearly reveals the biased assumptions about women's needs, roles and capabilities in the framing of the policy (Zenebework, 2000). This is because of political reasons. To begin with, farmers had access to agricultural land through Peasant Associations (PAs), institutions created by the state (Metz, 2007). With the exception of female-headed households, most women were excluded from membership in these institutions, as only heads of households are registered as members. By 1990, it was estimated that women were only 12 per cent of Peasant Association membership (Zenebework, 2000). It is worth to mention here that the PAs were the major state apparatus created by the regime to control the rural population. Hence, like in the medieval and early modern period, the issue of land tenure in Ethiopia was a political one. When Zenebework examines the other practical failure of the 1975 land proclamation, she writes:

*Initially, land was distributed by family size and registered*

under the male head of household. In using the household as the unit of [land] allocation, the policy assumed that households were uniform and it failed to take account of the intra-household distributional relations. Secondly, the policy assumed that the gender division of labor in agriculture was immutable and classified women with persons who, due to illness or age, could not personally cultivate their holdings. In other words, the reform failed to challenge the cultural taboo against women ploughing and sowing and, hence, reaffirmed the beliefs, practices and contracts which governed the relations between women and men (*Ibid*).

Even though the current government has established gender sensitive legal frameworks (FDRE, Proclamation No. 1/1995, *Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*; FDRE, *Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation*, Proclamation No. 89/1997; FDRE, *Family Law of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, Proclamation No. 213/2000; FDRE, *Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation No.456/2005*) and some attempts have been made to secure the women's rights promised in the provisions, it is difficult to argue that the problem of access to land among rural women is addressed fruitfully. Studies show that women have remained disadvantaged in many ways. Gender equality has not been achieved and women do not enjoy equal rights with men in accessing and having control over land and other productive resources. This is because access to and control over resources and benefits is determined by socio-cultural norms which have significant impacts on gender relations (Almaz, W, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, MA Thesis in Gender Studies). Regardless of policy provisions, implementation in the study area revealed discrimination against women in access to and control over land. Findings from assessment of the regional rural land policy and the survey conducted reveals gaps between policy provisions and actual implementation (*Ibid*).

Even an impact assessment on land certification indicates that female-headed households are unable to take full advantage of their cultivated area by renting out sufficient amounts of land. Furthermore, certification programs that seek to reduce tenure insecurity and increase productivity may have greater effects on male-headed households than female-headed households. Hence, while certification is clearly beneficial to farm level productivity, it does not necessarily lead to more gains for female-headed households (Mintewab and Holden, 2010). The problem is, thus, more of cultural and political which is the legacy of the past.

## Conclusion

As attempt was made to explain the issue of women's access to land historically in the above lines, *Sirit*, which was the result of territorial expansion, had marginalized

women at the outset because of the patriarchal nature of the services (military and church) that the state needed from its followers or, in other words, the patriarchal nature of the obligations imposed on the land. This in turn led to the deep rooted gender relations that deprived the majority of women of important economic, political and social rights. Accordingly, the problem has become historical which has been evolved for many centuries. Even though there were some exceptional cases in women's status like in that of the Gonderine period, the Ethiopian land tenure was entirely a male-dominated institution. This is mainly because the state, both during the medieval and now in modern periods, is all the time at the center of the evolution of the holding and use lands. As a renowned scholar on the subject comments, the agrarian issue has always been a political issue. The chief resource of the country still remains the land, and access to it has invariably been keenly sought by all concerned-the peasant, the privileged classes as well as the state-for the economic benefits this would confer as well as social and political dominance (Dessalegn, 2008).

In the final analysis, having stressed the fact that gender problems that are the outcomes of patriarchy did not emerge and develop overnight, approaching the problems historically gives scholars, policy makers and activists a chance to grasp what historical contexts, circumstances, causes, means and even chances/coincidences were working in the formation and development of patriarchic system in the Ethiopia land tenure. This will contribute a lot in effective intervention in alleviating gender related problem which in turn leads to the agenda of development by taking into consideration the presence/absence of the historical context, circumstances, causes, means etc. that had been active then and there.

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