

Review

A social institution of slavery and slave trade in Ethiopia: Revisited

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Ethiopia was the last strong hold of slavery. Slavery and slave trade were abolished by the active intervention of the British in the middle of 18th century. However the institution of slavery and slave trade continued in the eastern part of Africa until the middle of 19th century. The objective of this paper is to show the institutional feature of slavery in Ethiopia in general and the historical kingdom of Jimma in particular. The paper as a historical study attempted to explain the legal position of slaves in the Ethiopian traditional code. It also described the system of slave acquisition with a particular emphasis on the Kingdom of Jimma and the work and trade of slaves not only in Jimma but also in the country. At the end, the paper provides the efforts of Ethiopian monarchs in abolishing slavery in Ethiopia.

Key words: Slavery, slave trade, Jimma, Ethiopia, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Slavery in Ethiopia and its legal position

Slavery was well established in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa until the first half of twentieth century. It was official and legally accredited by the *Fiteha Negest* which was the traditional legal code of Ethiopia translated from the 13th century 'Coptic' document based on the Biblical and Roman Law (Pankhurst, 1968). The words of the *Fiteha Negest* were largely accepted by many Ethiopian rulers including Emperor Menilek (1889-1913). Like his predecessors, Menilek also attempted to abolish slave trade but it was not successful. This was due to their claim that the country was surrounded by those who engaged in slave trading (Abir, 1965). Secondly, the southward state transformation of Ethiopia in nineteenth century also produced many thousands of slaves as war

captives from the newly integrated areas in the southern, southeastern and south-western parts of the country.

Like other parts of Africa, the demand for slaves led to the extensive slave raiding and warfare in the southern part of the country. It resulted in the breakdown of law and order by providing a considerable exodus of population in many areas as well as extensive hunting of humans for slavery (Abir, 1965). This is particularly the case in Southern Ethiopia.

For instance in the kingdom of Jimma and its neighbors more than 2000 men of war captives were sold as slaves from one area (Lewis, 1965; Pankhurst, 1968a; Woldemariyam, 1984). In other words, warfare resulted in the continuation of slavery in Ethiopia. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, many states and kingdoms were at war for slave raiding. It was due to the introduction of

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modern firearm in the heartlands of Southern Ethiopia. The war together with the slave raiding diminished the population in the raiding areas and also brought severe economic exploitation of many provinces in the southern and southwestern part of the country (Woldemariam, 1984).

According to the *Fiteha Negest* as well as the traditional customary laws, slaves were deprived of any forms of property ownership and legal affairs. Slaves were considered as the property of their owners; sometimes the owners of the slaves might give them a piece of land and some cattle but they remained under the property of their owners. On the other hand, slaves, as a kind of property, were subjected to sell or be given as a kind of presentation (Nasser, 1973). Thus, a slave could be owned by more than one master.

Likewise, slaves could hold no public office as judge or guardian. They were deprived of providing evidence in courts. However, the slave master became legally responsible for any action or crime including murder committed by his slaves. The owner could become free either by emancipating or by handing over the slave to the aggrieved party. Similarly, punishment of a slave became an official phenomenon in the country. It includes whipping, flogging and even death (Pankhurst, 1964).

The law strictly forbade stealing of a slave or initiating him to run away. According to the law, he was liable to restore him to his masters together with equal price. On the other hand, a person may be entitled to get reward as he brings back a runaway slave to its masters. The recaptured slave would face harsh punishment including whipping, smoking of *beriberi*, red tape, executing as well as being resold to other persons (Woldemariam, 1984).

As the law indicated a slave master could utilize his slave on his will. A slave could not have the right to refuse or obey an order from his master. Even a pregnant slave was also obliged to participate in work until she resumed a few days after her delivery. As a calf belonged to the owner of a cow not the bull, the newborn infant of a slave also belonged to her master (Pankhurst, 1968b).

The law prohibited any kind of marriage between freemen and the slave. Even it ordered severe punishment in this case. If a master's wife fornicates with a slave, she may be beaten, her hair shaved, her nose broken and her infamy publicly proclaimed according to the *Fiteha Negest*. Nevertheless, the fate of the slave was obviously death. In actual fact in 1930s, there was no penalty in this case rather the concubines enjoyed special privilege as head of her master's slaves (Pankhurst, 1964).

Moreover, the *Fiteha Negest* also provided a provision for the manu-mission of slaves. The law provided that a slave might be free as if he served his masters father, became a priest, or the slave saved his master from death as well as after the death of the master having no heir over the slave. However, there was no slave freed by the time due to the unwillingness of the owners as well as

the un-implementation of the law to liberate the slaves. In connection with this, the law also prohibited the sailing of a pregnant slave except with her unborn child. The separations of a young slave from its mother also banned and urged for the desirability of keeping the families united although it was not practically implemented (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Slavery in the Kingdom of Jimma

The historical Kingdom of Jimma had been found in the southwestern part of Ethiopia. The neighbors of Jimma as one runs clockwise from North to southwest he got Janjaro, and the four Oromo Gibe states across the Gibe River, Dawro Kanta and Kaffa across Gojeb River. From these states and kingdoms, Jimma became the dominant power in the area. In the Kingdom of Jimma slave owning, buying and trading was widely known since early times. Slavery reached its zenith in the 1880s as emperor Menilek expanded his empire south of Addis Ababa, capital of the empire state. By the time, many areas were integrated into the Ethiopian Empire by wagging many wars. These campaigns produced many thousands of war captives who were sold as slave indifferent markets. Off all the major slave market in Southwest Ethiopia was Hirmata in Jimma (Pankhurst, 1968a).

As Tekalign noted in 1883, Jimma was visited by Julies Borille. Borille reported that Abba Jiffar II favored the continuation of slave trade in his kingdom because it was the basic source of Jimma's autonomy after its conquest in 1882 (Woldemariam, 1984). From its southern part, Jimma got a considerable amount of ivory and slaves sold in the kingdom. This ivory in turn was paid as annual tribute for Menilek. Thus prohibition of slave trade in Jimma ultimately led to the end of tribute paid in ivory and other luxurious items (Woldemariam, 1984). It is reported that Abba Jiffar II paid a huge amount of tribute to Menilek that includes 60 horses, 60 mules, 100 vases of honey, 30 elephant tusks, 60 slaves, 100 socks of coffee, 20 lion/tiger skins, 30 horns of civet masks and some amount of Thalers (Woldemariam, 1984).

As some sources indicated that the kings of Jimma, Abba Jiffar II, was one of the main participants of slave trade having more than ten thousands of slaves. In 1886, Borille claimed that the king offered "some five women and six eunuchs in exchange for a Winchester rifle" (Woldemariam, 1984). Vanderheym remarked in 1894 that slaves were sold at night in the Abba Jiffar's quarter of Addis Ababa and qualified him as "the ruler of the kingdom of slave trade" (Woldemariam, 1984). A decade later, another observer described the king as the "biggest slave trader in the world". He also stated that on Abba Jiffar's visit to Addis Ababa, he brought with him a large amount of slaves and sold them in a hard cash. He also exchanged them for his service offered. By the time, Abba Jiffar II exchanged "two slaves with two dogs and

paid five slaves to his dentist" (Woldemariam,1984).

SYSTEM OF SLAVE ACQUISITION IN JIMMA

Like other parts of Ethiopia, slaves were acquired in different ways in the Kingdom of Jimma. Some of the methods were capturing be it in war or riding, condemnation of criminals to servitude, outright purchase, etc. Most of slaves in Jimma were not natives of the kingdom. In fact there were slaves who were reduced to slavery due to royal judicial pronouncement (Woldemariam, 1984).

The majority of slaves in Ethiopia were produced in raiding, kidnapping as well as capture of wars. Particularly, the states and kingdoms of the nearby Jimma were highly victimized by slave raiding and kidnapping. The main slave riding grounds were Yam, Limmu Enariya, Kaffa, Dawro, Konta and other Sidama Peoples where slaves were kidnapped and sold in the nearby slave markets in Jimma (Mohammed). As Pankhurst noted "more than 3000 slaves were sized in a year in these areas either on their way to their villages or from their home at night (Pankhurst, 1968a).

At night, the kidnapers had broken the house for capturing the members of the houses. They also set fire to the house in order to capture their trophy easily (Pankhurst,1968). Slave raiding was also supplemented by surprise kidnapping. It is reported that in Enariya, the robbers took many youngsters. Most of them were sized as they attend their flocks, gathering firewood, drawing water, as well as playing in their villages. The robbers in turn sold them to the local merchants who would dispose them to traveling slave caravans (Pankhurst, 1968b).

War was one of the most successful slave riding and means of slave acquisition in Ethiopia like other parts of the world. The captives of the war were put into enslavement. It was permissible in the *Fitha Negest* to size the 'non-believers' and they became slaves and offered seven years of free service for their masters. As hostile neighbors surrounded Jimma, it fought many wars against them. The 1882 Jimma's war against Yam concluded by Jimma's victory and producing many thousands of slaves that were sold in Hirmata and other slave markets in Jimma (Pankhurst, 1965).

In the meantime the 1880s Menilek's expansion to the southern territories also produced a large amount of slaves as war captives. Particularly emperor Menilek's war with Wolaita (1894) and Kaffa (1897) where he faced stiff resistance by the local people Menilek ordered his men to enslave almost all residents of the area. By the time, many thousands of the local population were deported and sold them down in different parts of the country as a slave. Thus, Menilek's policy of the abolition of slavery in the country failed as he allowed his soldiers to enslave their trophy (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Slaves were also produced because of judicial pro-

nouncement of the court in Jimma. According to Franzoj death penalty was rarely applied in Jimma against a murder and other crimes. A certain guilty of murder was punished by enslavement in Jimma. One day when he was there, Franzoj reported that two men arrived at the palace of Abba Jiffar together with a caw to which one of them was chained. One accused the other for stealing the caw. After hearing the case, the king pronounced the accused one as "*gorgori*" which mean, "sell him". At the end, the culprit became the slave of his victim. This shows easy crimes like theft, banditry, robbery etc also brought enslavement in Jimma(Pankhurst,1968).

Locals from Jimma were also victims of slavery as they failed to participate in the community work in the kingdom. Participation in building the boundary of Jimma was the major one. As the boundary of Jimma was demarcated by digging trench around the kingdom, it was called *Berro*. For digging the *Berro* all-able bodied Jimmans obliged to do. Failure to do so brought enslavement together with his family. The boundary also had many gates or checkpoints, *Kellas*, guarded by his guards appointed by the king. The guard patrolled the enemy position. When an enemy approached the kingdom, the guards beat the alarm, *gennoalarm*, which awakened all Jimmans for the crisis. By the time all-able bodied men run away around the palace against their enemy. Those who did not appear in the palace by the time were put into the slave of the king by royal judicial announcement (Lewis). In connection to this, the dwellers of the town had to take care of the roads and streets; failure to do that ultimately led to slavery in Jimma (Woldemariam, 1984).

Once a certain convicted person, condemned to slavery, he was automatically enslaved by losing his liberty. Sometimes status might consider and the culprit was forced to leave the kingdom. However, for an ordinary person the trials were carried out in the palace in the absence of the accused, even without his knowledge. The *AbbaQorro*, village head, carried out the law enforcement in Jimma. To enslave the culprit a cord, or cords known as *Fnu Moti*, which were used to tie up the culprit and those whose fate was enslavement, were thrown in the house of the convicted person. Immediately the *AbbaQorro* together with the guards would go to the house and the condemned man together with his family were taken to the palace as a slave of the king (Pankhurst, 1968a).

The other means of slave acquisition in Jimma was through outright purchase. During the reign of Abba Jiffar II, Jimma became one of the largest centers of slave trade in Ethiopia. It was due to its geographical location as a crossroad for the caravans coming from north and southwestern part of the country (Woldemariam,1984). Besides this, Abba Jiffar also encouraged the slave trade by lowering its tax as well as by providing for merchants in his kingdom. As a result, many caravans arrived at Jimma to sell or exchange their commodities including

slaves and ivory. On the other hand, Abba Jiffar earned substantial amount of tax per slave that passed in his territory (Pankhurst, 1968).³⁶ Moreover, at the beginning of his reign, Jimma exported more than 4000 slaves per year in the direction of Shoa. The trade continued till in the 1920s; when the trade was in its death bed, Jimma exported more thousands of slaves (Pankhurst, 1968a).

SLAVES AT MARKET

The Kingdom of Jimma had main markets where slaves were sold openly like other commodities. The largest of all markets was Hirmata. It was found in near the palace and held on every Thursday. It was always busy and visited by many merchants including foreigners (Woldemariam, 1984). According to Borelli "more than 15,000-20,000 people attended the market in 1880s" (Woldemariam, 1984). Although the open markets of slaves were disbanded in 1920s, the trade continued as an open secret and slaves were sold at night in Jimma (Mohammed, 1974).

There were also other markets in Jimma where slaves became dominant and the major item of the merchandise. The first one was the market along the Omo River. In this market as Borelli indicated slaves were the major item of trade exchanged with a mere Maria Theresa Thaler in 1888. The other markets of Jimma was the market in Dedo along the Dawro and Konta Road. From this market, a large number of slaves were imported to Jimma from Dawro, Konta, Goffa and other areas (Woldemariam, 1984).

In the Thursday market of Hirmata also called Geba Kimssa, there were more than 10–15 blocks of stones on which slaves were kept for sale on the open market. Many thousands of slaves were reported to have been sold in the market. On the market days, the slaves were fed well and took a butter ointment on their body. This was to make them look smart and strong as well as attractive enough to incur a high price (Pankhurst, 1968).

In order to sell, a slave buyer used several mechanisms to assure the capacity of the slaves. The buyer might stretch to and forward the arms and legs of the slaves to see that they were not broken. They also examined the eyes and teeth of slave to check their sight and they could eat well with their teeth to get strength. For checking their hearing and speaking abilities of a slaves, the buyers talked to them like buying a talking cow. By understanding with the merchants, slave buyers slapped off the faces of a slave for testing the strength and emotions of slaves (Pankhurst, 1968a).

With regard to the price of slaves, it varied from market to market based on their place of origin, physical fitness, sex, age as well as color of the skins of a slave. In Jimma, slaves coming from Mallo and Doko, a place where beyond Omo River were considered as hard-working and obedient. These slaves had high demand

and became too expensive in Jimma (Mohammed, 2007). However, slaves coming from Dawro and Konta were considered as weak and quarrelsome so that they had less demand among slave buyers, although many slaves came from these area (Amnon, 1969). Worse slaves coming from Kaffa fetched far too little price. Particularly after Menilek of Kaffa in 1897, Menilek's soldiers took many thousands of slaves and sold them down cheaply in Jimma on their way back to Shoa (Pankhurst, 1964).

Physically, short black slaves with tough body incurred the highest price. On the other hand, thin and tall male slaves had far too little price. The reverse is true for female slaves. Tall and thin female slaves who easily reached the bottom of a jar had high price than the short ones. This was because the former could easily prepare *Ferso*/ local drink/ as her arm reached the bottom of the jar easily for the preparation (Mohammed).

Age and sex also determined the price of a slave in Jimma. The older slaves carry a lower price than the younger age. In Jimma slave traders used different names to differentiate the slaves on age and sexes. Accordingly, *Gurbe*, a younger male slave having 10-15 years of age, became more expensive than *Illijs* whose age was more than 20 years old. The *Gurbes* were favored by slave dealers that they might train well as personal servants and provided a longer service (Woldemariam, 1984). Similarly, female slaves having more than 8-15 years of age called *Tombore* enjoyed the highest price and became too expensive than the *Gardana*. The later were considered as beyond the age of training for a good household servant. However, *Tombore* had the advantage of becoming concubines of their masters and wives for male slaves (Pankhurst, 1964).

Generally speaking, slaves were at the cheapest price in the southwestern part of the country where large exudes of slaves recruited from the area. The value of slaves increased along the main markets towards the north. In different areas, the slave caravans were subjected to tax along the checkpoints. In 1880s the price of 10-12 years old slave was 6 to 8 Maria Theresa Thalers, in her forty, was sold for a single Maria Theresa Thalers or 4 *amoles*, bars of salt, along Omo market. By that time, a young slave was sold for 5-15 Maria Theresa Thalers and a young woman slave for 20-25 Maria Theresa Thalers in Jimma (Pankhurst, 1968).

Through time the price of slaves also increased. In the early twentieth century, a child slave whose age was 3-10 was sold for 8-21 Maria Theresa Thalers and above him 85 Maria Theresa Thalers in Jimma. By that time, a certain Armenian bought a pretty girl for 60 Maria Theresa Thalers and other foreigners paid 30 for a boy. In short, virgin women, strong and intelligent men slave and even eunuchs had the highest demand and became too expensive (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Moreover, the price of slaves alarmingly increased from southwest to north and eastern part of the country. Particularly slaves cost more in the coastal areas. It is

reported that the price of a slave in Addis Ababa was three times as high as in Jimma in 1920s. A decade later when slavery was in its dead bed, a boy slave fetched 100 Maria Theresa Thalers while a virgin girl incurred twice of that in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1968a).

Slaves at work

According to the *Fitha Negest*, a slave owner could utilize his slave on his will. A slave had no right to refuse or obey the task given by his master. Mostly slaves provide labor for their masters. In Jimma slaves cleared the forest for farming and participated in their owner's agricultural activities. As the land became more fertile they produced large amount of grains, coffee and other crops. Particularly the king of Jimma, Abba Jiffar had many hectares of land, *Yebbu* in different parts of the kingdom run by slave labor (Leggese). It is reported that due to Abba Jiffar's wealth, he was ordered by Menilek to give large amount of grain for his army in the war against the kingdom of Kaffa in 1897 (Woldemariam, 1984).

It is obvious that every ordinary Jimman's had at least a couple of slaves in their home. The tasks of a male slave were farming, loading the draft animals and accompanying their masters on journey, etc. The female slaves also participated in the household and farming activities of their masters. In actual fact the duration of a slave in a certain house was determined by his behavior and abilities. If a slave was not in a good term, he might be resold or exchanged by other (Woldemariam, 1984).

The other economic contribution of slaves in the kingdom of Jimma was their role in the expansion of trade. Many merchants arrived in Jimma from different parts of the country. Thus Jimma became the major center of trade in the southwest part of the country. On the other hand slaves also promoted divisions of labor, which necessitated trade for exchange. Some of them engaged in such activities as blacksmithing, weaving, pottery making, behaving and beekeeping, etc. so that slaves provided different kinds of products for the market (Woldemariam, 1984).

Loyalty and having special skills of a certain slave helped a slave to hold a highest office in the palace of Abba Jiffar. The most prominent and the most feared Abba Gaddu Sadacha, a eunuch from Nada, was a slave and rose to a position of a chief of jail and criminal investigator in Abba Jiffar's palace. Abba Gorro Gumma chief of palace treasure, Abba Jarra Abba Mlare, governor of Hereto, Abba Bike Shono, governor and overseer of the king's coffee farm were some of the slaves and slave origins who rose to a highest position in the palace of Abba Jiffar II. In addition to this slaves also served as the chief of the market where they enforced law and order in every market day (Woldemariam, 1984).

Generally, slaves in Jimma were not harshly treated by their owners. They live in their master's house until their marriage when they depart from their masters' house and

established their own under the auspices of their master.

By the time, the slave owner bought another slave for his household activities (Woldemariam, 1984). Russom concluded that slaves were not harshly treated in Ethiopia. "Abyssinians" he explained "generally are very kind to their servants treating them as members of their family especially in their marriage and death (Baravelli, 1935)."

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN ETHIOPIA AND ITS IMPACT ON JIMMA

Abolition of slavery in Ethiopia was attempted by many Ethiopian rulers although it bore no fruit until the coming of Italian in mid 1930s. The issue, however, got wider attention during the time of emperor Menilek. By the time Menilek issued two declarations for the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia. It was in February 1875 and 1889 he declared that Christians should no more buy or sell slaves. For these actions he testifies arrest. However, it failed to put into practice (Baravelli, 1935)."

Two main factors were accountable for Menilek's failure to abolish slavery in Ethiopia. The first and the most important one was his southward expansion of the Christian Highland Kingdom. Due to his successive wars and campaigns in the newly conquered areas, Menilek himself attended a massive enslavement of the captives of war. With the establishment of a new social-economic system in these areas, local people also enjoyed the pain of enslavement soon after their subjugation (Pankhurst, 1968a).

The other factor for Menilek's failure to abolish slavery in his kingdom was his highly reliance on individual foreign traders for his importation of firearms and ammunitions. These traders in turn operated on the goodwill of the coastal chiefs who collected heavy taxes and tribute on slaves. Menilek well aware of the situation and interferences with the slave trade would ultimately affect the imports of firearm to Ethiopia (Miers, 1984; Dennis, 1986).

As Suzana Miers indicated there had been little external pressure over Ethiopian rulers to stop slavery. Britain the champion of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade had little or no effort to suppress slavery and slave trade in the eastern part of Africa. In fact, Britain and France had their own protectorate on the Gulf of Aden. However the trade continued until 1930s by using different means of shipment of slaves along the coast (Pankhurst, 1968).

Before 1900s slaves were sold openly in the markets in Ethiopia. After this time the open slave markets were closed and slave traders abandoned their conventional routes and traveled at night on different routes. This was also the case in Jimma where slaves were sold at night through the brokers (Baravelli, 1935).

On his death, Menilek was succeeded by his grandson *Lij Iyasu*. This new crown did nothing for the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia. He even participated in a slave

raiding. In 1912, the well-organized slave raiding of *Lij* lyassu, captured and raided many southwestern provinces and captured many thousands of captives in the raiding. He distributed the captives for his favorite officials and clergymen. In other words during the reign of *Lij* lyassu, there was no attempt for the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1968a).

A very remarkable step for the abolition of slavery was taking by Tafari, the Reagent, in 1923. By this year Ethiopia applied for the membership of the League of Nations. However, the League forced Ethiopia to stop the slave trade according to its international agreement, conventions and declarations. In the absence of any alternatives, Ethiopia proclaimed the trading of slaves as a crime punishable by death (Woldemariam, 1984). A year later, another slave abolition law was declared by Tafari. It provided 500 dollar and 10 years imprisonment for slave raiding and a second offence would bring life imprisonment. It was in this duration that slaves were entitled to be free and Ethiopia freed a large numbers of slaves for the first time in the country (Woldemariam, 1984).

As Tafari became Emperor Haile Sellasse, he established an office for the liberation of slaves in the country. In Jimma the office was established in the Abba Jiffar's palace. It was an independent body accountable for the emperor. It supervised the laws and issued a certificate for the freed slaves. Emperor Haile Sellasse also appointed two judges for Jimma including Abba Garro Abba Bishan and Abba Digga Saperu. This court freed many slaves in later years (Tekalign, in his "Slavery in the economy of Jimma" argued that it was not the case. He provided that the main economy of Jimma was not slavery but production of coffee. However it seems hard to accept because the ultimate integration of Jimma in to Ethiopian empire was the result of the end of slavery in the country but not its cash crop economy).

The implementation of successive laws against slavery and the immediate death of Abba Jiffar II ultimately threatened Jimma's autonomous status in the country. This was because his successor Abba Jobir was not in a position to pay his annual tribute for the government. As his wealth and prestige declined Abba Jobir immediately embarked on slave the 'illegal' slave trade. This action ultimately led him to jail and replaced by a Shaon ruler appointed by Emperor Haile Sellasse (Woldemariam, 1984).

However, the total abolition of slavery in Ethiopia goes to the Italian. During their occupation, the Italians issued a decree in April 1936 which liberated more than 400000 slaves in the Galla- Sidama Province. The Italians created a job opportunity for some of the ex-slaves in the expanding infrastructural facilities of the country. In some place including in Jimma, they also set up a village of liberty for those freed slaves by providing plough and oxen to begin a new settled life (Woldemariam, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Slavery had a long tradition in Ethiopia; particularly in the Kingdom of Jimma slavery existed for a long time. This kingdom obtained many advantages from the trade. The abolition of slavery finally led to the Shoan dominance of Jimma's independent existence. This is because the slave trade became the basis of its economy unlike coffee which was a recent economic crop of Jimma as some writers argued. At this point it is possible to conclude that the independent existence of Jimma after its conquest in 1882 was highly interrelated with the continuation of slavery and slave trade in the country. The abolition of the trade in Ethiopia ultimately led to the end of the autonomous status of Jimma in the 1930s.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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