

POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SPECTACLE OF DESSIE, 1917–1991

Assefa Balcha

ABSTRACT

Based on available written and local oral sources, this article revisits the political and socio-economic scene of the city of Dessie, South Wollo, Ethiopia, after the Battle of Segelle. The main objective of this historical study is thus to re-examine and explain how the unlimited intervention of the central government in the immediate after years and in the ensuing decades following the defeat in 1917 of Negus Mikael at Segelle deprived Dessie of what it should have managed to obtain and to develop itself as one of the potentially thriving urban centers in Ethiopia. The ill-fated Segelle debacle, which was a turning point in the history of Wollo's short-lived political ascendancy, had had far-reaching economic and political consequences throughout the Imperial period. The study focuses particularly on how the political leadership at the national and provincial levels thwarted, if not totally blocked, the development of the town. With the exception of the Italian interlude and the unrelenting effort of the business community, the development of Dessie with its geo-political and economic advantages was not meaningfully enhanced even after the replacement in 1974 of the Imperial regime by the military junta or the Derg that ruled the country up to the start of the last decade of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Asfa Wossen, Derg, Dessie, Haile Selassie, Imru, Italians, Iyassu, Ras Mikael, Segelle, Shewa, Wollo

“You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.” — Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

INTRODUCTION

The Dessie area, previously known as ‘Lakomelza’, is one of the earliest inhabited regions in Ethiopia. In the medieval period and long before the name ‘Wollo’ emerged, the region was part of a vast geographic area called ‘Bête Amhara’. Though difficult to ascertain, an older settlement at a locality called ‘Wasal’, first mentioned in an early sixteenth-century Italian itinerary and now probably “lost in the debris of time,” may also have been the precursor of Dessie.

Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) repeatedly marched to Wollo to bring the region under his full control. During one of his expeditions, Tewodros chose the Jemie Hill, later renamed ‘Ayteyefe’, as his temporary camp. After the death of Emperor Tewodros in 1868, King Menelik of Shewa, seeking to incorporate Wollo into his realm, campaigned against the two local power contenders: Amede Liben (Abba Watew) and Mohammed Ali (the later Ras Mikael, son of Imam Ali Abba Bula and Woyzero Getie of Wore Himano). During his military expedition, Menelik also sojourned to the Jemie Hill; the same strategic spot where Tewodros had camped earlier. After securing the submission of the two prominent Wollo lords, Menelik reaffirmed the governorship of Mohammed Ali over the territories stretching from the Wayat to Bashilo rivers, constituting roughly the present Wadla Delanta, Wore Himano, Borena and Wore Ilu, while Amedie Liben was allowed to retain and govern Tehuledere, a generic name that constituted Dessie and its surroundings. Abba Watew, until his death in 1882, had his administrative headquarters at Azwa Hill (Azwa Gedel), the other highest point that shielded Dessie on the eastern side.

Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872–1889) saw the growing power of King Menelik in Wollo as a direct threat to his authority. Seeking to bring the two major regional rulers on his side and to resolve the doctrinal disputes among church leaders, Yohannes came to Wollo in 1878 and camped at Boru Meda, about six miles from the center

of Dessie. Yohannes also baptized Amede Liben and Mohammed Ali at the same place where the religious council took place. After their conversion to Christianity, the two local lords became Dajjazmach Haile Mariam Liben and Ras Mikael Ali respectively. For Yohannes, the conversion of these two powerful lords was a crucial pacifying measure. Since Wollo was religiously volatile and strategically important, Ethiopian rulers traversing from north to south or vice versa often came to Wollo and used Dessie as a temporary resting place.

Soon after he had mounted the throne following the death of Yohannes IV in Matemma in 1889, Emperor Menelik led his army north to deal with those who had not yet acknowledged his hegemony. While Emperor Menelik proceeded to Tigray, Empress Taytu, accompanying her spouse to Dessie, stayed at the top of Jemie Hill (Ayteyefe). After returning from Tigray, Menelik joined Taytu and spent some time in Dessie. In the meantime, Negus Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam came to Dessie to pay homage to the Emperor and stayed there for days (Oral informants).

NAMING OF DESSIE AND ITS NEIGHBORHOODS

In 1882, Ras Mikael (c. 1850–1918)¹ annexing the territories of his contender Abba Watew, who died around the same time, emerged as the sole governor of Wollo. On the advice of Menelik, as some sources indicate, Ras Mikael left Tenta (Wore Himano), his long-time power base, in favor of Kuru Amba (at Hara Wobelo) around the Gerado area. After some time, Ras Mikael came to Dessie and constructed his permanent residence at the northern tip of Jemie Hill, a spot where his royal enclosure or Gebbi eventually emerged. Ras Mikael's settlement at Jemie, which amounted to the actual foundation of Dessie, in 1886, was a fateful decision. In the early 1900s, Ras Mikael had his palace buildings built, as well as a large banqueting hall that was passed down in history as 'Ayteyefe

1 Based on an engraved slot pinned on the wall of Dessie Medhane Alem Church, Mikael was born on Tir 27, the same day his son Iyassu was later born.

Addarash' (lit. trans. "A Hall of No Segregation"). Even after the death of Negus Mikael (aged 68 years) in September 1918 at Holeta (being a prisoner for about three years at Dandi in Zeway Island and in Holeta),² the hall and the hill continued to bear the same name. In spite of the unfortunate ending of Mikael's reign, the name 'Ayteyefe', epitomizing the generosity and reputation of its founder, has been retained to this day (Balcha 1984). When we see the aesthetic superiority of the banqueting hall and all the other contemporary buildings at Ayteyefe, we may safely argue that Negus Mikael was the one who pioneered the introduction of modern-type buildings in Dessie; and he had done this in a period where the predominant construction technology was a thatched-roofed wooden structure and long before the widespread use of the Italian-style architectures during the five-year Fascist occupation of Ethiopia.³

Ras Mikael's selection of Ayteyefe as a seat of his regional government in Dessie was due largely to its strategic location. His settlement at Ayteyefe enabled Ras Mikael to defend himself and to control the movement of his adversaries from a distance. More importantly, the Tossa mountain range to the west and the massifs of Azwa Gedel and Doro Mezleya to the east made Dessie a naturally defended town. In addition, the five main gateways: Titaber and Qurqurber to Tigray; Kutaber to Begemider; Girarambaber to the southeast; and Bilen-Geradober to Shewa and Gojjam provided the town with an enormous strategic advantage. Dessie's fortified location had greatly reduced Mikael's security anxiety. The well-thought-out calculated move from Tenta, his previous administrative center, to Dessie had also greatly assisted

2 The mortal remains of Negus Mikael were later exhumed from Wajit Medhane Alem Church in Holeta, transported to Wore Himano (his birthplace and initial power base) and reburied in the precinct of Tanta Mikael, a church of his own making, in February 1929.

3 Oral informants.

Ras Mikael in extending his rule to Awssa, the eastern lowlands of Afar (Oral informants).⁴

Besides the availability in abundance of firewood and food crops within a radius of few miles, as well as adequate water sources (constituting numerous springs and a perennial river, Borkena, which flows from its source near Boru to the East traversing the northern part of Dessie), there was an economic reason that persuaded Ras Mikael to choose Dessie as his regional administrative capital. Even if Dessie by then was not a modern urban center, the two vital trade routes passed through it. The route stretching from Addis Ababa to Massawa, one of the major trade routes that crisscrossed the country, passed through Wore Ilu, Borumeda, Samale, Magala, Adwa, Asmara and, finally, reached Massawa. The other major trade route destined to reach Tajura also passed through Dessie. In effect, Dessie seemed to have fulfilled what Ras Mikael was looking for. The need to control the trade routes and trade centers enabled him to collect considerable revenue from the “toll gates” that he erected at various points. If seen from the late nineteenth-century economic and political landscape, Mikael’s resolve to come to Dessie demonstrated his personal wisdom and farsightedness (Dessie Municipality 10; Oral informants).⁵

Local oral tradition has it that the origin of the name ‘Dessie’ goes back to the early days of Emperor Tewodros II, who launched several military campaigns to subdue Wollo during his reign (1855–1868). During one of these campaigns, he is said to have camped by pitching his tent at Qetema, a small locality between Boru and Dessie. From Qetema the Emperor moved to the Dessie area and chose Aytteyefe as his camping site. In another account, the name ‘Dessie’ is related to Emperor Yohannes. During his reign, Emperor

4 Oral informants.

5 Dessie served as a major supply center when the Ethiopian army marched to Adwa. It also entertained the victorious army of Menelik while returning from Adwa. See Dessie Municipality, “Establishment of Dessie Town,” Mimeograph, N.D. P. 10. Oral informants.

Yohannes IV (1872–1889) came to Dessie repeatedly. On one of his visits of 1883, he spent some time on the high grounds of Dessie. Being delighted by what he saw, Yohannes was said to have named the area ‘My joy’, an approximate meaning for ‘Dessie’ (Oral informants).⁶

Further to how the name ‘Dessie’ originated, oral accounts have reiterated its association with Tewodros II. The first version is that Emperor Tewodros, observing the satisfaction of his men with the selection of the site and its naturally beautiful scenery, named the whole area ‘Delightful’. The second version is associated with the name of the Emperor’s tent, ‘Desta’ (lit. “Happiness”). Hence ‘Dessie’, a corrupted derivation of ‘Desta’. The third version is linked to a woman who vended *tella*, a local beverage. Emperor Tewodros asked her name, which happened to be Woyzero Dessie, he then named the whole area ‘Dessie’ after her. Be that as it may, as Emperor Tewodros conducted several military campaigns in the region, this period is the most likely time for the origin of the name ‘Dessie’ (Oral informants).⁷

The naming of *sefers* (neighborhoods) in Dessie were mostly associated with the weekly markets, water points, geographic markers, parish churches and the initial settlement of notable personalities such as Ras Yimer, Ras Yazew, Ras Ali Gebreyes, Ras Gebre Hiywot, Liqa Mekwas Abegaz, Tsehafe Tezaz Fantaye, and with the retinues of Mikael or groups of individuals working in Ras Mikael’s court, as well as craftsmen, and army contingents or business owners of various kinds. In this regard, the following are illustrative examples: The area between Ayteyefe and Silk Amba was named ‘Addis Ketema’. A locality stretching from Meriho Ghibi to the bus terminal was called ‘Arab Genda’. Arabs nationals, most of whom were Yemeni who came to Dessie in search of employment, resided there. It is said that Ras Mikael being impressed by their craftsmanship and architectural wisdom granted them land to build their houses; hence the neighborhood Arab Genda (Arab Quarter)

6 Oral informants.

7 Oral informants.

emerged. Atari Genda was a neighborhood between Segno Gebeya and Salayish. Atari Genda literally means “Retailers’ Quarter”, indicating the initial settlement in the area of small merchants. Berbere Genda (Pepper Quarter) was found between Salayish and Piazza. The name indicated the presence of Mesheta Betoeh (Local Taverns) and Setegna Adariwoch (Sex Workers), who either owned the local taverns, or those who were attached to or worked in them, and the recurrent disturbances and noises that characterized the area day after day. Owing to this constant insecurity, the place bore the name ‘Berbere Genda’. The neighborhood Dawdo was connected to a certain Sheikh Dawd. A corrupted derivation of this prominent Sheikh provided the name of this locality (Oral informants).⁸

Following the consecration of the Medhane Alem church on 8 May 1913 (Miazia 30, 1905 E.C.), the priestly class and officials of the church settled around it, and a neighborhood known as ‘Medhane Alem Atbia’ or ‘Medhane Alem Sefer’ emerged there. Ras Mikael built the church on the hilly spot facing Aytteyefe. A neighborhood between Medhane Alem and Silk Amba that was originally allotted to the guards (Zebengna) of Ras Mikael’s court was known as ‘Zebengna Sefer’. Likewise, living quarters between Medhane Alem Atbia and Wolayta Sefer was called ‘Gimira Sefer’. This neighborhood was named after the war captives that Lij Iyassu brought from his Gimira campaign, some of whom he gave to his father as a gift. By joining Menelik II in the campaign against Wolayta in 1894, Ras Mikael brought many war captives to Dessie. These captives, who became Mikael’s domestic slaves, were given land to settle to the northeast of the Ghibi. This special quarter, known formerly as ‘Chercharit’, took the name ‘Wolayta Sefer’ and it later became ‘Menbere Tsehay’ after the 1974 revolution. A neighborhood of army settlers who came from Cheliya and Harar and were stationed in Dessie after their victory at Segelle was to

8 Oral informants.

become Cheliya and Hararge Sefer.⁹ They were later subsumed under a bigger neighborhood called 'Metero'.

In contrast, a large meadow where annual celebrations such as epiphany and Genna playing as well as military processions had taken place since Ras Mikael's time was named 'Hotie'. Oral tradition has it that Hotie is a corrupted form of the Amharic word 'Watte,' which literally means "A place that takes in so many people." The name Watte thus signifies the vastness of the field and its capacity to accommodate a huge number of people at any given moment. A locality around the weekly Monday market was to become 'Segno Gebeya'. Ras Mikael was the one who founded this market. A neighborhood to the south of Ras Mikael's Ghibi where the first telephone station was erected was called 'Selk Amba' (Telephone Quarter). An open field where a bonfire was lit to celebrate the finding of the True Cross (or Meskel) was to become 'Mugad' (lit. "A place of fire"). During the Italian rule, the modern shopping center for Italian nationals, Merkato Nazionale, (also called 'Gumruk' (meaning "Custom" in Arabic; part of Arada in the Mugad neighborhood) was located in this area. It is to be remembered that additional neighborhoods also emerged in Dessie in the subsequent decades (Oral informants).¹⁰

DESSIE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Ras Mikael transferred his seat from Tenta to Dessie. Dessie owes much to him and his choosing of Ayteyefe as his residential and administrative site. Attendants and servants of Mikael were given plots of land to build their own houses around Ayteyefe. As noted above, the building of residential houses of the nobility facilitated the cropping up of new neighborhoods in Dessie. With the initiation of the Segno Gebeya weekly market, itinerant merchants from Tigray, Shewa, Gojjam, Gondar, and Yejju flocked to Dessie. Many of them built their own houses. Their settlement around Segno Gebeya and the emergence of neighborhoods such as Atari Genda

9 Oral informants.

10 Oral informants.

(Retailers' Quarter) in Dessie stimulated the mushrooming of retail shops, taverns for selling local alcoholic drinks and other service-rendering sites in different parts of the town (Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners, 14–15).¹¹ Since the early twentieth century, Dessie, being the seat of Mikael and a strategically located and commercially important center, as well as its contiguity with Boru Meda (a prominent “toll gate” and a thriving market), has repeatedly been mentioned by foreign travelers. In essence, not only the number of traders and inhabitants increased, but also the socio-economic and physical landscape of Dessie had begun to change substantially.

The hard-won peace and tranquility of the post-Adwa period stimulated the growth of commercial activity in the country. A year after the signing of a treaty of commerce and friendship between Menelik II and Ferdinando Martini on 21 July 1906, the Italians opened a commercial agency, R. Agenza Commercial, in Dessie, and it became the Italian Consulate in 1932. The commercial agency was run for many years by Colonel F. Marazzani Visconti, who was later replaced with Alberto Pollera. The Bank of Abyssinia and Bank of Ethiopia also had their branch offices there. The American-based Singer Company, which started its business in Addis Ababa in 1909, had begun supplying sewing machines to the lucrative Dessie market since 1910. Other than Mohammed Bazarah (an Arab) and Ato Yirghou, many Greek and Armenian nationals, such as Pagonis Freres, Harant Pagtikian, Nicolas Zambos, Dimitri Paskos, Athanase Papadjiman, Astig Karabian, Takakland Kolidas, G. Capellani, Christo Cardaloupa and M Paskos, ran several businesses such as a movie theater, bakery, cafeteria and retail shops (Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners, 14–15).¹²

At about 1907, the construction of Ras Mikael's palace was completed. Thereafter, many churches and residential houses were built in Dessie. It was Ras Mikael who built churches in Dessie, namely St. George (Giyorgis) in 1910, Medhane Alem (Savior of the

11 Oral informants.

12 Oral Informants.

world) in 1912 and St. Mary (Mariam) in 1914 respectively. In 1914, St. Tekle Haymanot Church was also constructed in the foothills of Doro Mezleya to the east of Aytteyefe. In 1914/15 Negus Mikael built a banqueting hall called 'Aytteyefe Addarash', which literally means "A Hall of No Segregation". In the early twentieth century, Dessie had few European-type buildings owned mostly by Greek and Armenian nationals, some of whom produced or sold alcoholic drinks, medicine and other trading items. Dessie had also served as a prison and as a place of exile for rivals of the regional lords and the king of kings. Negus Tona of Wolayta and Ras Abate were some of the royal prisoners in Dessie (Teshome and Getachew 222ff).¹³ During those early days, Dessie was visited by foreigners and local dignitaries. In 1906, Ferdinand Martini, Governor of Eritrea, paid an official stately visit to Dessie and met Ras Mikael, not to mention Lij Iyassu who frequently traveled to Dessie to meet his father. Between 1902 and 1904, Dessie, by virtue of its location, was to become one of the few towns to gain access to a telephone service from the line that was being installed between Addis Ababa and Asmara. A telephone operating station was set up at a new neighborhood called 'Selk Amba' south of Ras Mikael's Gebbi. In 1906, a telegraph station was also erected in Dessie.

SEGELLE AND THE END OF MIKAEL'S HALCYON DAYS

Following the death of Emperor Menelik II in 1913, his grandson Iyassu, the son of Ras Mikael and the daughter of Menelik II, Shewaragad Sahle Mariam, became Emperor-designate of Ethiopia. On 31 May 1914, Lij Iyassu dubbed his father 'King of Wollo and Tigray'. Abuna Petros VII (Atnaf Seged Yilma 163),¹⁴ Emperor

13 Ras Abate was imprisoned for six years, see Wondwosen Teshome and Buayalew Getachew, *Ras Abate Buayalew Negussu* (Amharic). Addis Ababa: Mankusa Printing Press, 2012 E.C., .222ff.

14 Abuna Petros VII (the Bishop of the north and a namesake of the Abuna Fascist Italy executed), carrying the Ark of St. Mary, accompanied Negus Mikael to Segelle and prompted the Wallo people to prove their allegiance to, and fight on, the side of Negus Mikael and Lij Iyassu. At

Yohannes's own bishop, crowned Ras Mikael Negus in front of a huge gathering of about 50,000 people and a highly orchestrated spectacle at a nearby field called 'Mugad'. Though the uncrowned Emperor Iyassu did not attend this extraordinary event, he sent his senior officials (foremost among them Ligaba Wolde Gabriel and Bejirond Yiggazu) to Dessie. "The ceremony at Dessie appeared to have culminated to accentuate [Mikael's] historic transformation in stature," and the sudden glare of fame of Wollo (Zewde 125).¹⁵

The well-coordinated conspiracy that dethroned Lij Iyassu resulted in the ascension to the Imperial throne of Empress Zewditu, daughter of Menelik II, with Teferi as her heir. Upon his removal from power, Lij Iyassu retreated from Harar to the Afar lowlands. This illegal seizure of power, which was extremely upsetting to Negus Mikael and the Wollo hierarchy, soon created an unbridgeable rift between the central government and Wollo, which ultimately led to open armed conflict between the forces of Ras Teferi and Mikael on the plains of Segelle on 22 October 1916. Despite his initial victory, Negus Mikael suffered defeat at Segelle, attributed partly to his meekness (Tafete 99), which was a reversal of the astounding victory that he had scored at Tora Mesk a few days earlier. Had Negus Mikael waited for some time to allow the contingents of Lij Iyassu and Ras Gebre Hiywot, his eldest son, to join his march against the Shewan army, he could have raised a formidable force that would have reversed the outcome of the Segelle battle and the trajectory of the country's history.

Unfortunately, Mikael, the daring combatant of Matemma and Adwa marching to Segelle without waiting for his sons, paid a grievous price. Surviving the Segelle ordeal, Ras Yimer and Fitawrari Sirah Bizu were able to meet Lij Iyassu who by then had managed to reach Dessie, albeit that his attempt to fight on the side of his father at Segelle proved futile. He then moved to Maqdala

the end of the battle, the Abuna himself became a prisoner and was taken to Addis.

15 According to Gobeze Tafete, the coronation ceremony was held at Hotie.

together with Ras Yimer and Fitawrari Sirah Bizu to resist the triumphant Shewan army that was marching to subdue Mikael's Wollo (Oral informants).¹⁶ For some time, supporters of Lij Iyassu continued to offer armed resistance against the central government.

The coming to Dessie of Lij Iyassu and his subsequent entrenchment at Maqdala (Wudneh E.C. 526)¹⁷ enabled him to enter into the great last combat in "a Theodorean fashion," by slipping "back and forth through the siege lines . . . won a few victories, and stirred up trouble" (Marcus 28). Following his escape from Maqdala, Iyassu, serving as a focal point of resistance and enjoying the loyalty of the Wollo peasantry (29), put up additional resistance to the ferocious, marauding Shewan forces in Ambassel, Delanta, and Dessie Zuria. Most importantly, the unsuccessful siege of Dessie, headquarters of the War Minister Habte Giorgyis, on 5 August 1917, by the Wollo forces, compelled the Shewan army to retreat. However, after a brief respite, Habte Giorgyis launched a coordinated counterattack and scored a decisive victory over his adversaries.

The capture of Ras Yimer Gebre Selassie¹⁸ and the death of "many high-ranking officials" (30), especially Fitawrari Serah Bizu Gebre, the military commander of Negus Mikael, sealed Iyassu's dream of reinstatement. The military victory of Habte Giorgyis also gave the Shewan army a good excuse to create mayhem and commit unprecedented atrocities on the pretext of punishing Lij Iyassu's supporters, including the execution of captives.¹⁹ With the stationing

16 Oral informants.

17 Mamo Wudneh likened this Shewan siege and bombardment of Maqdala to the attack of the British expeditionary force launched against Emperor Tewodros II in 1868. Mamo Wudneh, *My Achievements: Me and My Reminiscences* (Amharic), Addis Ababa: Neged Printing Press, 2000 E.C., 526.

18 Ras Yimer also died while he was in custody.

19 On the alleged misinformation of Habte Giyorgis's army and the unprecedented atrocities it unleashed upon the residents of Dessie, see

of Habte Giorgyis's army contingents from Cheliya and Harar, two neighborhoods called 'Yecheliya Sefer' and 'Hararge Sefer' respectively evolved in Dessie (Oral informants).²⁰

After obtaining information on the capture of Lij Iyassu in Tigray, on 21 May 1921, Ras Teferi came to Dessie. The troops of the central government as well as Ras Gugsa of Begemider and Ras Hailu of Gojjam gathered in Dessie. They stayed for about a month while negotiation with Ras Seyum about Iyassu's submission took place. The confrontation ended without bloodshed when Ras Seyum, the main proponent and father-in-law of Lij Iyassu, surrendered on 17 June. Ras Gugsa Araya brought Iyassu, the most wanted royal fugitive, to Dessie and handed him over to Ras Teferi. After getting hold of Lij Iyassu, Ras Teferi immediately returned to Addis Ababa. While this event confirmed Iyassu's removal from the early twentieth-century power politics of Ethiopia, it had greatly assisted the realization of Teferi's long-time aspiration of becoming an undisputed ruler of the country. In contrast, Iyassu's incarceration at Koremash (Bulga), Fiche (Shewa) and Grawa (Gara Muleta, Hararge) for about a decade and half and his mysterious death in November 1935 (aged c. 37 years), at the start of the Italian invasion, exacerbated the bitterness and resentment of the Wollo public towards Haile Selassie (Oral informants).²¹

DESSIE IN THE POST-SEGELLE YEARS

After the infamous Segelle battle, new governors were appointed to administer Wollo. Ras Kassa Hailu governed the province for some eight months. In the footsteps of Ras Kassa, Ras Abate, Lij Iyassu's prisoner at Maqdala and released on the promise of siding with Lij Iyassu, was made Governor of Wollo in October 1917 but he died a few days later (Teshome and Getachew 249). Ras Teferi entrusted Ras Wolde Giyorgis to fully pacify and govern Wollo until Ras

Bahru Zewde, *Habte the Strategist: from War Prisoner to Political Leader* (Amharic), Addis Ababa: Eclipse Printing Press, 2008 E.C., 93–97.

20 Oral informants.

21 Oral informants.

Kebede Mengesha Atikem replaced him in 1918. Ras Kebede governed the province for the next seven years until Fitawrari Aregay Becherie took his place in 1925. During Ras Kebede Mengesha's time the entire Wollo nobility were sacked from their governorship position. Moreover, their landholdings, together with the tenants working on them, were transferred to "retainers and soldiers from Shawa, Harar, and southern and south-western provinces of the country" (Gasha Muhammed 9). Despite the imposition of a variety of new taxes on the Wollo peasantry, the administration of Ras Kebede was characterized by extreme repression and rapacious exploitation, an eccentric system of governance that infringed what Mahteme Selassie has dubbed "intrinsic Ethiopian virtues" such as fear of God, courtesy, generosity, hospitality, honesty, and faithfulness (Wolde Meskel 9–12). The abuse of power and the flagrant violation of people's rights, as well as the unbearable injustice and administrative problems that plagued the region, demonstrated the dearth on the victors' side of moral decency and generosity of spirit. The perturbed situation obviously caused tremendous suffering on the entire population; and owing to this problem, many peasants were even forced to migrate to neighboring provinces. The following verse clearly demonstrates Ras Kebede's notoriously repressive administration of Wollo:

ቀን ሲተኛ ውሎ ሲጮህ ያድራል ውሻ

ወሎን አስለቀሰው ከበደ መንገሻ (Oral informants)²²

(A dog that slumbers during the day barks all through the night,
Kebede Mengesha makes the whole of Wollo squeal!)

This abnormally troublesome period leaves a lot to be desired. One may speculate that the deprivation of entitlement to farmlands seems to have inadvertently compelled many individuals and families to enter into the business sector, and this resulted in Wollo playing a leading mercantile role in the country. Perhaps, writing the history of Wollo under the Shewan administration (1916–1930)

22 Oral informants.

along the lines of contemporaneous administrations in the south and south-western parts of the country may well be a distinctively useful area of comparative research. In Dessie, the only accomplishments during the period of Shewan dominance did not go beyond the construction of the Selassie or Trinity (1920) and St. Mikael (1919) churches.²³

After Mikael's removal from Wollo, Teferi (later Haile Selassie) introduced a stringent policy of designating non-Wolloyes to the post of Enderassie (lit: "On my behalf"), a discomfiting policy he steadfastly upheld and cherished for nearly half-a-century of his rule; and "departures from this policy were rare" (Markakis 293). The appointment over Wollo of members of his own family and the Shewan aristocracy confirmed that Haile Selassie was determined not to reinstate natives of Wollo as governors in the birthplace of his wife, Empress Menen. Until her death on 15 February 1962, she had very little practical influence on her husband Emperor Haile Selassie I, and she was even powerless to help her son, the Crown Prince, exercise full authority over Wollo. That aside, the early destruction of the autonomous status of Wollo and its absorption by the central government inaugurated the coming onto the scene of a highly centralized administration of Emperor Haile Selassie, to which other regional entities also fell victim one after the other.

For Wollo, Ras Imru's appointment was said to be an auspicious period. It was in 1930 that Dajjazmach (later Ras) Imru Haile Selassie (cousin of Teferi) was appointed Enderassie of Wollo. Ras Imru introduced major infrastructural and administrative changes. During his time vital reforms, such as land tax, restructuring of the provincial administration, appointment of the first Ketema Shum (Town Chief or Mayor), and rudimentary town planning and distribution of urban land, as well as the construction of roads and bridges, had begun in earnest in Dessie (Haile Selassie 162–168). This promising developmental effort of Ras Imru, who was soon transferred to Gojjam, did not last long. Two years after his coronation as Neguse Negast on 2 November 1930, Emperor

23 St. Mikael Church was built by Ras Kebede Mengesha.

Haileselassie I (the former Ras Teferi) appointed his 16-year-old son, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, the great-grandson of Negus Mikael, Chief Governor-General of Wollo.

Some people naively believed that it was out of genuine conviction and respect for the Wollo public that Haile Selassie in December 1932 bestowed on his eldest son Asfa Wossen, who was crowned heir to the throne, the title of 'Meridazmach' on 2 November 1930 (Chief-Governor-General of the province). Others believed that Asfa Wossen's choice was part of a calculated strategy to mend and nurture the loyalty of the disgruntled Wollo lords as a whole and, in particular, to create a lasting harmonious relationship with the Wore Himano (Mamadoch) and Ambassel (Jantrar) ruling families, with whom Asfa Wossen himself as the great grandson of Mikael had blood relations through his mother Menen, the daughter of Jantrar Asfaw of Ambassel and the granddaughter of Ras Mikael of Wore Himano. It appears that the main objective of Asfa Wossen's appointment was to water down and stave off the long-standing tension that beleaguered relations of the Wollo people with the Haile Selassie regime (Oral informants).²⁴

The young Crown Prince with his advisor Dajjazmach Wodajo, a Shewan aristocrat who was known to have captured Negus Mikael at the battle of Segelle, lived in Dessie until its occupation by the Italians in April 1936. Initially, Asfa Wossen resided in the palace of Negus Mikael for some time and then moved to the present Meriho Gebbi around 1935. Abuna Petros, who was later assassinated by the Italians, and military commanders such as Fitawrari Sahle Dinkie and Fitawrari Faris, also resided in Dessie. During this time, the province's Deputy Governor-General under the chief-governorship of Meridazmach Asfa Wossen was Fitawrari (later Dajjazmach) Fikre Mariam Yinadu (Abba Techan), a renowned anti-Fascist patriotic resistance fighter, while the Dessie Ketema Shum was Blata Bekele Wolde Mikael with Ato Desta as Director and Nagadras Tesfaye as Customs Officer. Head of Public Works at the municipality was Fitawrari Dejene with his assistant Engineer

24 Oral informants.

Comte F. L. Bietry, and Ato Mekuriya Wolde Selassie as Director of Roads.

A crucial point worth remembering is that the seven successive Enderassie who had been appointed to govern Wollo in the post-Segelle period up until the Italian invasion: Ras Abate Buayalew (1917); Ras Kassa Hailu Dargie (1918); Ras Kebede Mengesha Atikem (1918–1925); Fitawrari Aregay Becherie (1925–1927); Dajjazmach Seyum Desta (1927–1930); Dajjazmach Imru Haile Selassie (1930–1932) and Dajjazmach Wodaje Wube (1932–1936) were either Shewan origin or non-Wolloyes (Oral informants).²⁵

Around the Italian Fascist invasion there were about 850 foreign nationals living and working in Dessie. About 50 of them were Arabs (Ahmed 31-37).²⁶ These foreign residents were teachers, merchants, medical personnel, government advisors, bankers, engineers, journalists, writers and missionaries.

Evolution of Administrative and Social Services

It was during Ras Imru's governorship of Wollo (1930–1932) that the first Dessie town administration was established. Its first Ketema Shum or Town Chief, who presided over the seven village heads or Sefer Shums, is said to have been the Italian-educated Aleqa Mekonnen.

The Italian Franciscan Fathers Catholic Mission and the American Seventh-Day Adventist Mission were also established in the mid-1920s.²⁷ In 1925, Dr. G.C. Bergman of the White Memorial Hospital in California came to Dessie to supervise the construction

25 Oral informants.

26 The majority of these Arab residents were Yemenis who came to Dessie in search of employment in the early twentieth century. For a brief discussion on Arab residents in Dessie, see Hussein Ahmed, "Archival Sources on the Yemeni Arabs in Urban Ethiopia: The Dessie Municipality," *History in Africa*, V,27 (2007): 31–37.

27 There was also a mosque (Zawiya) of the Qadiriyya Order in Dessie. The Qadiriyya was the oldest, more widespread and fastest-growing Sufi order in Wallo.

of the Seventh-Day Adventist Mission Hospital, which was completed in 1928. The hospital, known popularly as 'Teferi Mekonnen Hospital', has been remembered as the provider of the best quality medical care. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church also opened an elementary school.

There was an Italian Scuole Elementari Imperatrice Elena, Empress Elena Elementary girl's school, which was renamed 'Etege' (Empress) Mennen Primary School after the liberation. The first public school in Dessie, the Woyzero Siheen primary school, named after the mother of Etege Menen (consort of Haile Selassie), was established in 1922 E.C. (1930/01) at the precinct of present-day Negus Mikael School. The Negus Mikael Elementary School had begun functioning following the shift to the present location of the Woyzero Siheen School in 1942 (1934 E.C.) (Oral informants).²⁸ The French Catholic Lazzarist missionaries also opened one of the first modern school attached to their church in 1929.

The first modern clinic attached to the Italian commercial agency was opened in 1911. On the eve of the Italian invasion, the commercial agency (which later became the Italian legation in 1932) was renamed 'Meriho Gebbi'. It was in 1912 that piped water was first introduced in Dessie (Melake 13). The source of this piped water was Sere Minch, spring water from a locality in the Dawdo area, and the pipeline was stretched from there to Mikael's palace at Ayteyefe. Ras Abate was the one who singlehandedly initiated and consummated this project. Hence, it was known as 'Ras Abate Wuha' (Water) (Teshome and Getachew 231). The Italians also did some extension works on the Dessie water supply infrastructure. This additional public supply was connected to a water source at a place called 'Qurqur' (Tassew 79). In the 1920s a post office was opened; and a very limited road and air transport, and telephone and radio broadcasting services had also been initiated prior to the Italian invasion.

DESSIE ON THE EVE OF THE ITALIAN INVASION

28 Oral informants.

Haile Selassie left Addis Ababa on 26 November 1935 and reached Dessie on 30 November 1935 (Engeda Work 20). The Emperor used the former Italian Consulate as his “forward operation base” or “a compound for dispensing directives.” Hence, the name ‘Meriho Gebbi’ emerged. Meriho Gebbi, which still retains this name, was the only place inside the town worthy of his persona. In an effort to withstand the Italian invasion, the Emperor temporarily established a radio and telegraph station in the Meriho compound. However, the presence of the emperor in Dessie at this crucial period posed a serious threat to the town and its inhabitants (Oral informants).²⁹

On 3 December 1935, the Italians, in an attempt to assassinate the Emperor, bombed Dessie for the first time. In this bombing incident, the Seventh-Day Adventist hospital, which was already transformed into a Red Cross camp and had a big Red Cross insignia on its roof, was not spared. Of the 40 bombs that fell on the mission compound, only “five bombs hit the hospital” causing “no severe damage to the building” (*British Advent Messenger*). On that day alone, more than seven tons of bomb was said to have been dropped over Dessie. “Immediately after the disappearance of the Caproni bombers, the Emperor visited the hospital and spoke a word of cheer to each injured person. This he did frequently throughout his stay in Dessie,” wrote the London-based Seventh-Day Adventists newspaper. “The three-room school building has been turned into a hospital ward [and] . . . the hospital was full of bomb victims and soldiers. The soldiers were from armies passing through on their way to the front,” the newspaper added” (*British Advent Messenger*). An Ethiopian gentleman who was marching to the war front told Dr. Bergman, a man in charge of the Seventh Day Adventist hospital, has been quoted as saying: “Ethiopia has many shortcomings and has sinned many times, and God will punish us until we turn to Him, but the Italians [as Christians] must not do it” (*British Advent Messenger*).

As bombing continued the next day, many of the residents of Dessie fled the town. During this time, some thirty foreign war

29 Oral informants.

correspondents were in Dessie. At or near Meriho Gebbi, Emperor Haile Selassie, who the Italians targeted to kill, was photographed with his foot resting on one of the undetonated bombs and aiming his anti-aircraft machine gun at the tri-motored Caproni bombers of Regia Aeronautica (Engeda Work 22–23). It is to be noted that bombers or “flame throwers” of various models were also used in the conquest of Ethiopia, such as Stella and Savoia-Marchetti of the Regia Aeronautica (Baker 64–67).

When the Italians again bombed Dessie and destroyed an Ethiopian Red Cross airplane near the town in February 1936, the Emperor was in Dessie with his two sons, the Crown Prince and the Duke of Harar. A few days after, his military advisors Ras Getachew Abate, Fitawrari Biru Wolde Gabriel, Dajjazmach Haile Selassie Abayneh and Dajjazmach Adefresew left Dessie for the northern front on February, 21 1936, while the Emperor remained in Dessie.³⁰

DESSIE DURING THE ITALIAN OCCUPATION, 1936–1941

On 14 April 1936, owing to the eminent danger posed by the advancing Italian forces, the Crown Prince, escorted by Dajjazmach Wodajo and Dajjazmach Fikre Mariam hastily left Dessie for Addis Ababa. The next day, that is, early on the morning of April 15, 1936, an Eritrean army contingent, supported by the Italian air force that supplied it with arms and rations, easily captured the defenseless town (Toynbee 296). They did not encounter any resistance at all. Marshall Badoglio, sitting on a white horse, entered the Italian consulate jubilantly. Sending his advance forces to the capital city first and setting up a military base on April, 21 1936, Badoglio stayed in Dessie for about a week. He eventually left Dessie for Addis Ababa on April 27, 1936 (296). After the fall of Addis Ababa on May 4, 1936, a small group of patriotic forces “momentarily recaptured the city of Dessie . . . but [they] had to retire in the face of an Italian counter-attack with air support” (Greenfield 175).

The Italians made Dessie the seat of the Commissariato dell’Uollo (Commissariat of Wollo), within the Federazione dell

30 Oral Informants.

Amhara, one of the regional administrative divisions of Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa). In October 1940, Wollo was made part of Governo Della Scioa or the Governorate of Shewa. Dessie also became the seat for Prefettura Apostolica of Padri Cappucini. Following their entry into Dessie, the Italians confiscated all the previous government institutions; and they made, for example, the Gebbi of Negus Mikael the office of the Commissariat. The former Italian Consulate, one of the finest buildings in Dessie that was made the headquarters of Emperor Haile Selassie for some months on the eve of the war, was renovated and renamed 'Villa Italia' (Balcha n.d. 11).

The Italians commenced a number of public projects aimed at developing the city in line with their racist colonial objectives. The preparation of the city's master plan was one of the many tasks that they initiated to implement. The master plan was framed on the racist segregation policy of dividing the city into black and white quarters. The execution of the master plan was a hallmark of fascist racial policy. The northern part of the piazza area (previously Yeferenji Amba or "Whites' Quarter", wherein some Greek and Armenian businessmen lived and worked before 1935/36) was designated for whites only; while the southern part, which retained most of the old quarters, had been allocated for natives. The central area where the Italians built Casa Del Fascio (House of the Fascists) was also known as 'Piazza del Littorio', a square for the Fascist Party emblem. Various shops and cafés were also found around this central square. After liberation, Casa Del Fascio (now demolished) became the headquarters of the provincial police.

Owing largely to the construction of residential and administrative office buildings, and infrastructural facilities during the occupation, the city had shown considerable growth in terms of physical size. Most, if not all, the construction activities and infrastructural facilities were concentrated in the piazza area and in the northern section of the city, which was envisaged to be "a garden city" for the Italians. From Villa Italia (the previous Italian Consulate) northwards, several institutions and residences were

established. An Italian residential quarter known as ‘Casa Incis’, an acronym for ‘Casa Istituto Nazionale per Case Deli Imiegati Cello Stato’, a construction company that provided housing for employees of Italian East Africa (Bowers 200), was found in this area. Banko di Roma, Banko di Napoli, Banko di Italia, postal and telephone offices, and the municipality were built around the piazza. In between the Medhane Alem Church and the piazza area, there were the Ospedale dermoceltico (Dermatological Hospital) and a venereal disease clinic.³¹ Along the street to the south of the piazza, the municipality office, and out-patient clinics for local and Italian nationals called ‘Ambulatorio per nazionali e indigeni’ were set up.

In addition to Albergo C.I.A.A.O (renamed Touring and Ghion Ambassel Hotel after liberation and recently demolished), a movie hall (Cinema Impero, today’s Dessie Cinema), printing press (Poligrafio Del Impero), mills, schools, a hospital and a stadium were built north of the piazza along the eastern and western sides of the Dessie-Mekelle road. Along the eastern side of the main street running northwards, there were barracks for the Intendenza, a school and church of the Franciscan Lazzarists Catholic Mission, an Italian cemetery, a fountain, a sports field (Albergo Bella Milano), and an Italian workers’ camp of 18 wooden pavilions with a capacity of 200 persons each, a mill, the camp of Milizia Forestale, and Casa Del Preti (House of the Preachers). Moreover, manufacturing firms for soap and candles, and an oil-producing factory, wood-working shops, hollow block and brick factories were also founded. This quarter was also well supplied with clean water and electricity (Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners 25).

As the Italians sought to play on the ethnic and religious differences among the Ethiopian public, they purposefully “favored the Oromo over the Amhara and the Muslims over the Christians.” In addition to the building of mosques, they encouraged Muslims to make pilgrimages to Mecca (Greenfield 175). The big mosque at Shewa Ber was among the projects the Italians approved in Dessie.

31 The Italians expelled the SDA hospital staff from Dessie and the hospital resumed its services in the late 1950s.

They also constructed food-processing plants (for macaroni, biscuits, flour and for oil production) and a modern market center. To produce durum wheat for the food-processing plant, a modern farm in Valle di Gerado or the Gerado basin was made operational. A number of minor asphalt roads were built to connect the various parts of the city. The city's main bridges that had been initially erected during Ras Imru's time were upgraded. About 16 miles of the Dessie–Gondar road was also graveled and stabilized by 1938 (Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners 26).

The presence of the Italians in Dessie conspicuously accelerated the town's commercial growth. Because of its strategic location linking Addis Ababa, Asmara, Assab and Gondar, the Italians were interested in beefing up their commercial activities in Dessie. The Assab–Dessie road and the overall improvement of road transport facilities attracted a number of local merchants to Dessie to start up their own businesses (Berhanu 141). As Teferi alluded, in addition to local businesses, the opening up of bars and pubs made Dessie a commercial hub next to Asmara and the town with its beautiful women was to become a paradise for Italian heavy truck drivers (141). Several Italian firms had also begun functioning. The two companies involved in the construction sector were Giuseppe Bruno and Dioguardi & Figli, while Soc. An. Salvatore dell'Oca was a registered enterprise for providing a road transport service. By 1939, Lsona-Fraschini, a motorcar enterprise had its sub-station in Dessie. Though Dessie was visibly divided into industrial and commercial zones, the number of business establishments, constituting hotels, restaurants, general merchandise, import-export firms, among other things, reached more than 150 during the Italian period.

Around 1938 there was an airport at Kombolcha and bus transport to and from Asmara. Besides restaurants such as Aquila, Berenice, Bologna, Faro, Gambrinus, Impero, Neghelli, Primavera, Salvietti, Stella D'Italia, Tringale, Venezia and 9 Maggio, there were also street lighting, a public bath (Ufficio d. Lavoro) and a laundry service. In general, Dessie's urban development was speeded up during the Italian occupation. Even if the momentum was not

maintained thereafter, as has been argued, there were unprecedented inner-city changes in Dessie during the Italian period. The presence of hotels and restaurants acquainted the town's people with Italian cuisine. The taste for Italian dishes has been one of the long-lasting Italian colonial legacies. Few locally-owned hotels in the post-Italian years used to serve Italian foods, such as *pani* (white bread), *pasta al forno*, *pasta spaghetti*, *tagliatelle*, *minestrone*, *bisteca*, *espezzatino* and various types of *frutta* (mixed fruit and salad or *salata*); and it became common to see a *carte du jour* of Italian dishes along with Ethiopian traditional cuisine in the different hotels and restaurants of Dessie. Even today, Italian lexical borrowings are being retained in auto mechanics, electro-technical and in the construction field (Oral informants).³² However, such cultural intrusions and admixtures had been abruptly discontinued with the expulsion of the Italians from Ethiopia in 1941.

Between April 17 and 27, 1941, the Italians, despite their fierce resistance at Kombolcha, were forced to capitulate and hand over Dessie to the Ethio-British joint forces. The Italian garrison in Dessie was taken over by Brigadier Pienaar's 1st South African Brigade, which was assisted by 500 Ethiopian patriots (some of whom were Abebe Aregai's men) under the command of Captain Campbell. Right after the war, Dessie served as an internment camp, which became "definitive camp No. 410," a transit camp for evacuees awaiting repatriation (Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners 27).

DESSIE DURING THE IMPERIAL ERA: 1941–1974

Administrative Backdrop

With the restoration of Ethiopia's independence in 1941, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, replacing Liqa Mekwas Abegaz Chufa who had been appointed as interim overseer, was reinstated as Chief Governor-General of the province, together with Balambaras Mahteme Selassie as his tutor and secretary. The restored government had again adopted the previous policy of depriving the

32 Oral informants.

Wollo lords from top governorship positions. With the exception of Ras Gebre Hiywot Mikael, Iyassu's eldest brother who was installed as Enderassie of Wollo for some seven years (1943–1950) in the post-liberation period, almost all governor-generals appointed over the newly restructured Wollo right from the restoration of the imperial rule in 1941 to the downfall of Haile Selassie in 1974: Nagadras Berhane Selassie Abba Yirre and Brigadier General Asfaw Wolde Giyorgis (June 1941–December 1942); Dajjazmach Mengesha Wolde Giyorgis, a Wolloye by birth and related to Teferi through his mother, (1950–1955 and 1957–1959); Dajjazmach Dereje Mekonnen (1955–1957); Dajjazmach Demiss Wolde Amanuel (1959–1962); Fitawrari Belay Mersha (1962–1964); Fitawrari Mamo Seyum (1964–1971); Dajjazmach Solomon Abraham (1971–1973); Dajjazmach Legesse Bezu (1973–April 1974); and Fitawrari Mahrene Minda (May–September 1974) in the early days of the Darg, were non-Wolloyes (Gashaw Muhammed 39–40; Wolde Meskel 21–22).³³

It was to prevent the Crown Prince from creating an “independent” or an alternative power base outside of the capital, Addis Ababa (Clapham 59) that Haile Selassie continued to appoint “natives of Shewa” as Enderassie for the province, as he had done before he became Emperor (Negusa Nagast) in 1930, argued Clapham (59). Earlier, this same argument that had been told and retold was intentionally used as a rallying cry against Abéto Iyassu. The strained relations with Haile Selassie seemed to be a blessing in disguise for the crown prince. Though he received a purely nominal position in Addis in 1947, the Crown Prince retaining Wollo as his personal fief enabled him to reap “considerable financial benefits” (60).

John Spencer (332), a long-time legal advisor to the Imperial Ethiopian government, has depicted the august Crown Prince as an indecisive individual, who could not deter his corrupt retinues from exploiting the province ravenously by taking advantage of his

33 The other exception was Ras Gebre Hiywot's nephew, Dajjach Belay Ali Mikael, who had been appointed Governor of Wadla Delanta, one of the twelve Awrajas in Wallo; Oral informants.

lethargic and indifferent persona. Spencer also alluded that the Crown Prince was not loved by the Wollo people because of the deposing of Lij Iyassu by his father Haile Selassie, in 1916, and the grudge that had been seething among the population since then (332).

Serving as a onetime personal advisor to the Crown Prince, the British diplomat Wilfred Thesiger Jr., the son of Wilfred Thesiger Sr. the renowned minister of the British Legation in Ethiopia (1910–1919), described him as a nonchalant officeholder with very little interest in developmental matters. During his stay in Dessie, and until his subsequent resignation after a year's service (1943–1944), the only thing Thesiger claimed to have accomplished was the improvement of the sewerage system of the penitentiary. Thesiger also indicated the encirclement of the Crown Prince by rapacious and conservative officials, who defiantly opposed any modern developmental ideas. Owing to his acrimonious relationship with the Emperor, he added, the Crown Prince lacked real political power (Thesiger 149–154). It was with the approval of the Emperor that the Crown Prince would even appoint *awraja* and *woreda* governors of proven decent and loyalty to the regime and the Imperial throne. In addition, these governors, being remotely controlled by the Crown Prince, were at liberty to use and abuse their power. The various administrative blunders of both the higher- and lower-level officials, and their insensitivity to the plight of the people were by and large responsible for the surfacing and resurfacing of wide-ranging grassroots disappointments in the province. After reiterating the exploitative nature of Asfa Wossen, Tilahun Berhane Selassie (368) has summed up that even if the people of Wollo swore in his name, the Crown Prince did nothing to them.

Asfa Wossen spent most of his time in the capital city, with very little or no physical presence in Wollo. It was with the Emperor's prior consent that he would be able to travel to Wollo (Berhanu 154). It was often during the two-week fasting time in August called 'Filseta' that the Crown Prince would come to Dessie to meet with his administrative duties. Even then, he did not dispense justice

quickly; he indefinitely postponed many of the legal issues presented to his Chilot (Court of Appeal), and several cases were inevitably transferred to the then Supreme Court, the Emperor's Chilot or the Crown Court. Using his politico-administrative authority emanating from his supreme governorship of Wollo, however, Asfa Wossen managed to own a vast amount of urban and agricultural land from which he collected considerable personal income. Apart from granting government lands to members of the landed gentry and the Territorial Army, he collected money by selling urban lands to a select few individuals. People even accused him of undermining the Wollo resistance fighters (Amharic: Arbegnoch) and favoring those who collaborated with the Italians (Amharic: Bandawoch) and to whom he bequeathed some of the farmlands which he appropriated from the patriots.³⁴

Socio-economic Landscape: 1941–1974

After the restoration of Ethiopia's independence in 1941, Dessie continued to serve as the political and administrative center of Wollo. The former Italian office blocks later became public offices of the restored Imperial government. In a decree of 1942, Dessie was listed as one of the six "Schedule A" municipalities in Ethiopia. In 1945, Dessie was put under the jurisdiction of the Municipality Department in the Ministry of Interior. This period also witnessed the restructuring of the Dessie administration with which the city was divided into eight *sefer* (six of which were pre-Italian) with their respective village heads (Yesefer Shum). The Sefer Shums were appointed to help the municipality in matters of tax collection, and maintaining peace and order. This sub-division lasted until the Derg government introduced the Kebele administration in the 1970s.³⁵ Despite such benign efforts of the immediate post-1941 period, the restored Imperial government, which was believed to have been apathetic to Wollo, did not allocate the necessary capital that would

34 Oral informants.

35 Outlasting the Derg regime in 1991, still the Kebele administrative structure is more or less retained.

enable the Crown Prince or the provincial authorities to plan and execute any infrastructural or developmental works (Oral informants).³⁶

During the occupation, about “20,000 Italians lived in Dessie and [only] 40 of them stayed to live there after the war” (Palmgren and Sjostrand 34). Among the 40 Italians who remained in Dessie after the occupation: Mario Bigna (also called ‘Mario Aqua’) of water works; Parini, Nigri, Ferrari, Burzedini and the brothers Renato and Fantini of automotive/mechanical works; Saviatari and Iskarati of watchmaking/repairing works; Jakomino of electrical and construction works; Mario Marketi of wood works; Olivelli Ventura of electronic works; Vichenso, Johanny and Bascolini of milling works; Janolio and Nicola (Biccola) of road works; Rozetta and Junolio of Engineering works; Valenti Lodoviko of spare parts and gas distribution; Guido, Bibo, Bianco and Richi of transportation works; and the physician, Dr. Belezia, are still remembered (Oral informants).³⁷ A few of them had even married Ethiopian women and bore children of mixed blood or adopted local children. Sbacchi wrote about the shortage of Italian women and the widespread culture of “*madamismo*: the illegal cohabitation of an Italian man with an Ethiopian woman” (Sbacchi 170–172) Lentakis (69–70) wrote that lust for captivating Ethiopian women was a “problem of the highest magnitude,” as a result; the ordinary soldiers and high-ranking colonial officials breached racial laws. The Italian officer O’Kelly (113) noted on the problem facing the Fascist government in applying the 1937 law prohibiting miscegenation that almost half of the colonial army had “a native mistress” and “no disgrace had been attached to these liaisons” before the introduction of the law (113). In short, the efforts of the Italian colonial officials to prohibit “social intercourse” with the “natives” came to naught and no racial purity of the white blood/race was achieved.

Even if several Italian administrative and residential houses have recently been demolished, one may argue that they truly

36 Oral informants.

37 Oral informants.

represented until recently (only a few of them are still standing) the Italian legacy in Dessie. There are no traces of food-processing and other manufacturing firms the Italians had established in and around Dessie. There is very little knowledge about what happened to them. Some of them were believed to be dismantled and transferred to other places, while others were simply left to rust or were closed. This situation compelled the town's residents to ponder why these "colonial" establishments could not have operated and contributed to the city's development in the post-Italian period (Oral informants).³⁸ According to Teferi Berhanu (150), legal advisor to the Crown Prince, it was in a deliberate act of sabotage that all the socio-economic developmental works that had been established by Fascist Italy in Wollo were put under the central government, suspended from functioning or dismantled. This state of affairs obliged several local and foreign business owners to leave Dessie for Shewa, and the city ceased to become a business hub. This signaled the end of Wollo's halcyon days and Dessie was destined to become "like an empty dining hall" and rapidly descended into darkness (150). While a limited number of modern infrastructural services were initiated in other provinces, Wollo was deliberately unheeded, noted Berhanu (150).

The absence of public institutions bearing Emperor Haile Selassie's name (disregarding the few privately-owned bars and hotels) as customarily seen everywhere to display his paternalistic persona may provide a clue to what extent Dessie as a major city was ignored when it came to developmental works. The near zero employment opportunity in the public sector not only pushed people to engage in the business area, but it also fostered a widespread negative outlook towards public servants. The saying "Being a civil servant means living in perpetual poverty. So, why would you work and waste your time in public office?" Such an attitude requires no further explanation.

38 According to Oral Informants, the printing machine was dismantled and taken to Addis Ababa by Balambaras Mahteme Selassie Wolde Meskel, a one-time personal aide of Prince Asfa Wossen.

Until recently, transportation problems were a daunting challenge in Wollo. There was no road transportation network connecting Dessie to most *awrajas* (districts) and *woredas* (sub-districts) in the province. Many rural areas in Wollo were also infested with *shifita* (brigands), some of whom had even outlived the imperial rule. Banditry was an endemic problem that hampered the movement of goods and services too.³⁹

A letter Fitawrari Amedie wrote to Crown Prince Asfa Wossen on 25 Genbot 1958 E.C. (June 3, 1966), may give an insight into the complexity of developmental problems facing Wollo at the time. After eulogizing the provincial governor, Dajjazmach Mamo, for his personal efforts in connecting the different *awrajas* with the provincial capital Dessie by rural roads, Fitawrari Amedie described how the endeavors of Dajjazmach Mamo had been obstructed by *awraja* governors and local officials who deliberately misled the people by telling them how the construction of roads would affect their “decent” life. In order to resolve the chronic problem of road transportation, Fitawrari Amedie humbly demanded the Crown Prince to extend his wholehearted assistance to the Enderassie (Lemma 258–259). This indicated that the socio-economic development of Wollo did not substantially improve, and the vast majority of its people remained poor and destitute overall. This economic stagnation, coupled with the repeated visitations of drought and famine, negatively impacted the wellbeing of the population. The human losses during the famine of the early 1970s, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, were largely attributed to the weaknesses of the Crown Prince and his higher- and lower-level officials. Informants alluded that the Crown Prince, being Chief Governor-General of Wollo right from his reinstatement in June 1941 until his final flight to England in 1974, just a few months before the revolution, could have done so much to prevent the famine and the tragic human death in Wollo (Oral informants).⁴⁰

39 Oral informants.

40 Oral informants.

In contrast, several business-minded individuals actually succeeded in opening up businesses, creating jobs and making Dessie a commercially thriving urban center. This resulted in an observable growth in the city's population and its commercial activities. There were about 787 commercial establishments in 1968 against only 158 during the Italian period. Of these, 259 were retailers. Arada, Segno Gebeya and Robit markets were expanded hosting traders from Asmara, Jimma and the coastal areas of the Empire.

The Woyzero Siheen School, originally founded in 1930/1 (1922 E.C.), was one of the oldest public schools in Ethiopia along with the Menilik II School in Addis Ababa and Ras Mekonnen School in Harar. Soon after the liberation, it was transferred to its present location, following the construction of modern classrooms and office buildings by a Greek contractor called Mussie Hector.⁴¹ The Crown Prince, Meridazmach Asfa Wossen, inaugurated the newly-built school. The school was upgraded to a Secondary School in 1957, making it the first high school in the region. With the Woyzero Siheen's financial endowment of 153,000 Ethiopian birr, additional buildings were constructed for vocational education; in 1960 it was officially inaugurated by Emperor Haile Selassie. Since 1961, the school had begun offering the best-quality vocational training, which made it one of the leading comprehensive schools in the country (Oral informants).⁴² In the subsequent years, the school, being famous for running the legendary marching band and music performing unit, was to become a renowned institution for breeding political activists and socialist-oriented revolutionaries as well.⁴³ In 1950, the Memhir Akale Wold Primary School, named after the renowned cleric of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was opened.

In the area of public health, the only hospital that provided modern healthcare services to the Dessie public after 1941 was Asfa

41 He became a permanent resident of Dessie, engaged in a motel business, married a Wolleye and died there.

42 Oral informants.

43 It was popularly known in Amharic as *Yewoyzero Siheen Yemuzica Guad*.

Wossen Hospital, formerly Ospedale Civile Campo Allogio of the Italians, which eventually became the first government hospital. After the construction of a new 50-bed hospital at Hotie with the financial support of USAID in July 1962 (1954 E.C.), bearing the same name, Asfa Wossen, the old hospital at a place called 'Qurqur' was left to provide a limited medical service for the people of the surrounding communities. It later became a treatment ward for tuberculosis patients up to c. 1977 (Oral informants).⁴⁴ Crown Prince Asfa Wossen offered the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) a beautiful site at Boru Meda and the mission had established the Selassie Leprosarium in 1955. Moreover, one of the two provincial Desert Locust Control headquarters inside Ethiopia, which was founded in 1953, had its office in Dessie. As regards electric power supply, there was a 200 kW power station in the early 1950s; and it was later replaced with a new steam turbine plant that produced 280 kW. In the early 1960s, a new diesel-powered generator with a capacity of 635 kW was purchased; and a power line was also installed to supply the town of Kombolcha with electricity.

As to the private sector, there was a dynamic public transport firm called 'Yawallo Yaneged Yaindustrina Yahezeb Mamelalesha Aksiyon Mahbere' (Wollo Trade, Industry and Public Transportation Share Company), best known by its nickname 'Wollo Feres'. The company started its transport services by leasing two Italian-owned buses. By 1949 E.C. (1957), Wollo Feres bought two (new) buses of its own (Oral informants).⁴⁵ Wollo Feres, using a white horse as its logo, turned out to be a flagship, a source of pride and a symbol of identity for the whole province. It was the first share company in the country in the transportation sector founded by entrepreneurial individuals, the majority of whom were

44 Oral informants.

45 Among the various motor vehicles being used in Dessie, informants remember automobiles such as Volkswagen, Opel, Mercedes, Citron, Peugeot, Land Rover, Jeep, DKW, Austin, Tanus (Ford), Themes, Chevrolet, Mustang, Toyota, Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Volga, Pontiac, Renault and Saab.

businesspeople working in Dessie. The survival of Wollo Feres was not at all trouble free; at the time of the 1974 revolution, it had eight buses with more than a thousand shareholders. Its fate was finally sealed when the military government confiscated all the white horse carrier buses in 1980 (1972 E.C.) (Lemma 158–164). Besides Wollo Feres, several individuals did actively engage in the public transportation sector. There were also several individuals serving the town's people with horse-driven carts or *garri*.⁴⁶

A couple of civic organizations were established in the 1960s called 'Wollo Welfare Association' (WWA), which was aimed at working in famine relief activities, and the Dessie Urban Development Association (DUDA) that was founded to build schools, urban roads, and sports facilities, among other things, in Dessie. In fact, WWA and DUDA, in 1968 and 1969, "mobilized the residents of Dessie to plant trees on the slopes and hillsides between Dessie and Kombolcha, and in the Harego area" (Rahmato 24). Even if they were set up and made operational under the auspices of the then provincial governor Dajjzmach Mamo Seyum, both associations that were expected to tackle many communal issues proved to be ineffectual and had very little success (Oral informants).⁴⁷ Similar initiatives had been aborted in the post-Imperial regimes, and this compels one to ask why people in Wollo would not be allowed to organize self-help associations and help themselves. For instance, Dajjzmach Mamo was the one who replaced the old, corrugated iron sheets of Aytteyefe hall with his own money; and his request for reimbursement was said to be rejected by the Emperor (Oral informants).⁴⁸ After serving for seven years he was transferred in 1971, and this move abruptly suspended his multi-faceted developmental initiatives in Wollo. As Taffara asserted, Dajjzmach Solomon Abraham, the Provincial Governor who replaced Dajjzmach Mamo, was "the wrong choice for the problem province: he was only interested in showy displays instead

46 Oral informants.

47 Oral informants.

48 Oral informants.

of resolving the pressing needs of the people” (Degeufe 292).⁴⁹ Dajjzmach Solomon’s removal from office was attributed to his authorization of the dreadful execution in broad daylight in the Dessie Central Square in May 1973 of eight Woyzero Siheen School students who had joined a rally to demand provision of emergency relief assistance to the famine victims. Dajjzmach Legesse Bezu replaced him. Though not formally indicted, both Solomon Abraham and Legesse Bezu, being implicated for not doing enough to forestall the catastrophic Wollo famine, were executed by the Derg in November 1974.

In the mid-1960s, the city’s population, constituting different ethno-linguistic groups, was estimated to be more than 39,000 (of which 3.5% were foreigners); it grew to more than 97,000 in 1994; and in 2005 it jumped to about 170,000. During this time, eight schools were built, including two secondary schools (now more than quadrupled). Water, electricity and health services that had been installed before or during the Italian period and being maintained from time to time were functioning in the 1960s.

Dessie, in 1967, was among the 40 Ethiopian towns selected to be covered by a Grand Master Plan preparation project at national level. Though it was one of the biggest urban centers with a population size of more than 40,000, and the fifth-ranking town in the country, Dessie did not show significant physical changes during this period. Even after piped water had become available in most parts of Dessie, the absence of treated or chlorinated water remained a serious problem in the 1970s. As the 1984 census showed 23.6% of households in Dessie had access to the municipal water supply (Teka 183).⁵⁰ This made the per capita water consumption of

49 In 1971, Dajjach Solomon had “organized an exhibition in Dessie when signs of famine were already evident.” Taffara Deguefe, *Minutes of the Ethiopian Century*. Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2006, 292.

50 Many families washed their own clothes, or they hired washer folk to do the job at the Borkena River using either *endod* (*Phytolacca dodecandra*) or soap, as detergent, and *jendie* (dried hide) or locally-made washbasins manufactured by artisans in the Arada area. People

households very small, and it impeded the regular bathing and washing of clothes. The supply and distribution of electricity was no better than the supply of drinking water. The topography has been a serious challenge in changing the cityscape. As some observers reported, being hemmed in between steep hills, Dessie, consisting of a jumble of buildings and rocky alleys, seemed to defy any effort to introduce orderly town planning. A notable individual worth mentioning in connection with the Dessie town planning is Kegnazmach Tesfaye Teklewold. The city's two-lane main highways with streetlights and the few internal asphalt roads can be attributed to this enlightened person who happened to be the mayor of Dessie since the late 1960s and remained so for a few years even after the 1974 regime change.⁵¹

Yet, Dessie's moderate weather conditions and its strategic location linking Addis Ababa, Asmara, Assab and Gondar significantly helped the growth of the city and its business activities. Several commercial enterprises emerged, along with a few manufacturing or processing industries, such as the Dessie Soft Drinks and Candy Factories and various types of retailing and service rendering establishments. Most of all, Dessie's cordial and multicultural sensibility of its inhabitants, together with an astonishing interfaith harmony and coexistence, attracted both Ethiopians and foreigners alike, and this helped Dessie become a much more preferred urban center to most other cities in the whole of Ethiopia. Besides hundreds of Eritreans, Italians and Arabs, other foreign nationals (*ferenji*): Greeks, Armenians, Indians (known locally as 'Banyans'), Americans, Britons, French, Yugoslavs, South

sometimes bathed their bodies in nearby springs (e.g., Ras Yimer; Ras Yazew; Liqa Mekwas Abegaz; Boqeqesa, Arera, Sholaw, Qegaw, Sire Minch, Asfa Wossen) or in Desso and Borkena rivers.

51 For a comprehensive history of Dessie in the post-Italian period, see Abdu Mohammed, "The History of Dessie Town, 1941–1991," M.A thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1997.

Africans, Filipinos and Swedish origin also resided and worked in Dessie.⁵²

Besides the pre-Italian commercial firms, such as Singer (importers of sewing machines) and A. Besse & Co. Ltd. (providers of general merchandise, including corrugated iron sheets and exporters of hides and skin) that had already begun functioning in the early 1930s; Paul Ries & Sons (supplier of Peugeot and pesticides); Seferian & Co. Ltd. and Mitchell Cots (dealers of Volkswagen and Land Rover respectively); Hagbes Pvt. Ltd. Co. (supplier of grain mills); and Amalgamated Ltd. and Ries Engineering (suppliers of mills, agricultural implements and machineries), along with retailer firms such as Elias Papisinos (liquor); Awash Winery; Philips; Rol; Romer and Oris, were among the prominent ones operating in Dessie in much of the post-Italian period.⁵³ It is worth remembering those who initiated and helped sustain the different manufacturing, business and service-rendering firms in Dessie.

Through relentless personal efforts, many successful business people invested their capital in wholesale trade, service delivery and the provision of essential merchandises, such as coffee,⁵⁴ salt,⁵⁵ spices and condiments,⁵⁶ red pepper,⁵⁷ supermarkets/groceries,⁵⁸ as well as

52 Oral informants.

53 Oral informants.

54 Hajji Ali Bayan, Kebede Seid, Ali Mahmud, Hajji Yimam Tessema, Seid Ali Abuye, Nagadras Mohammed Hassen, Sheikh Amenu Soba, Zegeye Worku, Aragaw Ali, Asfaw Tessema, Yimer Tessema, Mohammed Ahmed Kayo.

55 Hajji Mohammed Yesuf (Leslasie), Hajji Mohammed Hassen, Fedlu Mohammed Nur, Hussein Ahmed, Ato Ibrahim, Eshetu Mekonnen, Yimam Mashele, Assen Quorate, Kassaye Woldie.

56 Hassen Korerima

57 Assen Ali, Ahmed Berberie, Sheikh Seid Abdella, Sheikh Hussein, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein.

58 Yilma, Tefera Woldie, Temelso Kahsay, Balila, Tsegaye Gebre Meskel, Zewge and Legesse Araya were the grocers at the forefront.

running different businesses such as gas stations,⁵⁹ drug stores/pharmacies,⁶⁰ buses, freight⁶¹ and public transport,⁶² stationery stores,⁶³ ready-made garments,⁶⁴ fabric,⁶⁵ tailors,⁶⁶ shoes,⁶⁷ kitchen/household utensils,⁶⁸ building materials,⁶⁹ factories,⁷⁰ oil

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- 59 Blata Abdel Malik Gonafer (Total), Valenti (Agip), Habte (Mobil) and Besse Co. initially and later others (Shell).
- 60 Shimeles Adal, Genet Gebre Selassie, Tariku Tamrat, Yimer Abebaw, Ayele, Tessema (Asir Alaqa), Bezabih and Bezuye.
- 61 Hajji Ali Bayan, Badahman, Balambaras/Sergenti, Temelso Kahsay, Abdella Mohammed, Mussa Abdu, Kebede Abegaz, Kassa, Aragaw Ali, Ali Mussa, Ibre Mussa, Hussein Yassin, Hussein Ibrahim, Kebede Bese, Yirgu, Mohammed Seid, Zewge, Amare, Kelifa (Bekri), Johanny, Bekele.
- 62 Mussa Abdu, Usman Sheikh, Gonafer, Bibo, Guido, Berhanu Beshir, Nurayu, Gorfu, Abadi, Yimam Hassen, Ahmed Piccolo, Yimer Adem (founder of *Mashilaye* Transport S.C.) and Ato Abbay are worth mentioning.
- 63 Muqbil, Abdul Latif, Hassen.
- 64 Abdul Latif, Abdul Kerim, Mohammed Amin (James Bond), Mohammed Addis, Marqos Ali.
- 65 Zergaw G/Tsadiq, Alemayehu, Ahmed Ali, Bezabih Aragaw, Ilala Checheso, Yimer Mekete, Worku Siraj, Ato Tekle, Memerie Yemane, Muqabish, Haile Mariam Aragaw, Shiferaw Aragaw, Kassa Kelil, Tefera Kassa, Gebre Yohannes, Beyane, Haile Asege, Waka Debebe, Aragie Chekol, Haile Afata and Several Yemenis.
- 66 Abegaz Asfaw, Assefa Kersima, Balcha Negwo, Kebede Kassa, Melke Gessesse, Getachew.
- 67 Kebede Alwabe, Tesfaye Wolde Mariam (Central), Meskelu, Nuru, Gelaw, Gurara, Haile Giyorgis.
- 68 Gosaye, Mitiswa.
- 69 Ibrahim Dawd, Seid Mussa and Ibre Mussa.
- 70 Soft Drinks Factory producing Teka Cola, Arenchata and Snap Cola of Temelso Kahsay; And a Processing Firm for producing candies (Yegebse, Teter and Djibouti Caramella) of Adam Fedlu and Ali Legasse jointly, and Berhie Araya of Mar, Saat, and Dula Caramella are worth noting.

mills,⁷¹ flour mills,⁷² grain cleaning and sifting,⁷³ laundries,⁷⁴ cabs,⁷⁵ import–exports, tearooms/cafeterias, ⁷⁶ hotels/bars/restaurants, ⁷⁷

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- 71 Dimitri (Greek); Mohammed Berhan and Hajji Salah Kahsay were pathfinders.
- 72 Ali Afasho; Mohammed Berhan; Vichenso and Johanny; Ras Gebre Hiywot; the brothers Alemu and Molla Gebre Yohannes; Zergaw Gebre Tsadiq; Mohammed Liben; Abdu Yesuf; Aregay; Gerazmach Wolle; Aragie; Hajji Said Rashid; Tefera Woldie; Liben; Ibrahim Gurgie; Yeferenju Wefcho at Robit were some of the individuals working in the field.
- 73 Mahfuz; Mahmud Abdel Wuhab, Badahman (both Yemeni Arabs), and Asfha Wolde Selassie,
- 74 Saba (Temelso Kahsay), atomic (Abegaz Asfaw) and sport (Hassen Ayele)
- 75 Pioneers in the area of taxi (cab) service were Tessema; Seid Ali; Yesuf Mohammed; Redi and Johanny
- 76 Wollo; Andinet; Sheikh Issa; Mitiswa; Sheikh Tahir; Dankalia; Wollo Betaem; Zeray Derese; Amena; Sualih; national sport; Aregay; Gebre Hiywot; creamery (Abdul Menan) were some of the tearooms/cafes in Dessie.
- 77 Lielit Egigayehu (an Italian hotel called Touti per Touti) and Negus Mikael (of Kebede Abegaz); Kadamawi Haile Selassie (Temelso); Asfa Wossen (Yilma); Asmara (Yifru); Aksum (Molla); Teqle (Ilala); Leul Mekonnen (Alemash); Menker Alemu; Yezareyitu Ethiopia; Zacharias; Kifle Mariam Giday; Kebede Abegaz Hotel (still working); Genet (Tenagne); Zerayaqob; Wanza; Dejach Yosef; Etege (Getahun); Touring; Kebede Desta; Belete Alemu; Dessie Hotel (of Ato Abate); Olympic Motel (of Mussie Hector and still in operation) were pioneers in the sector.

water wells,⁷⁸ taverns,⁷⁹ butcheries,⁸⁰ night clubs,⁸¹ movie theatres,⁸² bakeries,⁸³ weapons,⁸⁴ jewelry stores, garages,⁸⁵ woodwork firms,⁸⁶ warehouses/grain stores,⁸⁷ barbershops,⁸⁸ photographic shops,⁸⁹

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- 78 Abba Kebede, Mesale Solomon, Yatalian Gudguad, Kebede Abegaz, Arab Genda Masjid, Balambaras Mekonnen Gebbi, Liqa Mekwas Abegaz, Touring Hotel, Ato Yesuf and others.
- 79 Taytu Fedlu, Menen Amedie, Emahoy Alemush, Etagegn Woreta, Lakech, Bezunesh Aregeh, Tadelech, Askebiw Mengistu, Basha Wolde Gabriel, Yelfign Teshale, Zeni (Afedest), Zeyneba Awol, Ansha Awol, Zewde Awol, Abba Hagoy (Seraye), Woyraw, Mereb, Nagadras, Gumed were among sellers of Tej (a local beverage made from fermented honey, water and hops (*Rhamnus prinoides*)).
- 80 Amare Tefera, Mekonnen Beyene, Tassew Amenu, Tefera Abegaz, Gezahegn, Cherenet and others
- 81 Kassech Retta, Tsehaynesh Reddie, Ayalnesh College, Aselef Retta, Abebu Jewi, Beletu Woldie, Zufan, Alemitu and Yeshi Neway and Negesti were among the many business women in the area.
- 82 Gregory, Bekele Gebre Meskel
- 83 Hebste Manna (Tefera Woldie), Alene Faris, Dessie Dabbo as well as the famous Wollo Dabbo Bet of Sheikh Indris (still functioning) were at the forefront.
- 84 Marqos Ali, Mohammed Sanni, Hajji Ibrahim.
- 85 Fantini, Parini, Alemu Kassie, Tsehaye Gebre Hiywot, Guido and Burzedini.
- 86 Mario, Deneke, Gebre Kristos, Mengesate Ab, Kiar, Teferra.
- 87 Hajji Yimer Dawd; Hussein Ahmed (Inqulal); Hajji Seid Dawd; Ato Habte: Hajji Mohammed Ahmed; Hajji Yimam Tessema; Abera Ahmed; Habib Mohammed Yayu; Mekonnen Kassa; Ato Kasseye.
- 88 Assefa Shiferaw; Ato Dagne; Ato Zegeye.
- 89 Gebru Negussie; Gebre Tensae; Arefaynie Yimer; Gustabo.

house rentals,⁹⁰ and foreign currency (Maria Theresa) exchanges⁹¹. Despite the various challenges they faced during the Imperial regime, itinerant Muslim merchants travelling to as far as Jimma and beyond in the south, Asmara and Massawa in the north, and Matemma and Humera in the west contributed much to the increase in the number of the entrepreneurial class in Dessie; and this speeded up Dessie's development as a vibrant commercial and metropolitan city. Had it not been for the *joie de vivre* of the business community, Dessie in all probability could have remained a backwater or a semi-urban center. Documenting the role and achievements of the entrepreneurial class in Dessie can be an exciting subject of research in and of itself (Oral informants).⁹²

Prior to the 1974 revolution, Dessie was home to a number of football (soccer) clubs, many of which were sponsored by public offices, the business community and private organizations. Football was the major pastime of the Dessie public. At one point in time Dessie had more than 20 football clubs. Mebrat Hayl (of the Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority); Negade (of the Dessie Chamber of Commerce); Abba Shanqo, Abba Yitref; Abbay

90 Among the well-known individuals who built houses and rented them out to businesses, included Hajji Ibrahim Yesuf, Ato Betre, Hajji Abegaz Mussa, Hajji Hassen Reshid, Ato Messele Molla, Balambaras Mekonnen, Kegnazmach Ayehu Jemberie, Blata Abdel Malik (Gonafer), Hajji Ali Bayan, Afe Negus Atnaf Seged, Ras Gebre Hiywot, Sheikh Indris, Haile Afata, Hajji Ibrahim Turie, Hajji Salah Kahsay, Dajjazmach Mohammed Yayu Hanferie, Retta Bisewere, Ayele Goshu, Hajji Mohammed Dawd, Hajji Ibrahim Yesuf, Dajjazmach Mengesha Aboye, Mekonen Lemlem, Hajji Abdu Yesuf, Gerazmach Mussa Abdu, Dejjazmach Yosef Birru and Zebiba Abdella.

91 Beyene Wolde Mariam, Gebre Amlak Godie, Haile Amedie, Alemu Mera, Baye Beyene, Ayehu Mera, Menker Alemu; Gezate Mekonnen. It was due to the currency exchange that the surrounding business area has been known as 'Sheref Terra'. Besides, there were also specific areas supplying coffee, salt, *chat* and red pepper called 'Buna Terra', 'Chew Terra', 'Chat Terra' and 'Berberie Terra'.

92 Oral informants.

Minch; Tekle Haymanot; Walia (of the Provincial Police Department); Merha Tibeb (of the Provincial Teachers' Association); Awra Godana (of the Ethiopian Highway Authority); Tendaho (of the Mitchell Cots Co.), Dessie Wotatoch (of the city's youth), Cheffa (of the Cheffa Agro Industry), Tossa (of Teka Cola Soft Drinks Factory), Tele (of the North Eastern Regional Telecommunications Office), Genzeb Minister (of the Provincial Finance Office), and Gabarie (of the Provincial Agriculture Office) were the proverbial ones. Football matches continued in the post-1974 period, and the clubs: Pepsi; Sopral, Cherqa Cherqe, Mebraq; Hinsta; Zeray Derese; Negade; Police; Andinet, Kefteгна 1, 2 and 3, and Tena were prominent (Oral informants).⁹³

THE DERG PERIOD: 1974–1991

By labeling Wollo 'a disaster-prone zone' and a bastion of 'counter-revolutionary insurgent forces', the Derg regime assigned military officers to administer the province and all twelve the *awrajas* (or districts) of Wollo. With few exceptions, this system of administration lasted until the Derg's demise in the early 1990s. As there was a huge military presence, women from different areas flocked to Dessie to work in the informal sector. Owing to the marginalization of the private sector and the growing dependence on government financing of public institutions, Dessie's development, as happened elsewhere in the country, slowed down greatly. Nonetheless, some developmental projects had been executed. The city's main roads were upgraded; the Teachers Training Institute was established in 1980; office buildings for agriculture (recently demolished), plans and the economy (now Dessie City Administration), Ethiopian pharmaceutical industry, commercial banks, the development bank, and headquarters of the

93 The Dessie Soccer Clubs of the pre- and post-1974 revolution had produced a number of famous footballers who would play for the national club in Addis Ababa. Ground tennis, volleyball, basketball and even a kind of bowling called *boucha* were also played. Oral informants.

ruling Workers' Party of Ethiopia (currently the Zone Administration) were built. The shop buildings around Mugad were renovated and makeshift structures at Segno Gebeya were also constructed; a significant number of residential houses were built by the Agency for the Administration of Rental Houses (AARH); and three elementary schools (Bilen, Mettero, and Menbere Tsehay) were also built (Oral informants).⁹⁴

Even if there were no remarkable changes in the expansion of urban services in general, Dessie had begun to experience significant demographic and spatial growth. The proclamation of July 1975, which nationalized urban land and extra houses, though thwarted the booming private sector economy, enabled many individuals to build their own residential houses, which had been extremely difficult in the previous regime. The number of *kebeles* rose to twenty with three higher or sub-city administrations. The city expanded in the direction of the Teachers Training College, Dawe Meda, and Karagutu areas. In 1983, about one-tenth of the households in Dessie were supplied with piped water, whereas the majority of the urban dwellers had to collect water either from their immediate neighbors or from the twenty-two distribution points the municipality had erected throughout the town (Tassew 179). A new hydroelectric supply line, replacing the old diesel generator and a microwave telephone network were introduced. The half-baked sports stadium and the widely-renowned Lalibela artistic band were also the result of this period. In the area of healthcare facilities, the military government confiscated the SDA mission hospital in Dessie (also the Leprosarium at Boru Meda), as it did elsewhere, and for the second time its staff was expelled from the country and the hospital was soon reduced to a health center (Oral informants).⁹⁵

CONCLUSION

Despite its contemporaneousness with Addis Ababa, the newly-founded capital city of the Ethiopian Empire, Dessie, enjoying geo-

94 Oral informants.

95 Oral informants.

political, commercial and climatic advantages, and harmonious socio-religious interaction of its inhabitants, along with a hard-working entrepreneurial and business community, could not have developed as had been expected. This was due largely to the removal from the political scene of Negus Mikael soon after the overthrow of his son Lij Iyassu in 1917, and the negligent and lethargic attitude the central government had adopted towards Wollo since then. This indifference was expected to be reversed during the Derg regime, a regime that came to the helm of power using the 1973/74 Wollo famine as a political rallying motto to overthrow the purportedly divinely-sanctioned Solomonic Dynasty in Ethiopia. However, in reality, it introduced an unprecedented economic and political tragedy that beleaguered the country for the coming seventeen years. Besides the appointment of military officers throughout the width and breadth of the province, the Derg, like its predecessor which was bent on dismantling what the Italians had installed in the area and systematically preventing the development of Dessie, was unwilling to succor the business class and expedite the economic growth of the city. The same is true of the incumbent administration that came after the Derg in 1991. The government, espousing a system of governance based on ethno-linguistic division of the country and the pervasively corrupt, parochial, nepotistic and massively inefficient local administration, deprived Dessie of capable leadership that would readily provide infrastructural and other social services to the city's fast-growing residents. This has been a serious challenge to most ethnically- and religiously-mixed cities. Thanks to its energetic entrepreneurial and business-savvy individuals, Dessie has been facing up to the challenges posed by the three successive repressive regimes; and it will hopefully overcome the socio-economic and political hurdles that stunted its enormous potential for development.

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Assefa Balcha
Assistant Professor of History
Department of History and Heritage Management