

Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen (1825-1938): Biography and Internal Policy Legacies

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Abstract

This paper will present the life of Sheikh Hojjale Al-Hassen (1825–1938), who ruled over Ethiopia's Bela–Shangul Gumuz region from 1886–1938, with a focus on his contributions to internal policy. Accordingly, this study will discuss Sheikh Hojjale's rule from Emperor Menilik II until the regime of Hailesillasei, his internal policies with the then-central governments, as well as his contribution to the new Ethiopian empire from different perspectives. To achieve this, significant data were provided using both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen, Ethiopia, Islam

I. Setting the Scene

The name Bela-Shangul is derived from two words of the Bertha language, namely Bela and Shangul, etymologically the rock of the Shangul. This region currently comprises the people living on the shore of the Blue Nile, bordering the Oromia Regional State, the Amhara, the Gambella Regional State as well as present South Sudan.¹ Bela-shangul is home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Bertha, Gumuz, Mao, Kwama, Gwama, Shinasha, Oromo, Amhara, etc. The majority of the languages spoken in this region belong to the Nilo-Saharan families.²

The Mao and Goma are believed to be the first settlers in

¹Trimingham, J. Spencer, *Islam in Ethiopia*, (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1952).p.218; Atieb Ahmed, Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen and Bela-Shangul (1825-1938), unpublished BA thesis, AAU, Department of History, 1973. P.2.

²Alfredo González-Ruibal and Victor M.Fernández Exhibiting Cultures of Contact: *A Museum for Benishangul-Gumuz, Ethiopia*, Departamento de

the Bela-shangul region around the Tumat valley before the arrival of the Bertha ethnic groups from the southern part of the Sennar in the 17th century. The Mao and Goma group afterwards pushed by the Bertha in the southward direction of the present Bambasi and Begi areas.³The Bertha people under the leadership of *Agur Honhon* or *Aderish* moved towards the hill rock (Bela-Shangul) and settled in Tumat valley in the early 17th century. This king in his turn begot a son named Bertha Abun and was thus believed to be the father and powerful king of the Bertha ethnic group.⁴Consequently, this place after that has been a focal point of their early cultural centers and since then the whole region named by Bela-Shangul.⁵

Moreover, the Bertha people had begun to influence the politics of the region up to the coming of the Funj kingdoms in Bela-shangul area in the early 18th century.⁶As a result of the occupation of the region by the Funj, the Bertha obliged to leave their historical centre of a hill (Bela) in Tumat valley and thus moved towards the plain.⁷Following this, the Funj Sultanates flourished Islam into the Bela-shangul region. The Bertha and other ethnic groups submitted to Islam and subsequently began using Arabic as a medium of communication, particularly in the

Prehistoria, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Stanford Journal of Archaeology.

³Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a noman's Land, Bela-Shangul, Western Wellega, Ethiopia (c/800-1898)*.Napoli: InstitueUniverstario Oriental, 1981. P23-26;AlessandorTriulzi, "Myths and Rituals of the Ethiopian Barta," In M. Lionel Bender and Harold G. Marcus (Eds.), *People and Culture of the Ethio-Sudan Border Lands* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1981), P.183.

⁴Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁵Atieb Ahmed, p. 18.

⁶AdinewAbtew, *Political and Socio-Economic History of AsossaWäräda, 1941-1991*, (unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 2011), p.22.

⁷Alessandro Triulzi, 1981, 23-26;Atieb Ahmed, p. 3.

areas of Khomosha, Bela-shangul, Aqoldi and Gubba as well.⁸ Thus, this, later on, paved the way for the emergence of Muslim Sheikhdoms in the region of Gubba, Khomosha and Aqoldi respectively.⁹ In addition to the Funji's influence in the region, a Nigerian Sheikh named Fakih Ahmed had played a major role in expanding Islam in the region of Bela-shangul particularly, in introducing a *Tijaniyya* Sufi order. The Shafi'ite *Madhab* is widely diffused in the region as well.¹⁰

The Funjis and Arabs who came to Bela-shangul had enjoyed the reputation of the fertile land of Bertha both politically and economically. Accordingly, the Arab groups who left Sudan due to the imposition of high taxation and settled in the different parts of the region such as the Jaali, Rikabiya, Bidariya, Dongola, Shaygiya, Mahasiya, and Ribatab were chiefly engaged in trade as well as expanding Islam in Bela-shangul region.¹¹ By so doing, they began managing their relationship with the already assimilated people of *Jabalawin* and *Wetawit* in order to control the politics of the region by suppressing the power of Bertha people.¹² Moreover, with the help of Turko-Egyptian or Mahdists, the *Wetawit* became the leading group who controlled both the politics and economy of Bela-shangul region up to the arrival of three sheikhdoms in Bela-shangul in

⁸Trimingham, J. Spencer, p.219; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, (Second edition, Addis Ababa University Press. 2002).p19.

⁹Bahru Zewde, 2002.p.19; Abdussamad H. Ahmad, *The Gumuz of the Lowlands of Western Gojjam: The Frontier in History 1900-1935*, Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Anno 50, No. 1 (Marzo 1995), pp. 53-67). P54.

¹⁰Trimingham, J. Spencer, p.250.

¹¹Sergew Hable Sellasse, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United printers, 1972), p.65

¹²Desalegn Sisay, "The Process of Incorporation of Bela-Shangul Region into Ethiopian Empire (1936-1991)." BA Thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1997).p7.

the 1880s.¹³

Moreover, during the period of Mahdist, Khomosha was a center of trade and political activities, particularly for the *Wetawit* groups. This center was afterwards shifted to Aqoldi 18km North-West of Assosa by a *Wetawit* merchant named Mohammad Wad Fadlah.¹⁴ Consequently, the Bertha who settled on the hill of Aqoldi was later on known by the name *Fanaqoldi*.¹⁵ Mohammad Wad Fadlah was afterwards married into a woman from Bertha ethnic group and begot a son called Al-Hassen, the father of Sheikh Hojale.¹⁶ Al-Hassen has succeeded in retrieving the power of his predecessors, the traditional Bertha ruling line which was established in 1720 over Bela-shangul and subsequently interrupted by the coming of the Funj/Mahist in the early 18th century.¹⁷

1. Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen

1.1. Family Background

Al-Hassen and his family initially engaged in trade transactions such as gold, salt and sesame seeds (*selit*) between Bela-shangul and Sinnar.¹⁸ After a time being, he had able to get the attention of Funj rulers who occupied the vast area of Bela-shangul and thus they assigned him in the court of Mekas a scribe in recording the annual taxes paid to the Funj rulers of Koili.¹⁹ Accordingly, during his services under Funj rule, Al-Hassen

¹³Atieb Ahmed, p. 16.

¹⁴HosaenaAddisu, "Growth and Development of Asossa Town to 1980," (unpublished BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 1985), p12.

¹⁵Atieb Ahmed, p. 7.

¹⁶HosaenaAddisu, p12.

¹⁷Trimingham, J. Spencer, p.219. Cf. Chataway, S.N.R.Xiii.255.

¹⁸Informant, Abdurrehman Mohammad.

¹⁹Atieb Ahmed, p. 12.

has succeeded in building his diplomatic relation with the Arabs and as a consequence, he thrived to get weapons from them. Soon after he had won the heart of the Mek, and indeed, the Mek transferred their administration over Bela-shangul to him in order to rule the Bertha and other neighboring groups as well.²⁰

Moreover, following the death of Mek, the father of Sheikh Hojale i.e. Al-Hassen had thrived to rule over the Bela-shangul area successively.²¹ Due to the high tax imposition by the Turko-Egyptian led Mahdist forces over the region of Bela-shangul, Al-Hassen by collaborating with other influential tribal leaders such as the *Jabalawin* and Bertha began opposing against their political and economic subjugation.²² Following this, around 1871 Al-Hassen was captured by the Mahdists and thus imprisoned in Omdurman, Sudan.²³

Al-Hassen Mohammad begot seventeen children from his four wives during his lifetime in Bela-shangul.²⁴ Hojale who was born in 1825 from his father Al-Hassen and his mother Fadayil in Bela-shangul region, Assosa zone, Homosha wereda, Henhen Kebele had become the most influential figure among the children of Al-Hassen.²⁵ During his childhood, Hojale initially attended his early Islamic education at home under the guidance of his grandfather and afterwards entered the *Khelwa* (traditional local Islamic school) in his vicinity.²⁶

Furthermore, Hojale became active in acquiring Islamic education from the great Sheikhs of the region. To enhance his wisdom in the field of Qur'ān and basic *Ḥadīth*, he followed both

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Atieb Ahmed, p. 16.

²² *Ibid*, p.13.

²³ Informant, Sheikh Abbas Ashafi

²⁴ Informant, Sheikh Abbas Ashafi

²⁵ Informant, Abdurehim Mohammad

²⁶ *Ibid.*

subjects under Sheikh Faki Sa'id in Khomosha.²⁷ In addition to this, he engaged in a traditional practice of hunting animals in the nearby forest to feed his family as well.²⁸ As a result of this, he became a vigorous and courageous young man amongst the seventeen children of Al-Hassen Mohammad. Following this, Al-Hassen assigned his son Hojale as a tax collector, soldier and administrator of other services in the region of Aqoldi.²⁹ After his father was arrested and taken to Omdurman, Sudan in 1871, Hojale informally succeeded his father.³⁰ As a result of his antagonism against the high tax imposition on his people, the Mahdist abruptly sentenced Al-Hassen Mohammad to death in 1886. In fact, shortly before the death of his father in 1886, Hojale got approval from his father and thus succeeded him in ruling the Bertha people.³¹

2. The Reign of Sheikh Hojale Al- Hassen (1886-1938)

As mentioned above, the hereditary power of the Bertha ethnic group was disrupted by the arrival of Funj kingdoms in Bela-shangul region in the early 18th century. Thus, the power influence of the Bertha people was steadily shifted from the hands of the Bertha to the Funjis. Besides, from the monarchy of Funji, two strongest groups appeared in the region of Shoba in Qebesh and Muguale in Khomosha.³² Throughout time, these groups in their turn have united through marriage and begun expanding their control over the vast region of Bela-shangul. Following this expansion, the Funjis ascertained their political

²⁷Atieb Ahmed, p. 14.

²⁸Informant, Abdurehim Mohammad

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Atieb Ahmed, p. 13.

³¹Cf. Sheikh Hojale's family diary; Atieb Ahmed, p. 13.

³²JaboSiraje, "Ya'a pilgrimage centre, Wallagga," (unpublished BA thesis, AAU, Department of History, 1988), P.2.

activities on the indigenous people and started to exploit their resources.³³

During the 1880s from the region of Bela-Shangul particularly Khomosha and the nearby area of Keili, the Funji's led by the Egyptian rules had gathered annual taxes of approximately four thousand pounds.³⁴As a result of this, strong resistance began in key centers of the region such as Khomosha and Aqoldi respectively.³⁵Due to this and other related factors, three prominent tribal leaders of the region such as Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen (from Aqoldi), Torel-Guri or Abdurrahman Khojale (from Menge) and Sheikh Mahmud Muhammad (from Khomosha) started a rebellion against the Mahdists (Egyptians).³⁶

At the end of the 1890s, they succeeded to withdraw the Mahdists from the region of Bela-shangul.³⁷ Afterwards, the alliance of these three *Amirs* in fighting foreign invaders was, later on, became reluctant and split up into three sheikhdoms. According to Desalegn, the main factor for their segregation was a competition to control the trade route which lay from the southeast and the southwest trade routes that linked the area towards the neighbouring lands of Oromo.³⁸Accordingly, Sheikh Hojale was able to expand his rule over the southwards from Aqoldi to Asossa so as to ascertain his powers both the economy and political activities of the region. It is said that economically Sheikh Hojale desired to control the southern trade routes and trade activities in the nearby areas of the fertile lands.

³³Trimingham, J. Spencer, p.32; Atieb Ahmed, p. 4.

³⁴Bahru Zawde, p.21, "Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontiers", (PhD thesis, University of London, 1976), p.21.

³⁵JaboSiraje, p.10.

³⁶Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

³⁷Desalegn Sisay, p.10.

³⁸*Ibid.*

Additionally, politically he wanted to control his southern region to liberate it from both internal and external powers.³⁹

Moreover, around 1888, Sheikh Hojale thrived to control the area from Asossa up to Khomosha and the nearby region as well.⁴⁰ Subsequently, he began establishing (*Shura*) council of elders as well as the customary court at the centre of Asossa.⁴¹ In fact, the council had its own assembly in emergency times like war, conflict, crime, drought, etc. and had also a defence advisor named Abdurehim Maden. Additionally, the court had its own *K'adi* (judge) at a *Shango* (customary court) in Asossa. According to the informant, the system of the court was mixed by nature (it offers the *Sharia*/Islamic Law and the Bertha customary practices).⁴² There were two systems of presenting one's own cases at the *Shango* of Sheikh Hojale. The first system was gone through the local line traditionally called *Maqaddem* at the *Kebelle* level and when cases are difficult it passes on to the *Shura* and the *Shura* referred to Sheikh Hojale. Finally, after a meeting of *Shura* took place at *Shango*, Sheikh Hojale, at last, will decide the verdict. The second system is different from the first one and thus the case is directly present to Sheikh Hojale. This is when the case is beyond the *Maqaddem* as well as *Shura*.⁴³

³⁹ Adinew Abtew, p.25.

⁴⁰ Informant, Sheikh Abbas Ashafi

⁴¹ Informant, Abdurehim Mohammad

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*



Fig 1. Partial view of Sheikh Hojale's *Shango* at Asossa.⁴⁴

However, after Egyptian-led Mahdists left the Bela-shangul region at the end of 1890s there were three rival sheikhdoms in the region of Bela-shangul namely: the Aqoldi area ruled under Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen, the Menge area ruled under Torel-Guri or Abdurrahman Khojale and the Khomosha area ruled under Sheikh Mahmud Muhammad.⁴⁵

Sources assert that Torel-Guri was the fourth ruler in the line of the Bela-shangul Sheikhs and the successor of Khojele Wad Adam and Wad Adam was the successor of Fadli-Wad Musa. Accordingly, he established his rule in between 1878-1882 over the Menge area and afterwards extended his autonomous rule in the adjacent regions of other Bela-shanguls domination.⁴⁶ At the end of the 1880s, rivalries between Sheikh

⁴⁴Photo by the researcher.

⁴⁵Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁴⁶Atieb Ahmed, p. 7.

Hojale and Torel-Guri had come to happen when Torel-Guri attempted to control other Sheikhdoms of the region such as Khomosha and Aqoldi respectively.⁴⁷

Initially, Sheikh Hojale and Torel-Guri had the ambition to enlarge their power over the frontiers of the Bela-shangul region, particularly the main trade routes in order to attain their autonomy following the expulsion of Egyptians from the region.⁴⁸ Secondly, it is said that; three Sheikhdoms of Bela-shangul region was used to send their annual taxes to the Mahdists in Sudan. However, after the death of the father of Sheikh Hojale at the hands of Mahdists in Omdurman, he refused to send the annual taxes and thus resisted against them. The rest two rulers (Torel-Guri and Sheikh Mahmud Muhammad) at the beginning send their taxes without following the rejection idea of Sheikh Hojale. Due to this, the rivalry between these three Sheikhdoms escalated in the region.⁴⁹ Subsequently, the aspiration of these Sheikhdoms to control the vast region of the Bela-shangul area had fastened their segregations as well as conscientiously among themselves. As a result of this, Sheikh Hojale was obliged to manage an alliance with the then-central government of Ethiopia, Emperor Menilik II.⁵⁰

3. The Incorporation of the Sheikhdoms and Sheikh Hojale's Internal Policy Legacy

At the end of the 19th century, the regions of Bela-shangul attracted the central government of Ethiopia. This was seen mainly when the Wallagga region was incorporated into the new Ethiopian empire in 1886-1888.⁵¹ Indeed the success of this conquest paved the way for Emperor Menilik to send his soldiers

⁴⁷Atieb Ahmed, p. 23.

⁴⁸*Ibid*, 22, 35.

⁴⁹Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁵⁰Bahru Zawde, 1976:22.

⁵¹Bahru Zawde, 1976, p.15-16.

into the nearby periphery. In 1897, *Ras* Mokonnen marched into Arjo together with his other comrades such as *Dajjazmach* Gabra Egziabher (Kumsa Morada) of Naqamte, *Dajjazmach* Jote Tulu of Qellam and the Gonderian army under *Dajjazmach* Damisse to accomplish the integration campaign of Emperor Menilik II respectively.⁵²

Moreover, there are two views pertaining to the confrontation between the central government and the Sheikhdoms of Bela-shangul region. The first views claim that initially the Sheikhdoms of the Bela-shangul areas were wedged simultaneously and defended their autonomy against *Ras* Mokonnen's campaign at the battle of Qabash around the Dabos River in 1897. In this battle, Khojale, Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud were able to defend themselves and thus won over the army of *Ras* Mokonnen.⁵³ Consequently, *Ras* Mokonnen retreated from Najjo and came back into the Bela-shangul region after two years. According to the informants, during this phase, these Sheikhdoms failed to unite and resist against the Emperor's conquest policy.⁵⁴

The second views assert that *Ras* Makonnen before wedding the campaign over the Sheikhdoms sent a letter demanding the capitulation of the Sheikhs. Following this, Sheikh Hojale sent amongst his armies an endowment of gold in order to reveal the power of the central army stationed at Mendi commended under *Ras* Makonnen. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hojale conveyed his new diplomatic relation with the central government.⁵⁵ Additionally, the second view admitted that there was only one phase of confrontation between the Sheikhdoms

⁵²AdinewAbtew, 2011, p27.

⁵³Informant, Abdurehim Mohammad.

⁵⁴*Ibid*, Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁵⁵Rashid Mohamed. "A Biography of *Dajjazmach* Abdulrahim Khojale", (Unpublished BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 1988).p7.

and *Ras Makonnen* that took place in 1897. However, my informants argued that in the first phase, the Sheikhdoms won over *Ras Makonnen* and however in the second phase they were defeated due to the disagreement between them.⁵⁶

It is said that Sheikh Hojale initially managed a big meeting with Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud regarding the strength of the army of the Emperor and their modern weapons. Thus, he encouraged them to submit peacefully to *Ras Makonnen* before damaging their country as other foreign invaders do on the nation.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud rejected the proposal of Sheikh Hojale and thus preferred to defend their regional autonomy. Subsequently, Sheikh Hojale by leading his army went to Dabus River and met up with *Ras Makonnen* in order to confront the two rivals (Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud). Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud began their resistance by unifying their army under one umbrella.⁵⁸ However, 20,000 troops of emperor Menilik led by *Ras Makonnen* together with the assistance of Sheikh Hojale thrived to crash the forces of Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud at the battle of Fadogno in 1897.⁵⁹ As a result of their weak weapons as well as the dispute between them and Sheikh Hojale, they faced a defeat and consequently, Torel-Guri fled to Famka (Fazoghli) in Sudan and Wad Mahmud escaped to the mountainous area of Jerok.⁶⁰ The following are extracts from traditional songs of Bertha people in praising and begging Sheikh Hojale after this battle.

⁵⁶Informant, Abdurehim Mohammad; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁵⁷Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹JaboSiraje, p.13; BinayewTamratGetahun, AlemsegedDebeleTsega, *Centre-Periphery Relations in Ethiopian Empire: The Case of Benishangul Gumuz, 1898 -1941*. (The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies (ISSN 2321 - 9203), www.theijhss.com, Vol 2 Issue 12 December 2014), p.340.

⁶⁰Rashid Mohamed, p7.

“Bekun ka kinbul lala sayya pusa k’ik’tela ferzabuha lulanama bata ruha Hojale kadake buhe hehe abusawa uha”.⁶¹

The above extract contextually indicates that “from war, we can’t get any achievement except devastation which causes the death of children, hunger, etc. and due to this we would beg Sheikh Hojale to make peace and keep the region rigorously”. In fact, this song was played by the Berta women in their language regarding the high loss of soldiers during the war. Their implication was to get peace from war. It is said that it was after this that Sheikh Hojale made a peace agreement with *Ras* Mokonnen at the end of the 1890s.⁶²

Moreover, the soldiers of Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud became captives and some of them were enslaved by the emperors’ convoy.⁶³ Thus, the soldiers of Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud Muhammad were faced to enslave and subsequently some of them were transferred to Metahara around Awash valley under the command of *Ras* Mokonnen. However, in the case of Sheikh Khojale’s soldiers, it is said that he offers gold to *Ras* Mokonnen and abruptly released them from confinement.⁶⁴

Afterwards, *Ras* Makonnen sent sixty horsemen caring the Ethiopian flag to be hosted in the border areas of Bela-shangul where it was intended to show the boundary of Ethiopia.⁶⁵ By so doing, Emperor Menilik officially incorporated the region into the Ethiopian empire in 1902. Consequently, Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen was recognized as the ruler of the Bela-shangul region starting from Dabus River, Mengi, Assosa, Khomosha and other

⁶¹Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³Rashid Mohamed, p7.

⁶⁴Informant, Sheikh Abdulwahid Yusuf; Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed; Informant, Abdunassir Ali.

⁶⁵Debela Alemu, “A Historical Survey of Asossa Town to 1991”, (Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 2007), p13.

surrounding regions which were taken from Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud.⁶⁶

Besides, *Ras* Mokonnen pursued to arrest of the two leaders who escaped in Sudan (Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud) through diplomatic relations with the Ethiopians in Sudan. Accordingly, he thrived to arrest them and took them to Addis Ababa at the end of 1898.⁶⁷ After a while, news about the plot of Sheikh Hojale to reject the power of the central government by making a secret coalition with the British convoy in Sudan has reached Emperor Menilik in Addis Ababa. Subsequently, Sheikh Hojale was arrested and transferred by *Ras* Demissew to Addis Ababa so that he joined his two former rivals in prison.⁶⁸ It is said that Sheikh Hojale has blamed the central government for the reason that he was not recompensed for his services during the incorporation of Bela-shangul into Ethiopian empires.⁶⁹

There are two sources pertaining to the places of detention of these three Sheikhs namely: Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen, Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud. The first source claimed that they were confined in Addis Ababa,⁷⁰ while the second source asserts that they were detained in four places. According to the second source, initially, they were jailed at Gimbi, Mendi and Arjo for some years and afterwards transferred to Jimma.⁷¹ Eventually, these sources agreed that they have detained in a prison for nine years respectively whether in Addis Ababa or Gimbi, Mendi, Arjo and Jimma as well.

⁶⁶Atieb Ahmed, p. 35, 15-16; JaboSiraje, 1988, p13.

⁶⁷Etana Habte, "*Integration and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire State: The Case of Qellem, 1886-1941*", Bibliography Journal of Florida Conference of Historians, PP.87-100, 2012), p.92-93; Atieb Ahmed, p.41

⁶⁸Atieb Ahmed, p. 41-42.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰Etana Habte, p. 92-93.

⁷¹Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali; Informant Sheikh Abbas As-Shafi. See also Atieb Ahmed, p. 42.

Moreover, during the period of their detention, the region of Bela-shangul was ruled under *Ras* Damessaw from 1898-1903 and *Dajjasmach* Gabra Egziabher (Kumsa Morada) of Lega Naqamte from 1903-1918. The period of these rulers particularly under *Ras* Damessaw claimed that it was characterized by heavy customs duties paid by the people and wide exploitation of the resources of the Bela-shangul region.⁷² As a result, in 1903, by the order of *Dajjasmach* Gabra Egziabher, the people of Aqoldi, Menge and Khomosha particularly those who ruled under Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen, Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud Muhammad were obliged to pay 300-600 amount of gold annually to the central government which took the largest section of the entire of Bela-shangul's region.⁷³ In addition to this, the region of Bela-shangul hosts a difficult episode during the detention of their three rulers. Thus, it is said that the wife of Sheikh Hojale named Sitti Amna/Malka Amna was fully engaged in the slave trade between the region of Bela-shangul and Sudan. The people of Bertha in general and the Mao Komo, in particular, were among the sold groups to the Arabs in Sudan from 1898 through 1906 respectively.⁷⁴

After passing nine years in prison Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen, Torel-Guri and Wad Mahmud Muhammad were released from prison in 1906 and subsequently presented before Emperor Menilik II so as to acquire pardon and receive their duties and

⁷²Adinew Abteu, p.29; Rashid Mohamed, p.10; Debela Alemu, p.16.

⁷³Alessandro Triulzi, "Neqamte and Addis Ababa; A Dilemmas of Provincial Rule" in Donald Donham, (ed.) *The southern Marches of imperial Ethiopia Essays History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.59; Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia (1800-1935)*, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University press, 1968), P.400; IES, WTMRC Archive, Folder No.117, File No---, A Letter from Menilek to Khojale on *Nahase* 1906 E.C; Debela Alemu, p.14; Rashid Mohamed, p.10; Desalegn Sisay, p.16; Atieb Ahmed, p. 43.

⁷⁴Informant, Melles; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

titles.⁷⁵ Following this, Torel-Guri got a traditional Ethiopian status/title called *Dejjazmach* and Wad Mahmud Muhammad got a title *Fitawrari* while Sheikh Hojale refused to adopt these titles and continued by his former title of Sheikh as well.⁷⁶

Before he embarked on Bela-shangul, Sheikh Hojale received land from Emperor Menilik II in order to build a palace at Addis Ababa at the present place of Gulale sub-city. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hojale built a modern palace in Addis Ababa by hiring foreign architects'.⁷⁷ From the last two decades up to now, the palace has provided services for a primary school for the nearby residents of the Gulale sub-city.



Fig 2. The present view of Sheikh Hojale's palace at Gulale sub-city, Addis Ababa.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Rashid Mohamed, p.10; Atieb Ahmed, p. 42.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

⁷⁷ Informant, Sheikh Abbas As-Shafi; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali

⁷⁸ Photo by the researcher

During the period of Menilik II, Sheikh Hojale succeeded in preserving his autonomy over the regions of Beggi, Asossa, Fadasi, Sharqole and Ya'a. Besides in 1908, with the approval of emperor Menilik, he thrived in comprising the neighboring regions like Jote Tullu's region of Laga Doqe and part of Kumsa Moroda's territory of Harawe (Mendi) under his domination.⁷⁹ According to the informants, both Sheikh Hojale and emperor Menilik used to support each other during their reigns. Among the many things that are well glorified by the Bertha group of the Sheikh Hojale clan, but not got the attention of other Ethiopians are Sheikh Hojale's contributions during the establishment of the first Bank of Ethiopian called Abyssinian Bank and the construction of the Ethio- Djibouti railway. Thus, it is said that Sheikh Hojale sent an enormous amount of gold to emperor Menilik in order to process the establishment of the bank and railway construction as well.⁸⁰ In addition to this, sources at hand, assert that after the defeat of the Italians at the battle of Adwa in 1888, Sheikh Hojale immediately established a cinema hall named "Cinema Adwa" around Piazza in Addis Ababa in a memorandum of the victory of Adwa.⁸¹

Besides these endeavors in modernizing Ethiopia, some of the ethnic groups in Bela-shangul condemned Sheikh Hojale, particularly during his rule at the time of emperor Menilik II. Thus, they point out that, Sheikh Hojale was the one who sold them in the slave trade both to the neighboring countries and to the central governments of Ethiopia.⁸² The main evidence for their claim is the presence of the exchange of the letter between emperor Menilik and Sheikh Hojale which is currently displayed at the Museum of Benishangul-Gumuz in Asossa town. Even if some of the Bertha clan of Sheikh Hojale devaluated this notion by saying that the region of Bela-shangul was known for slave

⁷⁹Trimingham, J. Spencer, p.219; Atieb Ahmed, p.55.

⁸⁰Informant, Sheikh Abdulwahid Yusuf; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali

⁸¹Source: Sheikh Hojale's family diary.

⁸²Informant, Melles

raids by the black Arabs of Sudan long years before the advent of Sheikh Hojale, but they agreed that there was a slave trade during the nine years confinement of the three Sheikhdoms of Bela-shangul in 1898 and thus undertaken by the wife of Sheikh Hojale named Sitti Amna/ Malka Amna although not by Sheikh Hojale according to them.⁸³ Tradition speaks of an inter-regional trade route that started in Sudan and ended in Baro during these periods. In fact, in addition to the gold trade, slave, civet, ivory, iron, beads, coffee, sheep, cattle, goats and tobacco were the core source of relations between the Sheikhdoms of Bela-shangul and the Oromo to the east and south.⁸⁴

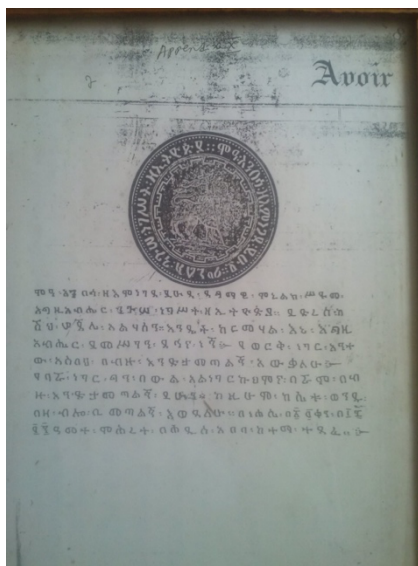


Fig 3. Correspondence between Emperor Menilik II and Sheikh Hojale⁸⁵

⁸³Informant, Sheikh Abdulwahid Yusuf; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali

⁸⁴Atieb Ahmed, p.17, p.55.

⁸⁵ Credit: From Sheikh Hojale family private archives.

Moreover, after the era of Menilik II, Sheikh Hojale maintained his relationship with the central government of Ethiopia such as *Lej Iyyasu*, *Zawditu* and *Haile-Sellassei* as well. In fact, Sheikh Khojale himself used to collect tributes, levied custom duties and personally or through his vassal chiefs took some amount of the revenue to the central government in power.⁸⁶ Alike his predecessor, *Leji Eyasu* brought all the territories of the northern neighboring sheikhdoms of *Khomosha* and *Bela-shangul* under the control of Sheikh Khojale Al-Hassen in 1914.⁸⁷

Despite the annual taxes that Sheikh Hojale used to send to the central governments during his reign; there were also other reasons for their strong relationships. Thus, Sheikh Hojale was acknowledged for his endowments particularly in offering gold as a gift in order to keep his diplomatic relation with the then leaders of the country.⁸⁸ As a result of this, he thrived to get the attention of the central government from Emperor Menilik II up to Hailesillasei respectively. The following letter is a good example of this.

⁸⁶Jabo Siraje, p. 17.

⁸⁷Rashid, p.10-11; Ateib, p, 53.

⁸⁸Debela, p,18; Rashid,p.35; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali

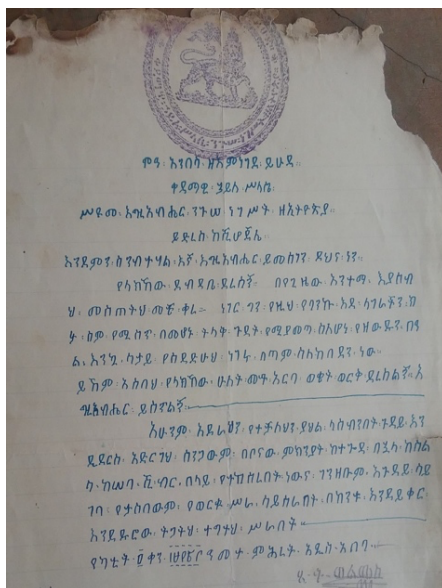


Fig 4. Correspondance between Emperor Hailesillasei and Sheikh Hojale⁸⁹

As illustrated in the letter above Emperor Hailesillasei requested Sheikh Hojale to provide him with financial in order to cover the loan from the World Bank. According to the source, Sheikh Hojale bestowed the emperor with both by offering gold and money in different periods whenever the emperor requested him for help. Additionally, Sheikh Hojjale contributed to the development of Addis Ababa by investing his fund in building houses in the main centers of the city, such as in the areas around the Abuna Petros monument, Habtegorges Dildiy, the main long-distance bus station located in Merkato and near Lagahar Ethio-Djibouti railway station as well.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Credit: From Sheikh Hojale family private archives.

⁹⁰Source: From family diary.

Moreover, following the Italian invasion in 1936 while the emperor Hailesillasei was forced to leave the country and exiled to England, Sheikh Hojale assisted him by sending gold with the purpose of presenting the case of the genocide of Ethiopians by the Italian force in Geneva.⁹¹ Internally, he played a major role in defending the peripheries from Italian invaders particularly by purchasing different modern artilleries like; *Shashego, Belgique, Demitfor, Muzer* and *Laben* from abroad and afforded them to the patriots.⁹² While the war between the patriots and the Italian forces were intensified, Sheikh Hojale helped the patriots by offering human resources including his son named Abdul-Rehman to lead them to pass into neighboring Sudan.⁹³

In 1936, internal revolts were aggravated against Sheikh Hojale following the arrival of the Italians in the region. Consequently, the Italians freed Mustafa Abdul-Rehman and Musa Mahmud who had been imprisoned in Addis Ababa by the imperial government since 1934. These two rivals of the Sheikh had begun orchestrating the revolt in the vast area of Belashangul since then.⁹⁴ It is said that this rebellion was predominantly caused by the widespread slave raids, high taxation and gold abuses by the sheikh to use them as endowments to the central government.⁹⁵

To control the internal revolts, Sheikh Hojale requested the help of the central army stationed at Gore under *Ras Emeru*, a representative of the central government. At the time Sheikh Hojale had not got urgent assistance from him due to the alarming confrontation between the patriots and the Italian forces at Addis Ababa.⁹⁶ However, in August 1937 Sheikh Hojale

⁹¹Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed

⁹²Informant, Abdunnasir Ali; from the family diary.

⁹³Desalegn, p.21.

⁹⁴Adinew, p.32.

⁹⁵Desalegn, p.19.

⁹⁶*Ibid*, Ateib, p. 19.

was able to get the support of the central governments when tens of Ethiopian patriots arrived in the Bela-shangul region before the coming of the Italian army in the region. Subsequently, he had been reinforced by them and controlled the revolt led by Mustafa Abdul-Rehman and Musa Mahmud in Khomosha and Bela-shangul respectively.⁹⁷

3.1. Sheikh Hojale's Final Life

During his ruling time, particularly from 1908 onwards, Sheikh Hojale thrived to rule over the Bela-shangul region and was able to build the region which was demolished both by the civil war and the force of the central government.⁹⁸ Thus, he aspired to stretch his autonomous rule in the peripheries of the region by removing the Mahdist dominance in the region of Bela-shangul.⁹⁹ Besides, he played a major role in developing diplomatic relations with other rulers of both internal and external forces of the time. By so doing, internally he achieved a good diplomatic relation with the central governments of Ethiopia from Emperor Menilik II up to Hailesillasei respectively. Additionally, he achieved his diplomatic mission with the neighboring rulers such as Jote Tulu of Qellam and Abba Jifar of Jimma as well.¹⁰⁰ Externally he managed to deal with the British control of Sudan in peacekeeping and other diplomatic matters in the areas of the borderlands with Sudan. Furthermore, it was a time when Sheikh Hojale attempted to deal with the Italian forces in the region. According to the informants, he had a strategic alliance with the Italians and at the same time had secret relations with the patriots as well.¹⁰¹ Subsequently, the Italian forces who stationed around Guba in Bela-shangul had received about the news of Hojale's secret relationship with the

⁹⁷Desalegn, p.21.

⁹⁸*Ibid*, p.17.

⁹⁹Informant, Melles.

¹⁰⁰Informant, Abdunnasir Ali

¹⁰¹*Ibid*, Informant, Melles.

central government and the patriots respectively. As a result of this, they plot an assassination on him.¹⁰²

There are two views on the death of Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen. The first group mentioned that, while he was at the Shore of the Abbay River at a place called Famaga, the Italians plotted to kill him by deceiving a man from the Gumuz ethnic group so as to kill him while the Sheikh was in a midst of his people. Thus, Sheikh Hojale was wounded and taken to Addis Ababa to receive more treatment for the sickness. After three years he was poisoned by the Italians while he was getting medical treatment at a hospital in Addis Ababa. Soon after, he was unable to recover from this illness and fade to death and his body returned to Assosa.¹⁰³ The second source asserts that during the confrontation between Ethiopian patriots and the Italian invaders, Sheikh Hojale was ordered to mediate between

the rebels and the Italians who stationed in Bela-shangul region. While Sheikh Hojale was negotiating the two groups he was accidentally wounded and died from a gun fired by an unknown shooter in 1938 at the age of 113.¹⁰⁴



Hassen¹⁰⁵

Fig 5. Sheikh Hojale Al-

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Informant, Abdunnasir Ali; Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed

¹⁰⁴ Benishangul Gumuz Information Bureau, *Addis Me'eraf Ma'shehe* (10th year, No, 21, June 2008), P.23; from Family diary.

¹⁰⁵ Credit: Museum of Benishangul-Gumuz, Asossa. Currently, the Museum and culture and tourism office of the region are engaged in collecting the material



Fig 6. The graveyard of Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen¹⁰⁶

Throughout his life, it is said that Sheikh Hojale married many wives in different periods. According to the informants, Sheikh Hojale's wives are around nine in which he married one after another while he moved from place to place. From these wives, he got about 70 children and among his children; his son named *Dejjazmach* Abdulrahim Khojale succeeded him respectively.¹⁰⁷

Sheikh Hojale Al-Hassen among the Ethiopian Muslim rulers of his time such as Abba Jifar II of Jimma (r. 1878-1932), Hasan Enjamo of Qabena (r. -1888), Emir Abdullah of Harari (r. 1884–1887), etc. had played a major role both politically and economically in the peripheral regions of Ethio-Sudan as well as

culture of Sheikh Hojale with the intention of persevering and documenting them in the customary court /sheikh Hojale's *Shango* at Asossa town.

¹⁰⁶Photo by the researcher

¹⁰⁷Informant, Abdulrehim Mohammed; Informant, Abdunnasir Ali.

in the central governments of Ethiopia. His major contributions toward building modern Ethiopia have not got much attention from different researchers. Taking this into consideration the present researcher has attempted in revealing the biography of the Sheikh and his internal policy legacy from a historical perspective. Last but not least, it is suggested that the role of Sheikh Hojale particularly in cooperating with the other central governments of the then-Ethiopian leaders in the making of the modern Ethiopian empire and his pan-Ethiopian aspiration could be studied in detail from different perspectives.

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