

# Power, Protest and Preponderance: A Chapter in the Political History of the Irob Chieftaincy during Zemene Mesafint, Tigray, c.1790-1831

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## *Abstract*

*The Irob community inhabits the northeastern Tigrayan escarpment, in ex-'Agama country. After their apparent invisibility in the annals of traditional Christian Ethiopian society, they featured more prominently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature largely for their active political part in the Zemene Mesafint politics. Warfare played a key role in negotiating (and reinvigorating) the political space, values and fora of the diverse ethno-regional entities within northern Ethiopia. This paper particularly narrates the progressive transformation in the politics of Irob chieftaincy from one of fratricidal struggle (in the 'Agama area) into vying for regional predominance over the whole Tigray by the turn of the century. The central thesis reveals how the fundamental social and historical undercurrent within the Irob community projects the notion of warfare, not as an external action to war itself; but as an integral part of power politics and social mobilization thereby extending the territorial and social spectrum of ethnic identity. It demonstrates how the Irob chieftaincy managed to become their own agents engaged in forging and/or consolidating a regional dynasty, whose members continued to rule Northeastern Tigray area until the 1974 revolution.*

## 1. The Prelude: Rise of Irob Ḥasabala Chieftaincy

Political and social history helps us to comprehend the evolution of modern Ethiopian society and polity, of which Tigray is a part. Successive armed conflicts produced, submerged and consolidated several chiefdoms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at an era known in history as the *Zemene Mesafint* (1769-1855). The extent of chiefdoms territory at any given time was determined largely by the level of control that its ruler was able to exercise over the core territories by his own personal military capability, determination and the economic resources that could be extracted.

Indeed, the prevalence of *ras* Mika'él Siḥul of Tigray and his army over the Gonderine court politics was often regarded as the harbinger of *Zemene Mesafint* politics when the weak Emperors had fallen at the mercy of powerful regional war lords. This paper tries to show some of the changing balances of power, processes of territorial expansion and the rise to predominance of different local dynasties in *Zemene Mesafint* Tigray with emphasis on the the ascendancy of Ḥasabala Irob cheiftaincy first over 'Agama and subsequently all over Tigray.

It is difficult to reconstruct the exact chronological framework for the beginnings of the emergence of Irob supremacy over 'Agame. Oral tradition, however, indicates that *šum* 'Agame Weldu was on the saddle of local 'Agame power well before the advent of *ras* Welde Sillasé as the undisputed master of Tigray in 1790<sup>1</sup>. Leaving the underlying political ambitions aside, the story of his political career apparently starts in the "celebrated" protest against the death of his father, *šum* Kumanit, by the early 1760's. In a serious battle at Amba Saho (Menebot), in Subḥa Sa'esi' district, Weldu defeated Kaḥsay *abba* Fido, the leader of the Tsellemti Zayle Ḥasabala clan, allegedly responsible for the murder of Kumanit (For Irob genealogy, see Appendix I).<sup>2</sup> This victory also enabled Weldu to assume Ḥasabala clan leadership throughout the districts of Subḥa Sa'esi' and Irobland. His centre of power at that time was in his father's land at Ara'e on the Irob escarpment overlooking the medieval monastery of Gunda Gundo. Apparently, it was at this stage that his sister, Arséma, arranged for him the marriage with the daughter of the more powerful *šum* 'Agame Neblu of Si'héta.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Ascendancy of Ḥasabala Irob in Northeastern Tigray

Weldu 's political vassalage and familial integration into the Si'héta chieftaincy paved the way for his political prominence in the sub region ('Agama). In time, he became the strongest follower of *šum* 'Agame Neblu; and when the latter died, he swiftly assumed the prestigious title (of *šum* 'Agame) and position of his overlord (as well as father-in-law). He subsequently moved his seat of power to the strategic place called Mekhido<sup>4</sup> situated in the highland district of Subḥa-Sa'esi'. It was from this centre that Weldu further reinforced his power through a combination of military action and a series of additional political marriages with well-established highland families. Thus, he contracted an important political marriage with the family of the relatively powerful chieftaincy of Bekot (northern suburb of 'Addigrat),

1 Informants: *Ato* Asgedom Berru, *ato* Meressa Abraha, *aleqa* Tesfaye Tawaldamadhen, *ato* Abraha Ad'umar. When *šum* Agama Weldu died in 1802, tradition indicates that he was about 65 years of age. Hence he could have probably been born in c.1737.

2 *Ibid*; *Abba* Ḥadgu Gebre Maryam; *ato* Abraha Gebre Hiwot.

3 *Ibid*; *Mel'ake Berbanat* Gebre Egziabher.

4 Informants: *Aleqa* Tesfaye; *ato* Retta Lamlam, *ato* Abraha Ad'umar.

*šum* Tella, by taking the hands of his daughter, Gergis, through whom Weldu was to become the great grand father of the future Emperor Yohannes IV.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, he married *weyzero* Sebene Giyorgis from a family of notables in the historical significant area of Seglat-Debre Ma'eso, in Gulomakheda, from which his famous son, *dejjazmač* Sabagadis will be born<sup>6</sup>. It also appears that he had been pushing his effective frontiers to include Suruxo, Debre Damo, Šimezana, Akhran and some of the Asawirta-Ḥazo lowlands.<sup>7</sup> It is while Weldu was in this position of strength that *ras* Welde Sillasé (c.1790-1816) assumed supremacy over the region of Tigray.

One seems to observe some kind of interesting parallelism in the causes for early political careers of *šum* 'Agame Weldu and his overlord, Welde Sillasé, who otherwise started his career as a rebel against the power of *ras* Mika'él Seḥul (c.1738-1780). After a brief period of predominance over the Gonderine court politics as a 'king-maker', a coalition of Amhara-Oromo rivals defeated *Ras* Mika'él Siḥul in 1771 and kept him under detention at Debaqi, in Lasta<sup>8</sup>, for about a year. His home base, Tigray, was then given by the victors to *dejjazmač* Kefle Yesus of Tembén, father of the future *ras* Welde Sillasé (formerly a trusted lieutenant of Mika'él). Upon his liberty and subsequent repatriation to Tigray, *ras* Mika'él had to fight and kill his former vassal, *dejjazmač* Kifle Iyesus, to regain his governorship (office)<sup>9</sup>. This naturally angered his son Welde Sillasé who became a *shifta* during the whole period of *ras* Mika'él's second term office (1772-80), and during that of Mika'él's grandson and successor, Welde Gebre'el, governorship of Tigray south of the Mereb River<sup>10</sup>. It seems that Welde Sillasé had *de facto* control of the salt trade through Arho country, which apparently enabled him to raise an effective group of followers and gradually increase his influence in the whole region.<sup>11</sup>

*Dejjazmač* Welde Gebre'el died at the battle of Medeb (Belesa), in 1778, challenging the position of the Yeju 'king-maker', *ras* Ali (d.1825).<sup>12</sup> This event paved the way for the seasoned rebel Welde Sellasé to be officially confirmed over

5 *Ibid.*

6 Informants: *Balambaras* Gebrehiwot Debas; *aleqa* Tesfay, *ato* Abraha Ad'umar.

7 Informants: *Member* Subagadis Tesfay, *qés* Bayyana Gebre Šadeq, *aleqa* Kaḥsay Gebre Medhin.

8 W. Blundell, *The Royal Chronicles of Abyssina 1969-1840* (Cambridge, 1922), p. 228; J. Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1771, 1772, and 1773* (8 vols), VI (London: 1813), p. 135.

9 *Ibid.*, VI, p.167-9; Tadesse Gebre Igziabher, "Power Struggle in Tigray During the Zemene Mesafint, 1769-1855" B.A. Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University, 1971, p. 13, E. Rüppell, *Reise in Abyssinien*, (Frankfurt. 2 vols, 184) II, p. 336.

10 Bruce, IV, p. 340; H. Salt, *Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into the Interior of that Country Executed Under the Orders of the British Government in the Years 1809 and 1810*. (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1962), p. 327; Tadesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 15.

11 Blundell, p. 388-90; N. Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Pearce* (2 vols.) (London, 1969), II, p. 109. Rüppell, II p. 377; Tadesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 16. Ḥaremat was one of the strongest chiefdoms during the Zemene Mesafint where *ras* Mika'él also faced a serious rebellion.

12 Blundell, p. 298; Pearce, II, p. 88; Salt, p. 325-6; Tadesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 16.

the governorship of the salt district, bearing the title of *be'algada*. Nevertheless, having turned down this offer for a petty office, Welde Sellasé instead took *ras* Mika'él's nephew and the new governor of Tigray, Gebre Mesqel, by surprise at Ger'alta thereby ending *ras* Mika'él's dynasty.<sup>13</sup> Gradually, Welde Sillasé defeated all the major Tigrayan lords in the early 1790s to become the strongest local power in Tigray, including the Mereb Millaš after 1801. *Šum 'Agame* Weldu of Ḥasabala Irob was one of the local chiefs paying allegiances to the rising star, *ras* Welde Sillasé. The relationship between Weldu and Welde Sillasé will afterwards continue to be close and amicable until Weldu's death in 1802.<sup>14</sup>

Weldu's loyalty was of strategic significance to *ras* Welde Sillasé who could thus have almost total control of the lines of communication between the interior and the Red Sea Coast, through Weldu's 'Agame country. Many observers attributed *ras* Welde Sillasé's growing strength to his near monopoly over firearms at the time. It can, however, be safely argued that a large part of this monopoly was certainly due to his control of the 'Agame routes and Weldu's loyalties, a fact that seems hitherto overlooked.<sup>15</sup> Because, once the *ras* himself lay closer grips over the western sector (Gonder-'Adwa-Massawa route) of Tigray's principal trade routes from his early capital at Adwa, he needed a stronger ally in controlling the eastern sector, which he found in Weldu. Welde Sillasé's controls over the Ethiopian principal trade routes and access to firearms made his threat to the Yeju hegemony (over the kingdom of Gonder) a very serious one. On a couple of occasions, Welde Sillasé crowned his own puppet kings to the Solomonic throne (namely *Niguses* Be'id Maryam I (1795) and Tekle Giyorgis I (1779-99), for which he was granted the prestigious title of *ras* in gratitude.<sup>16</sup> At other times, his rival, *ras* Gugsu (1800-25) of Gonder was compelled to strike compromise in crowning candidates acceptable to *ras* Welde Sillasé.<sup>17</sup> Welde Sillasé tried to reinforce his own position in the imperial court by enagaging in political marriage (by marrying Princess Mentewab, sister of King Igwala Šeyon (r.1808-18) and forging Amhara-Tigrayan coalitions by winning *ras* Gebré of Semén to his side.<sup>18</sup> This seems to have forced *ras* Gugsu to carefully avert the risks of any major armed confrontation with Welde Sillasé.

13 Blundell, p. 301; Pearce, II, p. 90; Rüppell, II, p. 379; Salt, p. 327.

14 G. V. Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, The Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in the Years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (3 vols.) (London, 1809), III, p. 18; Taddesse G., "Power Struggle" p. 19; Informants: *Aleqa* Tesfay, *šeqqa* Berhe Kaḥsay.

15 Rüppell, II, p. 383; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 17.

16 Blundell, p. 450; Wudu, p. 114-5, Zewde Gabra-Selasse, "Ras Walda Selasse", *The Encyclopedia of Africana, Dictionary of African Biography, Vol. I, Ethiopia-Ghana* (New York, 1977), p. 131-2; Both kings were deposed by his adversary - the *Yeju ras* Gugsu.

17 *Ibid.*

18 C. Conti Rossini (ed.) "Nuovi Documenti Per La Storia d'Abissinia Nel Secolo XIX" *Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei, Roma, Ser. III, Vol. II; 1947*, p. 361-2; Blundell, p. 464; W.Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia* (London, 1928), II, p. 480-81. Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 17.

The pattern of relationship between *ras* Welde Sillasé and the Irob (Ḥasabala) chiefs was, however, far from being consistent. While it lasted it seem to have been very close. The British envoy, Lord Valentia reports that Welde Sillasé referred to Weldu as “his brother”<sup>19</sup> and reduced the amount of tribute paid to him from ‘Agame in deference for Weldu’s intimate friendship. Even when Weldu himself levied much greater tributes in gold, matchlocks and cattle on his ‘Agame subjects; the *ras* Welde Sillasé modestly claimed only 200 skins of honey, 200 sheep, 50 cows and 10 matchlocks annually.<sup>20</sup> This was a small tribute in comparison to what the area paid earlier.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, by the turn of the 19th century, Welde Sillasé’s annual revenue from the whole Tigray reached about 75,000 thalers.<sup>22</sup>

Welde Sillasé’s seems to have been pursuing the policy of manipulating the northeastern Tigrayan chiefs overlooking the Red Sea coast via *šum* ‘Agame Weldu, which coincided with the latter’s ambition at expanding his chiefdom. Weldu was particularly keen to incorporate the areas of Surukso, Šimezana and even the Ḥazo-Asawirta lowlands. ‘Agame’s process of territorial expansion seems to have enjoyed the *ras*’ tacit approval with a view to tighten his grips on the Northeastern Tigrayan trade routes leading to the coast. Contemporary sources suggest that Weldu’s growing ambition, neverteheless, came to its halt with head on collusion against the rather very powerful rival, *Babir Negash* Yasous (sic) of Degsa, overlooking the key pass to Massawa, where Weldu was finally defeated at a battle and died soon afterwards, in 1802.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. From Fratricidal Rivalry to Regional Protest: The Sequel, 1805-1814

The close alliance between Irob chieftaincy and *ras* Welde Sillasé’s Tigrayan governiship hardly survived the death of *šum* ‘Agame Weldu. The latter’s territories fell into the hands of his four sons<sup>24</sup>: Subagadis<sup>25</sup>, Tsa’edu, Gebru Gura<sup>26</sup>, and Ḥagos. Oral tradition indicated that Weldu designated his eldest son, Subagadis,

19 Valentia, III, p. 18.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 S. Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Addis Ababa, 1991), p. 33.

This figure particularly refers to the year 1816.

23 Valentia, III, p. 18; 240.

24 *Ibid.*; Salt, p. 304; Budge, II p.484; Taddesse G. “Power Struggle” p. 19. Informants: *Ato* Retta, *ato* Hayle Sillasé, *member* Subagadis.

25 Subagadis in the Saho language is composed of two words “Suba” to mean kill and “gadis” fight by surprise. Hence, Subagadis means fight and kill by surprise. Coulbeaux, II, p. 383, Taddesse G. “Power Struggle”, p. 17.

26 Gebru was nicknamed *Gura (gera)* for being left handed (Taddesse G. “Power Struggle,” p. 19).

as his main successor. But it appears that the four brothers ruled 'Agame in league for some time until they established firm control over their father's territories. This harmony never lasted long. By 1805, the Weldu brothers quarrelled over the shares of their inherited estates. *Ras* Welde Sillasé's arbitration by dividing *šum* 'Agame Weldu's estates between the two elder brothers, Subagadis and Tsa'edu (ignoring the two juniors<sup>27</sup>, however, never contained the fratricidal conflicts. Apparently, Subagadis received the Western sector with its capital at Genaḥti, in the outskirts of 'Addigrat; while Tsa'edu had the eastern sector centred at Sewne, with Irobland and Subḥa Sa'isi' under him.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Ḥagos and Gebru Gura entered into the services of Subagadis and *ras* Welde Selassé respectively.<sup>29</sup> This settlement was, however, challenged mainly by Tsa'edu who began plundering and encroaching on the neighbouring territories of Subagadis and other local chiefs of 'Agame<sup>30</sup>. The two British envoys, Henry Salt and his assistant, Nathaniel Pearce praised Subagadis' character of humility, hospitality, mild expression in countenance besides being a man of distinguished ability, bravery and intelligence.<sup>31</sup> The *ras*, however, discouraged Subagadis' expectations of appointment over all his father's territories. Neither Subagadis's personal appeals to the *ras* about the misconduct of his brother, Tsa'edu, nor the pledges of mediation were of any avail. Even worse, Salt observed that Welde Sillasé kept up disregarding Subagadis while favouring Saedu on official occasions.<sup>32</sup> Subagadis' marriage to the niece of the *ras* (the daughter of *ato* Debbeb of Tsera') could not even help to cling him any closer to his overlord.<sup>33</sup> This increasing alienation seemed to have pushed him to protest militarily both against his brother (Tsa'edu) and the *ras*. Indeed, Subagadis acted swiftly by forcing Tsa'edu out of his entire estates and emerged the *de facto* chief of 'Agame by c-1809. Apparently, this event signalled the beginning of Tsa'edu's complete dependence on the *ras* while making the "indefatigable" Subagadis "a constant terror to the most warlike and powerful of his adversaries," including the *ras* himself.<sup>34</sup>

The sons of *šum* 'Agame Weldu now found themselves in two opposite factions. Tsa'edu and another half-brother called *fitawrari* Gebre Amlak entered the services of *ras* Welde Sillasé. The rest joined Subagadis and refused paying the customary tributes to the *ras* by 1809<sup>35</sup>. Informants claim that Welde Sillasé

27 Budge, II, p. 484; Valentia, III, p. 24; Informants: *Qés* Gebre Tsadiq Gebrehiwot, *šeqqa* Berhe, *membir* Subagadis.

28 Salt, p. 304-5; Valentia, III, p. 24; Informants: *Ato* Meressa; *šeqqa* Berhe.

29 Valentia, III, p. 24.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*, p. 18, 21; Pearce, II, p. 282; cf-J.B. *Coulbeaux, Histoire Politique et Religieuse d'Abyssinie* (2 vols) (Paris, 1929), II, p. 381.

32 Valentia, III, p. 49, 62, 18.

33 Pearce, II, p. 281; Valentia, p. 49; Informants: *Balambaras* Taffere Desta, *šaqqa* Berhé. Informants stress that Subagadis divorced her some time after the death of *ras* Welde Selasse.

34 Pearce, II; p. 291.

35 Salt, p. 304; Budge, II, p. 484; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 19; Informants: *Ato* Abreha Ad'Umer, *lij* Abreha Tesfay, *ato* Hayle Sillasé Redda.

officially appointed Tsa'edu over parts of Kilitte-Awla'ilo with the explicit project of subverting his brothers. It was not the issue of tribute payment alone that disappointed the *ras*. The Weldu bothers' rebellion in 'Agame was of much greater implication beyond mere refusal to pay taxes. Infact, more importantly, they were challenging the *ras*'s control of the routes to the coast thereby disturbing general law and order in that part of his governorship.<sup>36</sup> To make matters worse, Subagadis and his brothers managed to capture Tsa'edu, their brother and favourite surrogate of the *ras*. Further south in Kilitte-Awla'elo, they also attacked and captured *abba* Golem Kersu<sup>37</sup>, chief of Dera (who died in captivity) and controlled several additional villages in the region by killing many of the *ras*' appointees. As Pearce aptly describes: "Subagadis was plundering and destroying all the neighbouring countries and that no body could face him."<sup>38</sup>

The growing political deterioration had its own impacts on the economic life of Northern Ethiopia and on the patterns of relations between *ras* Welde Sillasé, his subjects in the low lying parts of Eastern Tigray and the uncertain loyalty of the 'Afar chiefs along the Red Sea Coast including the *Naibs* of Hīrgigo. Reports of the British observers further suggest that agricultural activities were negatively affected due to greater peasant insecurities which inturn affected local and regional trade prospects. Besides Subagadis' company, hosts of bandits swarmed the countryside and the strategic passes. This greatly discouraged merchants doing business in the nearby market centres like 'Addigrat, Ḥawzén and Sen'afe<sup>39</sup>. The then merchant group dominating the northern caravan trade, called *Qaflay*, not only lost their trade items but also their lives at the hands of rebels stranded from Rayya 'Azebo to the Red Sea Coast.<sup>40</sup>

Subagadis' success in plundering the *Qaflay* and the peasantry provided him with ample economic resources to recruit several committed 'Afar-Saho followers who were known to be sharp shooters. Many chiefly families allied to his father, such as *bilatta* Fessuh of the Inda Adgada Irob apparently sympathized Subagadis' protest against Welde Sillasé. On the other hand, there were also antagonistic chiefs in "'Agame proper", like Bekot and Surukso who tried to reassert their earlier political independence by openly siding with the *ras*.<sup>41</sup>

All these political problems were exacerbated by the unreliable loyalty of the Afar-Saho chiefs and the *Naibs* of Massawa, who often had the "technical upper hand" over the conduct of the long-distance trade in Northern Ethiopia. This

36 Informants: *Ato* Asgedom, *mel'ake* Birhanat Girmay, *qés* Gebre Madhin, *aleqa* Tesfay.

37 Informants, however, call him *abba* Gedam or Glia-Egzi. Informants: *Balambaras* Assefa Attay; *aleqa* Lemlem Teferi, *balambaras* Taffere.

38 Pearce, I, p. 58.

39 Salt, p. 143-50, 200, 206-218; Pearce, II, p. 134-49; F.O.1/1, Abyssinia, File No. 19, p. 82-94; Informants: *Balambaras* Ḥagos Saleh, *šeqqa* Berhe.

40 Pearce, I, p. 44; informants: *Abba* Gebre Mesqel Abarha, *ato* Ismail Ali, *weyzero* Šefta Menelik.

41 Informants: *Qés* Gebre Medhin; *aleqa* Tesfay, *grazmač* Nur Hussen, *qés* Gebre Sadeq; cf. Pearce, I, p. 58-60.

could perhaps explain Welde Sillasé's plan of developing an alternative port, Bur, closer to Enderta, instead of Massawa under the hostile *Naib* Idris<sup>42</sup>. *Ras* Welde Sillasé told Henry Salt that the road between Bur and Həntalo could be a good alternative for the *Qaflay*<sup>43</sup>, and the anticipated foreign trading with the British. But more than any thing else, this rather desperate plan to divert the route to the Buri peninsula shows the intensity of impacts posed by the challenges of Irob chieftaincy in 'Agame and its environs, in the absence of such loyal chiefs as *šum* 'Agame Weldu.<sup>44</sup>

The rebellion had considerably affected the 'Afar-Saho communities of eastern Tigray. The fact that the two communities supplied Subagadis both with an effective fighting force and safe sanctuary made him a "thorn in the bush", which directly threatened the position of the *ras* in the then lucrative salt trade. Indeed, the historian Morchedai Abir claims that the long-term rivalries between the chiefs of Enderta and 'Agame arose from their overlapping desires to monopolise the conduct of the salt trade<sup>45</sup>. Welde Sillasé also had to worry in other flanks, particularly in Aksum, 'Adwa and Seraye where he had successfully suppressed repeated rebellions<sup>46</sup>. But Subagadis' successes made the *ras* more apprehensive of possible coalitions that could be formed among dissident groups. The 'Agame rebellion further deprived the *ras* of any breathing space as it immediately followed the hard won and prolonged insurgency of Goji, the son of *ras* 'Ali Gaz, the leader of the Jawi and the Tulama Oromo whom he had defeated in just in 1808.<sup>47</sup>

The Tigrayan overlord conducted series of massive expeditions on 'Agame country between 1809-1814 with the aim of suppressing recalcitrant chiefs and consolidating his hold over northern Tigray. The nature, magnitude and effects of

42 Valentia, III, p. 40, 57, 114-17; F.O.1/1 Abyssinia File No. 19, p. 81-2. *Naib* Idris succeeded the *ras*' friendly vassal, *naib* Yohannes. Salt observed: "the Abyssinians [i.e., Christians] are little acquainted with commercial transactions, as they dedicated their lives to war and agriculture. All trade had rested from an early period in the hands of the Mohammadans who are in the possession of the difficult ports of Abyssinia in the Red see." (F.O.1/1, File No. 19, p. 90).

43 Valentia, III, p. 40, Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 40. Welde Sillasé already asked the British government, via Valentia, for artisans while on his own part sent presents of traditional clothers to King George III. Moreover, to further demonstrate his desires for diplomatic relations, Walda Selassé requested Salt to take his delegate, *ato* Debbbeb to England. Salt, however, turned down the offer as being beyond the instructions of the foreign office.

44 Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 40, 51.

45 M. Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of Princes* (London, 1958), p. 49; Idem, "Salt, Trade and Politics in Ethiopia in the Zemene Mesafint" *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. IV (2), July 1966, p. 4; cf. Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 40-2. The intrigues continued between *dejjazmač* Wubé and the successive Tigrayan chiefs. European intrigues in the Red Sea coastal area enroute from Idd and Amphila to 'Agame also enhanced the inter-chiefly or inter-regional rivalries.

46 Salt, p. 305; Valentia, p. 221-2; Blundell, p. fol. 187.

47 Salt, p. 291-2; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 19.

these expeditions are fairly well represented in the succinct accounts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century travellers, particularly in the two British eye witnesses Pearce and Coffin.

Pearce recounts his reminiscences of *ras* Welde Sillasé's stern preparations for the 1809 campaign as follows: ... the Ras Walda Selsasse ordered all to get ready against Subagades on Kidus Yohannes [the first day of Maskaram of the Ethiopian New Year, holiday.] The drum was beaten in the market place, to order Enderta, Giralta (sic), Temben, Sahorte (sic), Overgalle (sic) Bora, Salora (sic), Dova, Wojjerat, Wumburta, Dacer (sic) & C. to be ready at that time, and join him at Aggulah (sic).<sup>48</sup>

Welde Sillasé mobilized about 11000 muskets and many more spears and shields though, to his dismay, most of his vassal chiefs joined him too late only in Hāremat rather than in Agula' as earlier planned. Such a large force clearly indicates the far-reaching significance of the 'Agame rebellion at the time. The huge expedition followed a sort of crescent line along the Ḥayq-M'asḥal-Agula' - 'Addigrat-Assefe route. Personally leading his regional army on this difficult road, Welde Selassé pursued an earth-to -scorch policy of destroying all the crops, villages and other settlements, which brought about much disaster.<sup>49</sup>

The intensity of operations and constant state of *Zemene Mesafint* warfare had long term ecological repercussions, which coupled with natural forces, enhanced the pace for environmental degradation, deforestation and vulnerability to drought and/or famine. For instance, N. Pearce witnessed that only in Assefe (Surukso) did the huge army of *ras* Welde Sillasé stop for six days until their cattle consumed all the green corn. This disastrous action was preceded by reports of Subagadis' presence there a day before the *ras*' arrival. The *ras* apparently sought to deprive Subagadis of his comfortable economic base; but the real effect went much further into disturbing prospects of peasant food security and depressing agricultural productivity. Neither did Welde Sillasé succeed in rooting out the 'Agame resistance. The rebels evaded captivity by slipping into their mountain hideouts, near Mekhido, the old seat of *šum* 'Agame Weldu's power and the valleys of Gunda Gundo. The *ras* pursued the rebels and besieged their strongholds; but in vain.<sup>50</sup>

Although Subagadis ultimately run out of power and fled, the nocturnal attacks of his army inflicted relatively heavier casualties on that of the *ras* than they would have incurred in face-to-face engagements. Particularly those grass cutters for the horses and cattle of the *ras*' camp suffered the most from such attacks as the following Tigrigna poem, reportedly sang at the time by Welde Sillasé's followers, indicates:

48 Pearce, I, p. 62; cf. Salt, p. 304-5.

49 *Ibid*, p. 304; Pearce, I, p. 62-3.

50 *ibid*, p. 63; Salt, p. 304-6; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 19. Both Pearce and Salt report that it was on this occasion that the *ras* burnt down *šum* 'Agame Weldu's seat of power, Makhido, before leaving 'Agame.

Mekhido ye Mekhido ye  
 Ni Atsadi sa 'iri gededo ye  
 Attum nigus nikhido endo ne Inderta, nikhido ye!<sup>51</sup>

ማኸዶ ማኸዶ፣  
 ንዓግዲ ሳዕሪ ገደዶ፣  
 ኣቲም ንጉስ ንኺዶ እንዶ ንእንደርታ ንኺዶ።

Litterally:

Oh! Makhido! Makhido,  
 It has become much more worse for the grass cutters;  
 Oh! *Nigus* (sic)  
 Do let us go back home to Inderta!

Subagadis' followers molested the *ras*' troops, ambushing them all the way along the arduous routes and causing much damage to the army who likened the rebels to termites.<sup>52</sup>

The narrow roads and rugged terrains down into the eastern escarpment coupled with serious hunger and thirst gradually sapped the enthusiasm of the *ras*' more conventional army. And yet, the major achievement of the campaign was dislodging Subagadis and his numerous fellow rebels from their natural stronghold on 'Asimba, down into "the country of Taltals or Bedowins."<sup>53</sup> In the mean time, Subagadis could tactically send bands of his troops to 'Edgaḥamus and Kilitte-Belessa, both to collect supplies but mainly also to divert the attention of the *ras* towards his major power base, Inderta.<sup>54</sup> This strategy had its recipe in compelling the *ras* finally to give up his campaign. He rushed towards his capital, Ḥiṅtalo, reportedly taking with him the two important hostages: the beloved sisters of Subagadis, Hedaro and Berur, whom he kept with him for some time.

The troops of the *ras* devastated 'Agame on their way back, killing people; taking away the property of the people and many heads of cattle; and destroying whatever they could not carry to Inderta with them. The peasantry indeed suffered a lot not only directly from the war but also from the resultant famine and epidemics, which afflicted the countryside. N. Pearce, who accompanied the *ras* during the hostilities, still describes the desperate local peasant situation as follows: ... Having burnt the town of Arderghaso (sic) where we stopped two days and then marched in the plains where the corn was ready to cut, which took us five days to destroy....

51 Pearce, I, p. 67; cf. Informants: *Lij* Abreha, *šeqqa* Berhe, *abba* Ḥadgu.

52 Informants: *Aleqa* Tesfay, *Membir* Subagadis, *ato* Tesfay Mezgebo, *balambaras* Ḥagos .

53 Informants: *Ato* Hayle Sillasé, *ato* Retta, *šeqqa* Berhe. They were married to Subagadis' full sisters on both sides.

54 Pearce, I, p. 69; cf. Salt, p. 306-7.

Then in the River Munai (sic), the finest country in that part of Abyssinia for corn and cattle... We stopped a week to destroy every thing.<sup>55</sup>

The impact of the *ras*' campaigns was so disastrous for the whole socio-economic fabric of 'Agame which was enthusiastically described by Henry Salt only a few years earlier as a rich and fertile district.<sup>56</sup> It also led to greater alienation of the Afar of Kilitte-Awla'elo from the *ras* who avenged them for hosting Subagadis and supporting his cause.<sup>57</sup> Even Welde Sillasé's own army was quite disillusioned by their constant mobilization into the the endless campaigns in Tigray and else where in northern Ethiopian region.<sup>58</sup>

A year of relative peace followed in 'Agame during which Subagadis reportedly considered himself a *de facto* ruler of 'Agame. In the mean time, a very formidable coalition of the many Tigrayan chiefs opposed to the *ras* was formed in the same year 1810. This coalition was composed of Subagadis; *dejjazmač* Hizqiyas of 'Adwa who was the grandson of *ras* Mikaél Seḥul; *Nebure'id* Aram of Aksum; and some other local personalities of lower rank. These chiefs gathered in 'Adwa and resolved to take a concerted action against the *ras*. They even looked towards *ras* Gugsu of Gonder for political alliance and military assistance. However, Welde Sillasé aborted their intrigue at the eleventh hour by taking quick preemptive actions. He staged a surprise attack on them in which he barely survived; but the victory was clearly his; and left his opponents in disarray. Hizqiyas, Aram and his two sons left Tigray to join *ras* Gugsu and take refuge in Amhara land.<sup>59</sup> This event illustrated how Amhara-Tigrayan political coalition was part of the long-term developments shaping the political equilibrium of northern Ethiopia than one might normally assume.

Subagadis, however, went on creating much havoc by raiding 'Agame and other places in adjacent districts; waylaying caravans; intercepting tributes on their way to the *ras*'s court; and killing many of Welde Sillasé's appointees. He had the strong Irob levy and 'Afar-Saho backup behind him. Such deteriorating political developments compelled Welde Sillasé to march against Subagadis once again, at the end of 1810. The Battle of Bi'era, in Sa'isi', again resulted in Subagadis' defeat; but he still avoided capture and slipped down into the 'Afar lowlands. Soon after this decisive battle, the local balance of power seems to have drastically shifted in favour *ras* Welde Sillasé. Subagadis appeared so wearied of prolonged rebellion and was contemplating submission. He apparently allowed his brother Gebru *Gura* to do that first and ask the *ras*' pardon for both of them. Gebru did this on January 20, 1811; but Welde Sillasé simply declared that Subagadis had "the blood of so many chiefs upon him;" and in August 1811, Gebru *Gura* himself was chained and arrested at Imba Alajje where all offending chiefs were confined.

55 *Ibid*, p. 448.

56 Informants: *Šum Bahri* Ibrahim, *ato* Eddissa Ali, *bajji* Ahmed Mohammad.

57 Informants: *Šum Bahri* Ibrahim, *ato* Eddissa, *bajji* Ahmed, *ato* Retta.

58 For instance, no sooner than the army of Welde Sillasé turned from 'Agame to Hēntalo than orders passed for another campaign this time against *ras* Gugsu.

59 Pearce, I, p. 76.

This was done soon after Tsa'edu, Welde Sillasé's favourite 'Agame chief broke out from Subagadis' prison, and joined his overlord again. The *ras* felt relieved and promptly appointed Tsa'edu over all 'Agame territories, thus trying to revive his old policy of divide - and - subdue, by exploiting the mutual jealousies among the sons of *šum* 'Agame Weldu.<sup>60</sup>

The year 1811 turned out to be one of greatest success for the *ras*. Many of his rivals began to submit one by one; while others disappeared from the political scene. *Nebure'id* Aram died in self-exile in Amhara; and his sons, *ato* Menker and *ato* Welde Mika'él, together with *dejjazmač* Hizqiyas all came from exile in submission to the *ras*, who graciously restored them to their respective local offices.<sup>61</sup> Subagadis himself submitted in October 1812, not only because he had been militarily exhausted but because he apparently also wanted to have his brother Gebru released.<sup>62</sup> But Welde Sillasé declined to release Gebru; which made Subagadis rebel again in 1813, barely three months after his submission. As usual, he intercepted the annual tributes due to the *ras* by killing important courtiers. One of the victims was the *ras*' favourite treasurer, *asalaḥi* Tesfa-Mariam and his followers. Subagadis also plundered 'Agame as far as 'Haramat. In March 1813, the incensed *ras* ordered the chiefs of Atsbi, Dera, Ger'alta, Ḥaremat and Tsira' jointly to march against the dangerous rebel. However, at the bloody battle of 'Addigrat fought on 24 March 1813, Subagadis routed the *ras*' army inflicting heavy casualties on them. Above all, by taking into hostage, among others, some of the *ras*' relatives, Subagadis now forced the release of his brother, Gebru.<sup>63</sup> But Subagadis and the *ras* do not seem to have improved their relations any better. Neither do we have any indications of Subagadis' success in getting the appointment over half of 'Agame<sup>64</sup>, which he had demanded in return for the hostages. Contemporary reports seem to suggest that Subagadis was still in rebellion as late as 1814 when he was attracting more dissident chiefs to his side and disturbing the security of the 'Adwa-Inderta road.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.1 *Irob Power Consolidation and Subagadis Confirmation Over 'Agame*

While on revolt against the *ras*, Subagadis simultaneously expanded and consolidated his internal hold over 'Agame. Informants claim that he had repeatedly defeated and ousted his powerful brothers, Tsa'edu and Gebre Amlak. The next strong local resistance reportedly came from the hereditary chiefs of Bekot (sons of *šum* Tella) and Sebeya, in Surukso, (sons of *šum* Mahlet) whom Subagadis attacked one by

60 *Ibid*, p. 86-88; Tadesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 20.

61 Rüppell, II, p. 398; Pearce, I, p. 89-90. But Welde Mika'él and Manker were only given half of their father's land.

62 C. Markham, *The Abyssinian Expedition* (London: 1869), p. 51; Rüppell, II, p. 398; Pearce, I, p.103; Tadesse G. "Power Struggle" p. 20.

63 Rüppell, II, p. 38; Markham, p. 53; Pearce, p. 78-79, 114-5.

64 *Ibid*, p. 178-79.

65 *Ibid*, cf. Rüppell, I, p. 272.

one. After some military set backs, Subagadis routed Bekot, killing its leader, *abéto* Welde Gerima and his brother, Yishaq, at the fierce battle of Che'anadug, at the site where we now have the Agazi Comprehensive Secondary School in 'Addigrat.<sup>66</sup>

Subsequently, Subagadis reportedly announced to the chiefs of Sebeya-Surukso that their fate would not be any different from Bekot's unless they submitted peacefully. But, Subagadis was badly defeated twice at Tankatam and Sarana-Gata by the sons of the hereditary chief, *šum* Mahlet of Sebeya. Particularly the casualties suffered by his army at Sarana Gata were so severe that he barely survived murder. At this stage, the quarrel between the chiefs of Sebeya and the Ida Adgada and Buknayto Irobs over access to local markets helped Subagadis. He soon established a strong alliance especially with the Ida Adgada clan though the Buknayto house largely kept neutral in the conflict. Thus, with the active support of his follow Irob, the Ida Adgada, Subagadis defeated Sebeya at the decisive battle of Amba Matra.<sup>67</sup> The two leading Sebeya chiefs, both named Gelawdéwos<sup>68</sup> were killed while another chief named Debre Tsiyon escaped to his stronghold of Debre Ma'iso, in Gulomakheda.

According to our informants, this victory earned Subagadis the congratulations of even the reluctant chiefs of Buknayto clan, *Ona* Kumanit and his brother, *hanayta* Sa'eru. The Buknayto chieftaincy were neutral in the conflict owing to their own grievances with Subagadis himself. Although the Sebeya were hostile to all the Saho, the Ga'aso of eastern Akkele-Guzay, who had suffered from Subagadis' frequent raids regreted his victory.<sup>69</sup> Though the Surukso were now militarily defeated, their feud with the descendants of *šum* 'Agame Weldu persisted for over 60 years; until the marriage alliances arranged later by *ras* Sebhat Aregawi (1875-1914) could improve their inter-family relations. Once Subagadis consolidated his power internally within 'Agame, *ras* Welde Sillasé seems to have had no alternatives other than confirming him in the position by the end of 1815 and the beginning of 1816.<sup>70</sup>

66 Informants: *Aleqa* Tesfay, *qés* Gebre Tsadiq, *abba* Tesfay Hädgu, *šeqqa* Berhe.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Informants: *Qés* Gebre Tsadiq, *ato* Tesfay Fessuh, *aleqa* Azezey, *aleqa* Abreha. There is still a site called "*Meqtal Keleta Galawdewos*" which in time developed into a sort of Shrine where the local people used to put stones en route. This left the site with piles of stones.

69 Informants: *Ato* Tesfay Debesay, *ato* Tesfay Fessuh; *aleqa* Azezey.

70 This fact does not, however, appear to have been appreciated by earlier writers like Tadesse Gebre Igziabher who felt the cession of Subagadis' rebellion in about 1812 (Tadesse, "Power Struggle..." p. 20). Bayru has a better approach on Subagadis' reconciliation with the *ras* in 1815 when his claims to the governorship of 'Agame was apparently recognized (Bayru Tafla (ed.). *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Šewa* (Stuttgart, 1987), p. 961. Even then the ey witness N. Pearce and some oral informants insist that he did not fully submit until the last quarter of 1815 (Pearce, I, p.178-9; Informants: *Aleqa* Kaḥsay, *ato* Abreha Ad'Umar).

#### 4. Civil War in Tigray and the Advent of Irobs to Regional Predominance, 1816 –22

The last days of Welde Sillasé were characterized by incessant rebellions all over Tigray, religious problems and a lack of harmony with the new Egyptian bishop, *abune* Qerlos who was accused of “insolence and unblushing extortion.”<sup>71</sup> To take advantage of Welde Sillasé’s serious illness and aging, strong rebellions broke out in ‘Adwa-Aksum and Selewwa. However, the *ras*’s soldiers reduced the principal leaders of the revolt, namely *baša* Welde Kidan and Gebre Sardu in Selewwa as well as the sons of *nebure’id* Aram in Aksum quite easily.<sup>72</sup> The *ras* finally died on March 28, 1816, a rather disappointed man.<sup>73</sup>

Welde Sillasé was apparently renowned for his justice to his subjects and his clemency to his enemies compared with *ras* Mika’él, or even Subagadis after him. Ironically, his reign was far more unsettled than those of the two men. Thus, he was forced to put down a series of rebellions in Tigray besides engaging in numerous wars with the chiefs of neighbouring regions. However, confusion and anarchy reigned in Tigray immediately following his death. The region was immersed into a civil war, which lasted almost six years.<sup>74</sup> Claimants to his succession became even more numerous than ever before. But the most formidable contestants for supremacy include: the *ras*’s heir, *dejjazmač* Welde Rufa’él; *šum Tembén dejjazmač* Gebre Mika’él (the regent of Welde Rufa’él); Subagadis of ‘Agame, *dejjazmač* Hizqiyas of ‘Adwa; the *ras* nephew Dimtsu of Inderta and *Inda* Makhoni who was also Subagadis’ brother in law; Ar’aya, the disowned son of the *ras*, as well as *šum Selewwa Berhe* of Bora Selewwa.<sup>75</sup>

War broke out all over the place, immediately after Welde Sillasé’s death. His son, Welde Rufa’él, supported at first by his regent, *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika’él, tried to assert his power by campaigning against Tsira’e, Tembén and Širé, in Western Tigray. Soon afterwards, however, Hizqiyas, the governor of ‘Adwa, “Tigray Proper”, put up his own claims by gaining the alliance of the chiefs of Širé, Ḥamasén and with the services of many Amhara troops he had brought from across the Tekkeze. He camped outside ‘Adwa with a formidable army of as many as 3000 troops expecting the attack of Subagadis.

But Subagadis attacked with a relatively small but more effective Afar-Saho speaking army; and he badly defeated Hizqiyas.<sup>76</sup> ‘Adwa now came under

71 Markham, p. 51.

72 Conti Rossini “Nuovi Documenti...” p. 363; Ruppell, II, p. 394; Pearce, I, p. 180-85; Tadesse G. “Power Struggle...” p. 21.

73 Pearce, I, p. 190; Tadesse G. “Power Struggle...” p. 21. *Ras* Welde Selassé died with out launching the long expected war to unseat the Yeju lords.

74 Pearce, I, p. 67, Tadesse, G. “Power Struggle...”, p. 20, Markham, p. 51.

75 Salt, p. 495; Pearce, I, p. 97.

76 *Ibid*; Conti Rossini, “Nuovi Documenti...”, p. 362, Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia* (2 vols) (New York: 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., N. D.), p. 93.

Subagadis, control in September 1816; and he appointed as his own governor over the historic town, another grand-son of *ras* Mika'él, *qenazmač* Welde Kidan.<sup>77</sup>

Subagadis soon proceeded to Inderta and fought against Welde Rufa'él near Cheleqot. On his way through Hāremat and Tsira', Subagadis reinforced himself with a large number of Talfains. We do not actually know the identity of this community. Pearce, however, calls them a "people between the Galla and Taltal" who always showed a great regard to Subagadis.<sup>78</sup> The chronicle of Amde Tsiyon also listed a certain Mekonn kin of the Talfains among those dissident chiefs who had joined the rebellion of Sabradin.<sup>79</sup> Any way, Welde Rufa'él tried to negotiate with Subagadis but with no success. War became inevitable. Subagadis was accompanied by his influential lieutenants, including his brothers, Gebru *gura*, Tsa'edu, *belatta* Fessuh, with his brother *Hanayta* Adhanom (chief of Ida Adgada), *šaleqa* Tesfu, and others.<sup>80</sup> Subagadis emerged victorious at this costly battle where he had lost his brother and right hand man, *fitawrari* Gebru *gura* and many other soldiers.

The casualties on Welde Rufa'él's party (Inderta) were no less disastrous, which devoured a great number of influential lieutenants and courtiers of the late *ras* Welde Sillasé, including *agafari* Tesfu, one of the *ras*' secretaries, *ato* Gebre, the chief of Wejjerat and many other dignitaries. Cheleqot was initially severely looted by the 'Agame troops. But Subagadis, who was now beginning to act as a proper statesman, soon ordered his followers to restore their booties to their owners.<sup>81</sup> The British renegades, Pearce and Coffin reports that only their personal friendship to Subagadis spared from the vengeance of the 'Afar of Wemberta who could easily identified them (by their clour) as part of Welde Sillasé's raiding party. Subagadis took some sever measures to maintain the discipline of his largely "pastoral army."<sup>82</sup> The residents of Hēntalo were very cautious though and received Subagadis warmly with singing and dancing for which they seemed to have saved themselves from devastation that Ch'eleqot suffered.

Meanwhile, as a loyal regent of Welda Rufael, *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él carefully raised an army of about 5000 muskets, allied himself with the *ras*'s disowned son, Ara'ya, and formed a secrete coalition with many of Subagadis' own half-hearted vassals. Subagadis', unaware of the conspiracy, ambitiously marched to incorporate Tembén and got initial victories at a battle, near the Geba River. But his fortune was soon reversed by the sudden attack from Gebre Mika'él's forces led by his own brother, *šum Tembén* Seyfu.<sup>83</sup> Subagadis was himself taken prisoner in February

77 *Ibid*, Taddesse G. "Power Struggle...", p. 22.

78 Pearce, II, p. 103.

79 Huntingford, C. W. B. *The Glorious Victories of Amde Seyon, King of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 78.

80 Pearce, II, p. 108; Informants: *Ato* Edissa; *qés* Gebre Medhin.

81 Pearce, II, p. 105.

82 *Ibid*.

83 Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Document", p. 363; Parkyns, II, p. 93-94; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 23.

1817 together with his brothers, Tsa'edu and Gebre Madhin; his son, Ḥagos and some of his best lieutenants like *balambaras* Teklu and *ato* Mezgebo. The excited regent, Gebre Mika'él, sent the prisoners to *dejjazmač* Walda Rufa'él, who chained and detained them on Imba Arara, Indarta.<sup>84</sup>

After a brief period of detention, however, Subagadis was helped to escape from prison by the young "prince", *dejjazmač* Welde Rufa'él, owing to a secret deal to reduce the growing power and influence of *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él.<sup>85</sup> The intrigues behind the escape of the dangerous Subagadis led to growing raws between Welde Rufa'él and Gebre Mika'él. The senior regent (Gebre Mika'él) now dropped his regency and opted to rule over Tigray. Subagadis, on the other side, raised a strong army in 'Agame; and *dejjazmač* Hizqiyas, who had regained his 'Tigray Proper' during the absence of Subagadis, made an agreement with him to avoid frontier raids and counter-raids between 'Agame and 'Adwa. Encouraged by this *dejjat* Hizqiyas marched against Tembén and attacked Ḥenṭalo with a huge army, which included the British Coffin. There was a frontal confrontation with the forces of *dejjazmač* Welde Rufa'él and Gebre Mika'él at the battle of Mugee, at the Wejjerat border. But Hizqiyas's party lost the battle in which he himself and all his chiefs were taken prisoners and detained at Imba Arara.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, Subagadis exploited the brief detention of Hizqiyas to incorporate his districts of the Seven Iggela,<sup>87</sup> Ḥaḥayle and Imba Sineyti into 'Agame. At the same time, perhaps in the mid 1817, Subagadis, Gebre Mika'él and Welde Rufa'él ceremonially came to terms in the church of Aksum through the mediation of the deposed Gonderine king Tekale Giyorgis I. The three rivals wished Takla Giyorgis to fairly allocate the territories of the late *ras* among them. Thus, they agreed on Welde Rufa'él's continued control of the two regional capitals, 'Adwa and Ḥinṭalo, both of which brought rich customs duties. Interestingly, the deposed king seems to have wielded some powers of confirming old titles and granting new ones. Thus, he confirmed the title of *dejjazmač* for both Welde-Rufa'él and Gebre Mika'él; but Subagadis is said to have rejected the offer of the same title by arguing that he would achieve it only through his own spear.<sup>88</sup>

84 Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti", p. 362-363; Parkyns, II; p. 94; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle." p. 23; Informants: *Qés* Gebre Medhin, *aleqa* Tesfay, *šeqqa* Berhe. A large number of 'Afar followers of Subagadis perished in the war.

85 Parkyns, II; p. 94; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle", p. 23; Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti", p. 363.

86 Pearce, II, p. 122. Later on, Hezqeyas was released.

87 The seven Iggela are reportedly named after their seven Iggela clan occupants of the areas north and east of Intich'o, north of Debre Damo and western parts of Akkele Guzay up to and including Deqe Amḥara with all its surroundings. These clans are assumed to be: Iggela Daggabsi, Iggela Hasin, Iggela Ḥamis, Iggela Gura'e, Iggella Welesti, Mereta-Sebene. (Gebre Eyesus Abbay, *Meseret 'lét Hezbi Mereb Mellaš* (Asmara: Kokebe Tsebah Printing Press, 1959 E.C.), p. 22-23).

88 Pearce, II, 123. Informants: *Aleqa* Kaḥsay, *balambaras* Assefa, *ato* Retta, *balambaras* Teffera, *grazmač* Kidane Maryam.

But the accord was only short-lived. Subagadis' arrogance in rejecting the title of *dejjazmač* apparently displeased his two rivals and trouble flared up again among all the contestants. Gebre Mika'él was particularly enraged with Welde Rufa'él's treason in releasing Subagadis from prison. And soon after Subagadis and most of the Indarta army left for their respective areas, he treacherously turned against the son of his former master, Welde Rufa'él and badly defeated him at the battle of Inda Abba Gerima. Welde Rufa'él fled to Indarta leaving behind all his musketry to his disloyal regent. *Dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él then proclaimed himself governor of Tigray in the capital of 'Adwa, which he continued to rule until 1822.<sup>89</sup> Subagadis' hasty attempts to reinforce Welde Rufa'él only ended up in his own defeat and subsequent flight to the stronghold of Be'ati Felasi,<sup>90</sup> in Haremat [Kilitte Belesa].

Left alone on the saddle of Tigray power, Gebre Mika'él of Tembén began to carry out administrative reshuffles by appointing men of his own choice over certain districts. *Fitawrari* Gebre Amlak of Gendebta was made governor of 'Adwa.<sup>91</sup> The Egyptian bishop Abune Qerlos could at the same time get back the district of 'Addi-Abun, which was traditionally the official estate of the bishops but which had been contested by Gebre Amlak for some time.<sup>92</sup> Gebre Mika'él apparently also tried to confirm Welde Rufa'él over his father's land of Indarta. But the latter had a conflict with *ato* Berhe of Selewwa who attacked and defeated him and put him in prison. Instead, he released Welde Rufa'él's prisoners, *dejjazmač* Hizqiyas and Subagadis' brother, Tsa'edu.<sup>93</sup>

Though Gebre Mika'él seems to have been the strongest single power in Tigray, his position was, nevertheless, far from being secure. He had to put down a series of rebellions through out the period of his supremacy. *Dejjazmač* Hizqiyas who had been realised from prison by *ato* Bahre frequently rebelled against him only to be defeated and put into prison again on two occasions. Moreover, between 1817 and 1819, Subagadis engaged Gebre Mika'él not less than four times (February 1817, October 1817, February 1818 and October 1818) with indecisive results; and almost perenial raids and counter-raids into their respective territories continued during the period. Gradually, Subagadis became a rallying point for all of the opponents of Gebre Mika'él. Thus in Tigray itself, even the influential district chiefs of Qolla Tembén, *šum Tembén's* Animut and Sahlu, began to be his allies.

89 Parkyns, II, p. 94; Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti", p. 363, Pearce, II: p. 124-5.

According to Pearce, Gebre Mika'él of Tembén dominated the region having an army of over 1500 muskets, 20,000 horses and several foot men as well as over 30 powerful chiefs with tents under his command. (Pearce, II, p. 125).

90 Parkyns, II, p. 94; Informants: *Aleqa* Lelmem, *balamabaras* Hagos, *ato* Tesfay Mezgebo.

91 Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti", p. 361-2; Ruppell, II, p. 421; Pearce, II, p.207-8.

92 After *ras* Welde Sillasé's death, *abune* Qerlos changed seats from Hentalo to Tembén and then later to 'Addi-Abun. Even *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él failed to settle the disputes between Gebre Amlak and the *abune* in his 5 years reign. Some times the conflict led into armed encounters between the supporters of both antagonists.

93 Parkyns, II, p. 94; Pearce, II; p. 130.

*Ras* Mika'él Seḥul's grandson, Hizqiyas and the sons of *nebur'id* Aram of Aksum were also allied to him.<sup>94</sup>

Subagadis now began to venture even beyond the frontiers of Tigray by establishing alliances with more important regional lords against Gebre Mika'él. In May and June 1818, he apparently coordinated his attack on Gebre Mika'él with the hostile move of *dejjazmač* Hayle Maryam<sup>95</sup> of Semén. While Subagadis burned down the district of *azaž* Gigar, Gebre Mika'él's most powerful vassal, in the Wer 'i valley, Hayle Maryam simultaneously plundered Abergelle and other districts of Tembén. At the same time, Welde Rufa'el who had also allied himself with both Subagadis and *dejjazmač* Hayle Maryam was challenging Gebre Mika'él's power in Indarta. Gebre Mika'él was now being increasingly isolated in Tigray; and, apparently to help offset this development he married *ras* Gugs'a's sister, *weyzero* Astér, after prolonged entreaties. He also tried to convince Gugs'a of his greater loyalties by sending gifts and handsome tributes and expressing readiness to help in any military confrontation.<sup>96</sup>

But Subagadis still had problems with his own brother, Tsa'edu now out of prison and challenging in Irob country in eastern 'Agame. It was only after much struggle that he defeated him and sent him on exile to the 'Afar lowlands. In March 1818, Subagadis marched south against Tekle Giyorgis of Dera (son of *aba* Gadam) and *Ato* Yohannes of Atsbi, both hereditary chiefs in Killite-Awla'elo who had conspired against him. He defeated and took them prisoners. Subagadis also had several military encounters with such local chiefs as his father's archrival, *babre nagash* Yasus of Digs'a, *kontiba* Susinyos of Simazana and *fitawrari* Gebre Amlak of Akkele Guzay. He seems to have been successful in all these campaigns and managed to incorporate Akkele Guzay upto the coast in the years 1818-20.<sup>97</sup> To reinforce his military gains, he contracted a marriage alliance with *Fitawrari* Gebre Amlak whom he gave one of his daughters.

The raging civil war among all these military adventurers had a multitude of socio-economic consequences. It is reported that insecure peasants abandoned their homes to live in monasteries, forests, caves and other sanctuaries together with members of their households. According to informants, Tigrayan monasteries like Aksum, Inda Abba Gerima ('Adwa), Debre Damo,<sup>98</sup> Gunda Gundo and some others in Tembén particularly served as shelters for these people. Chiefs of 'Agame and a number of the peasantry are also said to have hidden their property in Debre

94 Pearce, II, p. 165-69.

95 *Ibid*, p. 113/165.

96 Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti" p. 363; Taddesse, G. "Power Struggle..." p. 23; Informants: *Aleqa* Kaḥsay; *ato* Hayle Sillasé, *balambaras* Assefa, *ato* Retta.

97 Pearce, II, p. 136, 201; Informants: *Ato* Retta, *membir* Subagadis, *ato* Asgedom, *grazmač* Gebre Medhin. These mentioned Akkele Guzay chiefs remained a headache for Subagadis. When Subagadis attacked them, they used to hide among the Assaurta chiefs in the lowlands. This forced Subagadis to lead several raiding campaigns as far as the Massawa road, plundering their villages. And occasionally he was even interrupting the trading activities of the *Qaflay*.

98 E. Combes and Tamsier, *Voyages en Abyssinie* (3 vols.) (Paris, 1838), I. p. 227-8; Pearce, II, p. 114-5. Informants: *Abba* Ḥadgu *ato* Meressa, *qés* Gebre Medhin.

Damo. Since robbery became the order of the day, many people, mainly women, wandered from place to place.

The civil war also had serious repercussions on the ecological make up of the region. It is said that, because of the frequent traffic in the woods and forests much of the wild game migrated across the Tekkeze. The forests were also set on fire.<sup>99</sup> A series of locust invasions and droughts are also reported. Naturally, trade suffered as a result. The price of cattle went down while food grains were expensive. Next to salt, cloth was one of the best items of trade. Soldiers plundered clothes and sold them in open markets. Many chiefs also waylaid and plundered the *Qaflay* traders along the northern caravan route. Even the *bahre negaš* is said to have done this.<sup>100</sup>

During this period of chaos of the *Zemene Mesafint*, Tigray was also an arena of slavery and the slave trade. Children were being stolen for sale to the *Qaflay*. Even members of the clergy of Aksum, Debre Damo, and *abba* Gerima reportedly took part in the slave trade. The Muslim 'Afar-Saho of the Coast kidnapped highland children to sell them to 'Arab dealers. Chiefs had several slaves as part of their households. Many of the slaves were brought from Oromo and Amhara areas to the south. *Ras* Welde Sillasé himself kept several Amhara-Oromo slaves and few slave concubines at his court. His disowned son, Ar'aya, was apparently born from an Oromo slave.<sup>101</sup>

In spite of all these difficulties, caravan trade in northern Ethiopia continued for the "Tigre tyrants and rebels are not so bad as the Galla [meaning oromo] or Amhara"<sup>102</sup>, as Pearce reported. Petty merchants from Gojjam and Gonder used to attend such prominent markets as 'Adwa.<sup>103</sup> The Egyptian bishop *abune* Qerillos is said to have been one of the wealthiest persons in northern Ethiopia at the time. Salt served as a medium of exchange in those days; and the bishop earned average revenue of 1000 pieces of salt and about 24,333.3 Maria Theresa dollars in two years.<sup>104</sup> As a matter of fact, the bishop was consistently in bad terms with successive Tigrayan lords in general and with *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él and his vassal in 'Adwa, *fitawrari* Gebre Amlak, in particular, over some estates and the collection of tax and tributes. He is said to have forced them to comply with his

99 Pearce, II, p. 114-5.

100 *Ibid*; p. 121, 136.

101 Salt, p. 382, Valentia, II, p. 48; Ruppell, I. p. 193-4; Plowden, p. 364; R. Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Slave trade in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth centuries." *Journal of Semitic Studies*, IX (9) 1964, p. 224-7.

102 Pearce, II, p. 137; Informants: *Šekb* Mohammad Adam, *Grazmač* Nur Hussen, *Abba* Lemlem.

103 A Certain *baša* Abdella was a favourite head of customs of 'Adwa both under *ras* Welde Sillasé and *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él. Salt says that he was the head of all Muslims in Tigre. Pearce also describes him as charitable to the poor, both Christians and Muslims alike. His position passed over to his children.

104 Pearce, II, p. 200-201. The *abune* with several estates also used to enjoy great presents from far off clergy as Debre Libanos (Shoa). The latter were visiting him to get altars consecrated for the different churches newly build by king Sahle Sillasé (r. 1813-1847) to spread Christianity in the south.

demands through a combination of excommunication, the interruption of church services like funerals<sup>105</sup> and the use of angry mobs.

*Dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él faced many challenges to his power since the late 1818. In October 1818, Subagadis, *dejjazmač* Welde Rufa'él, *ato* Berhe and Ara'ya all conspired to attack the position of the *dejjazmač* in Tembén from their respective strong holds in Hāramat, Gembella (Inderta), Seḥarti and the Giba valley. Of these chiefs, Subagadis was more committed into action and much more ambitious to succeed Gebre Mika'él as governor of Tigray. His elder sons, Hāgos and Welde Mika'él stormed the Tembén camp of Gebre Mika'él by night, taking several horses, matchlocks and other trophies that they presented to their father. Subagadis himself pursued the retreating Gebre Mika'él to the borders of Tembén; and his ally Ara'ya burnt Debub, the capital of Saḥarti.<sup>106</sup> Despite all these setbacks, Gebre Mika'él seems to prevail over his rivals well until 1822.

By 1822, the power struggle in Tigray had clearly reached its climax. Subagadis' repeated raids provoked Gebre Mika'él to stage an open attack on the major 'Agame town, 'Addigrat. But the numerically inferior 'Agame troops defeated the overwhelming forces of Tembén at Mt. Alaqua, on the massifs just behind 'Addigrat. Apparently, Subagadis had built up his collection of firearms over the years to match that of Gebre Mika'él. Almost all of his soldiers are said to have been armed with guns which gave them an easy advantage over Gebre Mika'él's.<sup>107</sup> Keeping much of his army, Gebre Mika'él's troops plundered the 'Agame countryside sparing not even churches. The final Battle was fought at Ba'aty on March 12, 1822 where Gebre Mika'él was wounded and reportedly later killed by Subagadis himself. Gebre Mika'él's *Negarit* (lit. drum - symbol of power and governorship) was captured and all his followers submitted to Subagadis who now became the undisputed strongman of Tigray, a position that he had aspired for a long time.<sup>108</sup>

## 5. The Irob Hgemony in Tigray Under Dajjazmac Subagadis (1822-31)

Following his victory over Gebre Mika'él, Subagadis marched on the capital, Adwa and proclaimed himself governor of Tigray. On his way, he secured the complete

105 Informants: *Aleqa* Lemlem, *abba* Baraki, *ato* Asgedom, *grazmač* Kidane Maryam (cf. Pearce, II: 264)

106 Pearce, II, p. 280-282, 290-1.

107 Parkyns, II, p. 96; Taddesse G. "Power Struggle". P. 23, Informants: *Ato* Abreha Ad'Umar, *aleqa* Tesfay, *abba* Hāgu.

108 Rūppell, II, p. 398, Parkyns, II, p. 96; Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti," p. 377; J. Kolmodin (ed.) *Traditions de Tasazzega et Hazzega* (Rome, 1912), p. 135. Some informants say that *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él was killed by Subagadis' brother (Informants: *šaqqā* Berhe, *aleqa* Tesfay).

submissions of the chiefs of Ḥaramat, Imba Sineyti, Iggela and Ḥaḥayle. But he had to suppress a strong coalition led by Wessen and Desta, the sons of the former governor of 'Adwa and the district of Gendebta to the east of the capital. These two had behind them the support of the chiefs of 'Addi Abun, Seré, and other neighbouring districts, and managed to put up some resistance against Subagadis. But he soundly defeated them and captured as many as 500 prisoners who were all influential personalities. Parkyns tells us that Subagadis dealt with these local dignitaries very harshly after his victory.<sup>109</sup>

Soon, Subagadis extended effective control over all the territories of Tigray as far as the 'Tekkeze' in the west; all the highland districts of what is today Eritrea in the north; and Lasta in the south.<sup>110</sup> The Ḥasabala origin of his family ensured for him the enthusiastic support of the Saho-speaking Christian Irob in the eastern escarpment of the Tigrayan plateau. These Irob kinsmen were fierce fighters and they joined his army in large numbers. He specially used them to subdue the coastal lowlands of the Red Sea inhabited by the closely related 'Afar-Saho pastoralists. In this connection, the withdrawal of the Egyptian garrison from Massawa and its surroundings in 1826 was a golden opportunity for Subagadis to extend his sphere of influence over the area.<sup>111</sup> The *naibs* of Massawa who tormented Welde Sillasé appeared to be in better terms with Subagadis. His agents and delegates could pass through these areas quite easily.<sup>112</sup> However, the extent of Subagadis' territories seems to have certainly been less than those of *ras* Welde Sillasé of Inderta; yet probably more than those of his immediate predecessor, *dejjazmač* Gebre Mika'él of Tembén. Indeed, by 1823, Subagadis complained in a letter to Henry Salt about the relative weakness of his forces to conquer all the country that the *ras* formerly governed.<sup>113</sup> It appears that in the same year Coffin had joined the services of Subagadis and had been participating in the campaigns of the new leader of Tigray.<sup>114</sup>

Subagadis appears to have setup a relatively stable system of administration in the region. This involved the appointment of loyal hereditary chiefs in many parts of Tigray. For instance, he confirmed the Tsa'azzega chief,<sup>115</sup> *ato* Tewelde Medhin, over parts of Ḥamasén; further sealing the political arrangement by offering his daughter, *weyzero* Sahlu, in marriage to the Ḥamasén Chief. Likewise, he offered another daughter, Desta, to a strong rival chief, *azzaž* Gigar, who dominated the

109 Taddesse, G. "Power Struggle." p. 24; Informants: *Mel'aka Berhanat* Gebre Egziabher..

110 Parkyns, II, p. 95; Informants: *Membir* Subagadis, *ato* Abreha Ad'Umar, *grazmač* Kidane Maryam. Some informants claim that Subagadis' southern frontier reached the Aleweha River, a few kilometers north of the present town of Weldiya in Wello which seems to have been true in the days of *ras* Welde Sillasé. But we lack reliable sources to support the claims for Subagadis.

111 Abir, *Era of Princes*, p. 26-35.

112 Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 67.

113 Salt, p. 405.

114 Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 67.

115 Kolmodin, p. 135.

areas of the War‘i river valley. Some informants compare Subagadis’ use of such political marriages with that of his contemporary *nigus* Sahla Sillasé (r.1813-47) of Shoa.<sup>116</sup> He was himself married to several wives recruited from among powerful chiefly families in Areza (Seraye); Kilitte Belessa, Tsira’, Selewwa and Simén. He also gave out his daughters, sisters and other female relations to the powerful chiefs of Akkele Guzay, Kilitte Belessa, Dera and even to the emerging ruler of Simén, *dejjazmač* Wubé who was married to Dinqitu Subagadis. To effectively neutralize continuing conflicts with the still powerful descendants of *ras* Welde Sillasé of Inderta, the latter’s daughter, *weyzero* Maššabeš, was reportedly married to one of the sons of Subagadis, *dejjazmač* Kaḥsay.<sup>117</sup>

Informants further claim that as part of this process, Subagadis gave the prestigious office of *šum Tembén* to Mirriča Welde Kidan, a member of a family of notables in Tembén, and gave him one of his nieces, Sillas, in marriage. It was from this marriage that the future Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) was born; and *šum Tembén* Mirriča was said to have served Subagadis very loyally afterwards.<sup>118</sup> In addition, Subagadis is said to have favoured the ‘Afar-Saho communities mainly the Ḥasabala clan group. He is also said to have redistributed land in ‘Agame, giving the major estates to his brothers and children.<sup>119</sup> While consolidating his local support, Subagadis appears to have also been in cordial relations with both *ras* Gugsu of Gonder and his puppet king Gigar. The king is actually said to have made royal grants of land to Subagadis in ‘Agame as well as in other parts of Tigray.<sup>120</sup>

Subagadis’ allocation of the best lands and offices in Tigray to his family in lieu of *rist* (inheritable property) on permanent basis triggered protests. Grievances over Subagadis’ nepotism even at times instigated rebellions such as that of *fitawrari* Gebre Amlak of Akkele Guzay. Even individuals closely related to Subagadis, through marriage, bitterly resented this favoritism.<sup>121</sup> Among these, *dajjazmač* Sahlu of Ḥaremat who was married to *weyzero* Wubé Gigar, granddaughter of Subagadis, became so disappointed with only ‘Agame relatives being appointed to significant offices that he is said to have composed the following beautiful poem playing on the words ‘Agame and ‘Agam.

116 Informants: *Membir* Subagadis, *aleqa* Tesfay, *grazmač* Kidane Maryam; *lij* Abreha.

117 *Ibid*; *Šeqqa* Berhe (For some of the marriages see Appendix XII).

118 Informants: *Mel’ake Birhanat* Girmay, *hajji* Ahmed, *membir* Subagadis, *šeqa* Berhe.

119 *ibid*. The grant to his brother *abba* Seber Haylu is recorded in the marginalia of the *Kebra Negest* at the Gunda Gundo monastery of St. Mary, eastern ‘Agame, on the last folio. In granting the *gult* lands to Tsa’edu, who was his erstwhile rival, Subagadis is quoted having said: “I would not mind my brother, Tsa’edu holding his fiefs so long as he does not challenge me in matters of political authority”, Informants: *Aleqa* Tesfay, *lij* Abreha.

120 C.W.B. Huntingford, (trans. & ed.) *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*. (Addis Ababa: I.e.,S. 1965), p. 72; Shiferaw Bekele, p. 31. The land charters’ numbers 73, 74, 75 and 76 are granted to *dejjazmač* Subagadis by king Gigar whose guardian was *ras* Gugsu.

121 Informants: *Aleqa* Lemlem, *hajji* Ahmed, *ato* Edissa, *šum babri* Ibrahim.

*Zinnab zennebe alu be hamlé be sene  
‘Agam le‘agam enjji min teqemeñ lené.*<sup>122</sup>

ዝናብ ዘነበ ኣሉ ቡሓምሌ በሰኔ፣  
ዓጋም ለዓጋም እንጂ ምን ጠቀመኝ ለኔ።

Literally:

The rain fell in Hamlé and Sené!

But what use is that to me?

After all, ‘Agam [gives things of value only to fellow] ‘Agam!

The powers of most traditional elite families had been spent up during the civil wars following the death of ras Welde Sillasé, during the period of six years (1816-22). This spared Subagadis from any serious challenges to his power, even though there was much dissatisfaction in many places. His reign of nine years was relatively peaceful and prosperous with little or no serious reports of lawlessness, banditry, robbery and the like.<sup>123</sup> Besides being very brave, Subagadis also appeared to be generous, impulsive, just to the poor and friendly to strangers.<sup>124</sup> ‘Adwa in Tigray proper; ‘Addigrat in ‘Agame and Atsbi in Kilitte Awla‘elo were his alternative seats of power. Though he spent much of his time in Adwa, the traditional capital of Tigray, ‘Addigrat also flourished as his centre of administration, commerce and culture.<sup>125</sup> ‘Addigrat began to attract such foreign communities as Arabs, Banyans and Greeks besides indigenous merchant communities like the *Jeberti* (Ethiopian Muslim merchants) and their junior partners, the *Qaflay*. Moreover, Subagadis’ British servant, Coffin, European Christian missionaries like Kugler, Aichinger and Gobat also lived there for some time. This made ‘Agame a centre of interaction among diverse communities.<sup>126</sup>

It also appears that the peasantry was better protected; and trading was relatively safe. The volume of trade is said to have increased steadily during the period. A reorganization of the customs posts and taxes was also made. Fiso,

122 Informants: *Aleqa Lemlem* (decendant of *dejjazmač* Sahlu), *grazmač* Kidane Maryam, *balambaras* Teffera, *šek* Mohammed Muzein, *dejjazmač* Sahlu later ruled over Tigray under Tewodros II (1855-68).

123 Taddesse G. “Power Struggle,” p. 25.

124 S.Gobat. *Journal of A Three Years’ Residence in Abyssinia* (London, 1834), p. 293; Coulbeaux, II, p. 381-2; Zawde, p. 131. Pearce, II: 221. (cf. p.8 in this paper).

125 Markham, p.51-53. Kebede, p. 11-3. According to Kebede, ‘Addigrat revived as a chief town of ‘Agame in the heydays of Subagadis. It also became one of the most prominent towns and for a brief period the capital of Tigray. Subagadis shuttled between Atsbi and ‘Adwa so as to control the different market towns.

126 *Ibid*; D. Crummey, “European Religious Missions in Ethiopian, 1830.” Ph.D. Thesis, London University, 1967, p. 29-30; Idem, *Priests and Politicians*, p. 26-28.). Subagadis also set up his grand palace in ‘Addigrat that served as a nucleus around which others build their habitats. (Ferret and Galinier, *Voyage in Abyssinie* (Pari,; 1847), II, p. 47; A. F. Shepherd, *The Campaign in Abyssinia* (Bombay, 1868), p. 72, Markham, p. 200-201.

in Agula, Atsbi and May Mesanu, north of Addigrat, were among the five new poll gates (*Killas*) reportedly instituted by Subagadis.<sup>127</sup> Like Welde Sillasé before him, he tried to open up or revive a trade route to the coast directly across the salt plains; but not with much success. But he actively encouraged commerce, protected and taxed the salt caravans through his region en route to Gonder. He seems to have particularly appreciated the commercial advantages of the coastal areas, following his incorporation of the Afar-Saho territories. His income from the salt trade enabled him to accumulate a large pile of firearms over time, in view of his future struggle for national prominence.<sup>128</sup>

Subagadis is also said to have tried to expand Christianity among the lowland Afar communities. His foundation of Atsbi Sillasé and another in Fišo, both frontier market towns on the edges of the Afar lowlands, might be considered as a partial evidence of such efforts. Interestingly, there are traditions that he rewarded some of the Afar converts with tracts of rich pasture or agricultural land, in the highland districts in Agame and Kilitte Awla'ilo.<sup>129</sup>

Subagadis is actually renowned to have been a famous church builder. In fact, requests of building materials for his churches figure in his correspondence with foreign powers. Many informants credit Subagadis for the maintenance or foundation of many churches like Adwa Medhané Alem, Addigrat Qirqos, Atsbi Sillasé, Addi Šihu Medhané Alem, and Lasta Suba Maryam.<sup>130</sup> He had also graciously allocated *gult* lands to many of these churches to hold their regular services.<sup>131</sup> However, Subagadis had a bitter conflict with the then Egyptian bishop, *abune* Qerilos. He disgraced the *abune* officially and was apparently more successful in checking the bishop's excessive powers than did his predecessors: Welde Sillasé and Gebre Mika'él. He even sent a letter (in 1827) to the Egyptian Patriarch *abune* Petros asking for another bishop, but in vain.<sup>132</sup> Though Subagadis charged the old

127 Huntingford, *The Land Charters*, p. 72, 102. Atsbi and perhaps Fišo may have predated Subagadis' reign as *Kellas* but he could have revived them all the same.

128 Abir, *Era of Princes*, p. 39; Kebede, p. 12-3.

129 Informants: *Mel'ake Birhanat* Gebre Egziabher, *membir* Subagadis, *ato* Tesfay Mezgabo.

130 *Ibid.*

131 Huntingford, *Land Charters*, p. 71-75; Tadesse, "Power Struggle" p. 25; Kebede, p. 23. Informants: *Abba Baraki, melake birhanat* Girmay, *šeqqa* Berhe. He also kept his own personal treasures in Gunda Gundo Maryam and Adwa Madhané Alem Churches. While his own garments are presumed to exist in Adwa Medhané Alem. There are two *negarits* (drums), a reputed "throne" and some books claimed to belong to Subagadis at Gunda Gundo monastery in Irobland.

132 Rubenson, (ed.), *Acta Aethiopica Vol. I, Correspondence and Treaties, 1800-1854*, p. 23; Idem, *Survival*, p. 62-3; Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, p. 26; F.O.1/2, *Abyssinia*, p. 1-2. Besides corresponding with the Egyptian leader, Mohammad Ali for a bishop, Subagadis was also said to have made a brief but abortive attempt to secure an *abune* from the Armenian patriarch (Crummey, *Priests*, p. 26). His whole effort was to secure an amenable bishop toward his ambition of Imperial guardianship in Gonder by ousting the Yeju lords.

*abune* for drunkenness, intervention in secular administration and unholy obsession with wealth, the incomes from taxation and tributes seem to have been at the heart of their personal disputes.

It was Subagadis who first gave permission to the foreign Christian missionary Society (C.M.S) to operate in his realms, forcing the strong Orthodox establishment of 'Adwa to tolerate them. While Salt's visits made a slight impact on the revival of Ethio-European relations, the CMS agents Samuel Gobat and A. Kugler who arrived at Subagadis' court in February 1830, were the first Europeans to establish a firmer and continuous links with Ethiopia. Indeed, Subagadis appreciated the CMS both for their mild acceptance of the religious *status quo*, their cautious evasion of serious Christological debates that rent the indigenous church as well as for their technical, medical or perhaps even more, for the anticipated diplomatic support. The fresh stirrings of Euro-Ethiopian relations apparently favoured the dreams of Subagadis for national political prominence.<sup>133</sup>

To sum up, the reign of Subagadis (1822-31) clearly marked Irob's political preponderance in Tigrayan politics. His further growing political ambitions for regional hegemony, however, brought him into a head-on-collision with the Yeju overlords of northwestern Ethiopia at the Battle of Debre Abbay (February 1831). The Battle cost him both his Tigrayan reign and his life. Subagadis' bid to assume the power brokerage of Gonderine Imperial politics failed. Yet, his descendants ruled 'Agame until the 1974 Revolution.<sup>134</sup> Subagadis' popularity (in Northern Ethiopia) has survived him long after the battle to become an icon of 'Agame identity.<sup>135</sup> Most highland 'Agame's today try to forge ancestral connections with him and of the Irob chieftaincy.

133 Crummey, *Priests and Politicians*, p. 30; Idem, "European Religious Missions", p. 29-30; Kebede, p. 23. Subagadis also seemed to have been much interested in foreign skills, military reforms and modernization.

134 Rubenson, *Correspondence and Treaties*, p. 24, Idem, *Survival*, p. 63, Conti Rossini, "Nuovi Documenti," p. 373; 375; Zawde, p. 131; Crummey, "European Religious Missions", p. 29; Abir, *Era of Princes*, p. 34. (For further details on the Battle of Dabra Abbay and its impacts to Tigrayan politics read my another article published in the proceedings of 14<sup>th</sup> *International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 2000).

135 Informants: *Lij Abreha*, *ato Asgedom*, *aleqa Tesfay*.

Table. 1: List Of The Oral Informants

No.	Name	Age	Place	Remarks
1	Abreha Ad'Umär ( <i>Ato</i> )	78	Addigrat	An Irob learnt in the Catholic school. Very well versed informant on 'Agame history.
2	Abraha Emalmali ( <i>Ato</i> )	70	'Alitena	Has a sound knowledge of the Irob tradition, and interactions with highlanders and other lowlanders.
3	Abraha Gebre Sillasé ( <i>Ato</i> )	73	Sebeya	Knows much on the Surukso tradition.
4	Abraha Tesfay ( <i>Iji</i> )	71	Addigrat	Great grand son of <i>ras</i> Sebhat with long years of office in government
5	Azezey Mezgabo ( <i>Aleqa</i> )	46	Sebeya	Has a good inclinations in historical matters
6	Abraha Gebrehiwot ( <i>Ato</i> )	62	Addigrat	knows a great deal on the Hasabala inter-clan conflicts.
7	Hayle Sillasé Redda ( <i>Ato</i> )	56	Addigrat	Has very good knowledge on the history of 'Agame
8	Asgedom Birru ( <i>Ato</i> )	78	Gwāl'a	Although aging, his reminisces on the history of 'Agame remains quite clear
9	Assefa Attay ( <i>Balambaras</i> )	66	Wuqro	He has a sound knowledge on the 'Afar. Tigray relations
10	Aḥmed Moḥammad ( <i>Hajji</i> )		Sawne	A Ḥazo from Sawne, he knows mainly about the Hazo-Irob relations in Subḥa.
11	Beyene Gebre Tsadiq ( <i>Qés</i> )	72	Zalanbesa	A Catholic priest with intimate knowledge of the Medieral traditions of 'Agame
12	Berhe Kaḥsay ( <i>Šaqqā</i> )	79	Addigrat	A descendant of <i>dejjazmač</i> Kaḥsay Subagadis. He has an interesting memory of the over all history of 'Agame and Tigray.
13	Debesay Kaḥsay ( <i>Ato</i> )	77	'Alitena	His information on some aspects of the Irob history filled great gaps.
14	Eddissa Ali ( <i>Ato</i> )	94	Sawne	A Ḥazo elder who appears to be a good informant on inter ethnic relations.
15	Gebre Egziabher Berhe ( <i>Meleke Birbanat</i> )	61	'Addigrat	Has a good memory of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century 'Agame history.
16	Gebre Hiwot Debes ( <i>Balambaras</i> )	79	Dengolo (Gulo-makhada)	formerly government official with some sharp observation in local history

No.	Name	Age	Place	Remarks
17	Gebre Medhin Gebre ( <i>Qés</i> )	98	Assefa (Surukso)	Although old enough, he still appears to be a clear headed man on the history of 'Agame.
18	Gebre Medhin Tesfa Maryam ( <i>Merigéta</i> )	65	Ḥawzén	An enlightened informants with intimate knowledge on the history of Kilitte Belessa.
19	Gebre Mesqel Abraha ( <i>Abba</i> )	82	'Addigrat	A Catholic priest from Béra with considerable knowledge on Catholic expansion in 'Agame
20	Gigar Tesfay ( <i>Ato</i> )	54	Addis Abeba	A history graduate with a publication on the Irob genealogy. An Irob himself he has a stimulating knowledge on local tradition.
21	Ḥadgu Gebre Maryam ( <i>Abba</i> )	82	Gunda Gundo	A monk in the historical monastery of Gunda Gundo. His recitation of the Irob-Tigray-Ḥazo relations is appreciable.
22	Ḥagos Salih ( <i>Balambras</i> )	84	'Addigrat	- Knows a great deal about trade and trade relations of 'Agame in different periods. - He has also some memories on ethno religious matters.
23	Gebre Tsadeiq Gebrehiwot ( <i>Qés</i> )	63	'Addigrat	One of the most outstanding informants with wider exposures to tradition and modern education. He is an instructor in 'Addigrat Major Seminary.
24	Ismail Ali ( <i>Ato</i> )	75	Geban (Sa'isi')	One of the good informants on Irob-Ḥazo-Tigray relations. He himself belongs to these ethnic groups.
25	Kaḥsay Teklehaymanot ( <i>Aleqa</i> )	78	Zalanbessa	He knows a lot about the history of the family of <i>Šum 'Agame</i> Weldu
26	Kidane Maryam Alemé ( <i>Grazmac</i> )	76	Ḥawzén	Has a good memory particularly on the history of Ḥaremat.
27	Lemlem Teferi ( <i>Aleqa</i> )	57	Ḥawzén	A descendant of the house of Subagadis and a critique of the family. He also belongs to the rival chiefly family of Ḥaremat.
28	Mohammad Berhan Muzeyn ( <i>Hajji</i> )	79	Ḥawzén	He has interesting knowledge about local trade, political and social history.

No.	Name	Age	Place	Remarks
29	Meressa Abraha ( <i>Ato</i> )	85	'Idaga Ḥamus	His knowledge about the history of the people of the region is quite impressive.
30	Nur Hussien ( <i>Grazmac</i> )	79	Wuqro	He knows very well about the Ḥidaro community
31	Retta Lelem ( <i>Ato</i> )	66	Meqele	His information on the history of the people or 'Agame is very important. He was a Lawyer.
32	Šifta Minilik ( <i>Weyzero</i> )	76	Irob 'Alitena	Her knowledge about the Irob is quite helpful
33	Subagadis Tesfay ( <i>Membir</i> )		'Addigrat	A descendent of Suabagadis with highly striking memories
34	Ibrahim (Šum <i>Baḥri</i> )	54	Agula'	He knows about about the salt trade as well as the interaction between the 'Afars and the Tigreans.
35	Tesfay Fesuḥ ( <i>Ato</i> )	43	Irob 'Alitena	His reminexense about he tradition of Irob is very interesting
36	Tesfay Ḥadgu ( <i>Abba</i> )	78	'Addigrat	An old man with very interesting knowledge about the history of the region
37	Tesfay Mezgebo ( <i>Ato</i> )	67	Gwal'a	He knows a lot about the famliy of šum 'Agame
38	Tesfay Tewelde Medhin ( <i>Aleqa</i> )	76	Bekot	His information were helpful in filling most of the gaps in my study
39	Tefferi Desta ( <i>Balambaras</i> )	65	Sinqata	He has a good knowledge on the early 20 <sup>th</sup> century history of the region.

N.B.: All the fieldwork has been carried out between September and January 1996. But the data has been updated through followup studies and consolidated in the Years 2000-2003.