The Ethiopian Salt Trading System in the 20th Century:  
A View from Mäqäla, Northern Ethiopia

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An Ethiopian perspective of rural sectors, such as the salt industry, could be a key to the study of Ethiopia’s economic history. The Ethiopian rock salt, commonly known as amolé or ganfur, once functioned (or malfunctioned) as food commodity, a medium of exchange, mode of tax/tribute payments, a form of salary, capital, and luxury gift to social elites simultaneously. Amolés wider demands were often at odds with its supplies. In the 20th century, amole still command greater demands. Produced in the Arho semi desert plains, amole was widely distributed to different Ethiopian regions. Mäqälä, the current capital of Tegray Region, northern Ethiopia, was the principal market and centre of amole distributions from the late 19th through the 20th centuries. This paper attempts to give a general picture of amole trade from the side of Mäqälä.

1.0. The Problem

Historical studies of Ethiopian commerce hitherto focused on export items such as gold, ivory, slaves, coffee, and, recently of khat. However, the roles of indigenously produced and distributed items, such as salt, have been overlooked. This study seeks to appraise the roles of salt trade in the economic life of northeastern Ethiopians where it still constitutes a composite source of livelihood to the basics of peasant agriculture and agro-pastoralism. While historically more active within the Ethiopian domestic transactions; salt had also extensively interacted with those export commodities and other items channeled into the regional economies of Ethiopia and the Horn in the period 19th and 20th centuries. This paper seeks to give some reflections upon the history of salt; its broader economic significances to rural economy and impacts on social change as could be viewed from Mäqälä, capital of Tegray (northeastern Ethiopia). Mäqälä used to be a prominent market centre of the Ethiopian rock salt, locally called amolé, in the 20th century. A preliminary oral recollection of the operations of salt trade from the perspectives of this city complemented by secondary literature can give us insights about the regional socio-economic interactions in the period. A couple of fieldworks conducted during the summers of 2003-2004 constituted the basis of this paper.

Salt in 20th Century Ethiopian Economy: A Historical Overview of Roles, Access and Spatial Distribution

Access to salt resources was an important factor in the political economy of Ethiopia. The urge to control salt in some cases triggered protracted conflicts in the 19th and 20th Century Ethiopia where society attached multiple roles to salt. Salt had various uses in

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Ethiopia. It was an important culinary item and crucial ingredient for animal nutrition to facilitate digestion, fertility and reproduction. Salt was also serving as a change to fractions of the imported Austrian Maria Theresa thalers (which had no small change) until the early decades of the 20th century. The supplies, access and circulation of Maria Theresa thalers were, nevertheless, fairly limited. This made salt as an even more acceptable medium of exchanges amongst many rural northern Ethiopians. Governments and chiefs also used to collect tributes and taxation in the forms of salt and dispense this salt as salaries for services. One can easily prove this from the tax records of the reign of Tewodros II (r.1855-68). Further, salt has been a form of salary and a luxury item to be offered as a gift to social elites, favorites and visitors. It also served as a means of accumulation of capital. This versatile type of salt with multifunction is variously known as ‘common salt’, ‘rock salt’, or locally amolé, mined in the Afar lowlands, in northeastern Ethiopia. By the early 20th century, the Italian consul in Mäqälä, M.A. Tancredi, witnessed that ghiela (then weighing about 0.7kg) and amolie (c.1.68kg) were the divisional money and used for payment at customs posts. Until 1991, the widely demanded amolé salt bearing districts of Afar were largely part of Təgray province.

Afar lowlands were not the only sources of Ethiopian salt though. Studies indicate the existence of alternative salt deposits in the Red Sea coast (Eritrean sea salt), the bay and hinterlands of Tajura; small salt lakes of Ogadén, the crater lakes of Dillo and Sogida, near Méga (Sidamo), and inland Wabi Valley. And each of these deposits catered to local needs in northern Ethiopia (up to the Täkkazé valley), the Sultanate of Aussa and parts of eastern Shāwa, the Ogadén Somali (up to Harar), and the Borâna-Sidamo (southern Ethiopia) and parts of southern Ethiopia (up to southern Shāwa) respectively. Local salt mining sites in Benishangul also serve local demands in Wälläga. Many small salt-water springs are identified in former Balé and Harargé provinces that apparently originate from salt layers of the Mesozoic system. Besides, most of the Rift valley lakes are reputed for their saline waters, which herds of cattle frequently lick them. More geological studies may still reveal further salt deposits in Ethiopia.

The Afar amolé was historically widely circulated than any other salt items; used to play multitudes of socio-economic functions and integrated various social or trading networks across Ethiopia and the Horn. The quest for controlling amolé salt markets,  

6 Tancredi, “Sui mercati...”, P. 41.  
7 Tsegay Berhe “A History of Agamâ (Təgray),1822-1914”, M.A Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1996: p.34. As a historical geographical entity, Təgray even extended to include parts of present day Eritrean highlands during the 19th century.  
taxation and mining sites partly triggered internecine conflicts among several northern Ethiopian chiefs. Regarding its circulation during early 20th Century, Tancredi again clearly states amolé used to be channeled to many markets in Tsegede(northwestern Ethiopia), Goğgam and Amhara, via from Tigray via Lasta. This indicates how salt then appears to have been a very critical item in the regional (and even national) economic transactions. One can find several traveler reports for the 19th Century as well.

The desire to monopolize its tax revenues even attracted the attention of foreign powers. Belgium, Egypt and Italy tried to control the Arho salt mines in the 1830s, 1870s and 1890s respectively mainly in search of salt taxes. Neither the introduction of Maria Thresa Thalers (19th century) nor those of Ethiopia’s own modern dollars (early 20th Century) could displace the popularity and convertibility of amolé in the domestic market transactions. Emperor Menelik (r.1889-1913) had initial difficulties of displacing salt currency in favor of his own minted currency. In effect, in the years 1897-98, the Emperor resorted to introduce a new type of amolé to replace the salt coming from Tigray and control the trade of northern Ethiopia. Tancredi calls this “Ichelie amolie” which was of superior quality, purity, portability (compactness) for which it commanded better price than the amolé coming from Tigray. The problem with this piece of data is that the author never cites the identity or source of this Ichelie amolie.

The domestic economic and commercial significance of salt continued unabated during the subsequent periods. Even more significantly, salt featured prominently in the modern history of Ethiopia’s external trading interactions. The flow of European trading items (from neighboring colonies) into Ethiopia was first demonstrated in the huge exports of salt in the period 1900-1935. Studies show that salt transactions took the lead in volume in European exports (from colonies) into Ethiopia which was comparable to their huge volume of coffee imports in return. Its legacy seems to have lingered thereby delaying the development of local salt industries. Ethiopia has paid the price by totally depending on the salt exports of Eritrea (1991-1998) and Djibouti and Yemen (1998-2003). This is more striking as one realizes the country’s over 3billion tones of proven reserves.

The existence of a regional market in the 20th century in which different salts interacted and competed could allow us to consider the industry as single unit of analysis (rather than in piece meals). The principal purpose of this regional approach (even where the focus lies on Mäqäla) has been to demonstrate how people responded to market demands and how the forces of production varied in the wider Ethiopian region. The metaphor of ‘commodity net work’, interlinking the structures of salt production,

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15 Ibid.
distribution and consumption along typical patterns of ‘webs of interdependence’\textsuperscript{17} could also complement the regional approach. Because this can better capture the multidimensional relationships and transactions characterizing different sets of actors both within and outside the indigenous salt industry system. An overview of the Ethiopian salt trading system from Mäqälä illuminates the dynamics of an indigenous industry in northern Ethiopia when properly approached from such diverse ‘networks’ of production, transportation, taxation and marketing and distributions.

\textit{Salt Production}

The Afar Region is still in a constant state of geologic turmoil and volcanic eruptions. It was in this region that the earliest human remains of Lucy (3.18 million years old), Ramidus (4.5 million old) and recently Sälam (4.18 million old) have already been explored. In the pre-1991 systems of administration, the Afar Region was divided into four Ethiopian provinces: Eritrea, Təgray, Wällo and Shäwa. The Afar people are predominantly pastoralists or agro-pastoralists, though some of them also earn par time income from petty trading, camel based cargo services and salt production/mining. The source of traditional \textit{amolé} salt supplies for the whole Ethiopia was the Dalul Depression, within the northern Afar; at least about 120 miles of its plain hosts pure sodium chloride /salt/.\textsuperscript{18}

Tradition attributes the origins of the Afar rift and of salt to the wrath of God. He once destroyed the ex-cultivation field by volcanoes and leveled it. As the people yelled repenting their sins, He subsequently drained it by pouring flood from highland Agama and endowed it with new resources.\textsuperscript{19} Geologists, on their part, explain the Afar mineral salt deposition as the product of the Quaternary era’s geological processes of intensive sedimentation. This process ultimately left huge mineral deposits (of sulphur, nitrates, iron, magnesium and potassium) that blossom the area, though salt still dominates the plains. Geologists saw an immense potential in geothermal and hydropower energy development to sustain huge chemical industry dependent on salt supplies.\textsuperscript{20} Whether the creationist view holds an alternative explanation to the scientific theory of rift, volcanic action and salt sedimentation may be less important. The fact remains that Afar salt producers intuitively understood the geological endowments of their region. Indigenous wisdom let them exploit the mines by shifting sites annually thereby developing specific techniques of extracting salt layers.

The Təgrayan cultivators inhabiting the immediate Afar hinterland, on the other hand, largely engaged in the salt transport services (often in contest with the Afars). The peasant salt traders are locally called \textit{arhotays}. They responded to the growing demands of the \textit{amolé} salt in Ethiopia, demand that the Afar pastoralists could hardly met alone. The \textit{arhotays} (from Endärta, Agamä, Kältä-Awlaelo, Tämbién and Rayya Azäbo) shuttled between the strings of highland salt market centers, such as Mäqälä, and Arho, in the low lands. In the course, one can comprehend the evolution of a symbiotic

\textsuperscript{17} Alex Hughes and Suzanne Reimer (eds.), \textit{Geographies of Commodity Chains} (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), P.4.


\textsuperscript{19} Informants, Ato Găssăssăw Găbrăgziabhër (salt whole seller), Age-78, Mäqälä; Ato Assäfa Kahsay (salt retailer), Age-76, Mäqälä, Hajji Kahsay Ahmad (salt whole seller), Age-77, Mäqälä.

\textsuperscript{20} Imperial Ethiopian Government Ministry of Planning and Development, “Regional Aspects of National Planning”; p.259.
economic interdependence between two ecological zones/or communities, that of Afar (lowlanders) and Tägray (highlanders) communities in their shared social history.  

Informants unanimously stress that salt mining was the preserve of the Afar in the 19th and 20th centuries. Put it differently, the salt industry in northern Ethiopia essentially depended on hiring Afar salt workers on contractual wages. This is significantly different from the rock salt mining traditions in the Saharan Africa (such as Ijil) or brine salt production in the Oases of Central Sudan (such as Bilma, Bornu, Khawar, Dallo f Fogha) in the same period. In both cases, salt working largely relied on the labour mobilization of marginalized (or dependent) social classes of slaves, castes and migrants rather than independent wage labour.  

How does the actual process of salt mining/production function in Ethiopia? Salt bricks are, of course, a product of team work involving Tägrayan fokolo or fänqalo(literally -breakers) pick up the salt flats/layers. In the last half a century, most fokolo were arhotays. They produced amolé salt in collaboration with the hadäli or tsäräbti (literally-hewers or masons) group who fix the proper size of each brick. The third group of workers constitutes the t’äräfti(literally packers) and the tsäanti (loaders), a task often done by the respective caravans. Each salt production team of breakers and hewers operates as a company in dealing with chief organizers of the caravans to settle the often-contractual labour arrangements. In most cases wage is paid in kind. Thus, the Afar salt workers often demand payments in bread and the saline free water fetched from cleaner highland water streams. Currently, however, the fänqalo and tsäräbti charge caravans in cash at the rates of Eth $7 Birr per a chunk that can be further cut into 60 salt slabs. These slabs can be carried on three strong mules, each carrying at the rate of 20 slabs per head. But camels could carry as much as 24 slabs.  

The salt technology hardly witnessed any breakthrough until the recent introduction of commercial salt plants in Lake Afdéra, adjacent to the indigenous Rägäd/Arho salt mines. This lag in the technology of rock salt production explains the persistence in the divisions of labour. The natural process of salt formation and replenishments further contributed to the problem. In the 1970s, the Catholic priest cum traveler (and historian), Kevin O’Mahoney vividly observes and graphically describes this process:

At any one time the salt workers hack out the shape of the slab of salt to be removed. Four men then lever out whole slab which may be three or four feet square. Other squads are then ready to cut the large slab into for loading onto the waiting camels. The hole left by the slab quickly fills up with intensely salty water; under the radiation of the sun the water evaporates and new salt crystals congeal. In this way the whole plain is self-perpetuation.  

Apparently the team of salt workers used to employ simple tools including erfi(sticks fitted into sharp edged metal bars), axe, and adze. The team of fänqalo employs the sticks to break up large slabs out of the upper salt layer. Then using axes, the slabs are broken into fragments of a few square feet in area. Subsequently, the tsäräbti overtake

21 Informants: Fitawrari Dämäwoz Seyoum, Age-92(Wuqro), Ex-Senate member  
23 Informants: Alaqa Tasfay Mebrahtu, Age 65(whole seller), Mäqälä; Ato Gedäy Mängeste, Age-71; Ato Assäffa.  
the tasks of chopping the fragments into bricks of uniform area along two standard thicknesses: thin or thick.²⁶ O’Mahoney recounts that at any one time a maximum of 600 men may be working on the salt plain.²⁷

Standardization in the absence of scales (being only recently introduced) often requires skills of careful craft with the adze. Accordingly, through most of the 20th century, there were three major categories of arho salt in order of size including: gäl’o, gäräwānyay and amolē.²⁸ All of them appeared in rectangular shapes. Standardization not only simplifies portability but also remains a key factor in determining prices of salt items during marketing. This is not withstanding rock salt’s crudity for establishing prices in comparison to industrial salts. Gäl’o, in effect, remains the biggest salt form weighing about 8 kilograms, while gäräwānyay weighs about 5 kilograms. Gäräwānyay are often subdivided into 3-4 bars of amolē.²⁹ Even though caravans often transported salt from Arho/Rägäd to the Tägrayan highlands in any of the first three forms, all rock salt categories are often further scrambled into pieces of amolē within the stores of merchants, especially Mäqälä. Amolē remains the ideal size in circulation through out Ethiopia, for which it became the distinctive name of rock salt through out the country vis-à-vis other types of salt resources.³⁰

2.0. Organization of the Arhotay Trading

The arhotay trading provides the key link in the production cycle between producers and consumers. It remains the dominant form of organization against risks of security, physical exhaustion; isolation and boredom inherent in the process of salt ferrying from Afar land. Three basic stages of organization seem evident including preparation, mobilization, and operation. In principle, salt is freely available in Arho for all able-bodied peasants of north-eastern Ethiopia with access to little cash and other forms of capital such as owning or hiring draft animals. Indeed, a series of arhotays used to be organized for the last century from all districts of Endärta, Agamä, Kölità- Awlæelo, Tämbein and Rayya-Azäbo.³¹ In practice, however, factors related to logistics and distances made arhotay trading more central to the household economy of Endärta and Afar land than those the other districts of Tägray subject to more extra costs. This relative difference of reliance on the salt trading is partly manifested in the frequency of the Endärta arhotays.³²

The historical evolution of Endärta’s local administration seems to have been highly interlinked with the operation of the salt trade and its taxation system. Pankhurst (1968) and Abir (1968) have attributed the entire tasks of salt caravan organization to the bäalgada, title assumed by the governor of Endärta, since at least the Medieval period (c.1270-1527).³³ However, the nature and operation of caravan organization seems to be much more complex than Abir and Pankhurst seem to have envisaged. It had required the bäalgada to engage in an elaborate process of institutionalizations to cater to better accommodate the operation salt trade system. For instance, the bäalgada used to be

²⁶ Informants: Alaqa Täsflay; Ato Asäffa; Hajji Kahsay.
²⁷ O’Mahoney, “Salt Trails”, P.151.
²⁸ Informants: Alaqa Täsflay; Ato Asäffa; Hajji Kahsay.
²⁹ Informants: Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid
³¹ Informants: Ibid, Also personal discussions with my former history Professor Merid Wolde Aregay, Addis Ababa University, Age–71. I acknowledge that I owe him a lot for suggesting me to take up the current topic for my doctoral project.
³² Informants: Aläqa Täsflay Mäbråhu, Hajji Mohammad.
assisted by a group of three to four officials each bearing the title of *shumbahri* (literally- ‘chief of the sea’ or the salt lakes). It was this group of officials who actually coordinated and executed the operational aspect of the *arhotays*. Local informants indicate that chiefs of Endärta were the greatest stake holders in the caravan organization owing to the prevalent conflicts of territories, resources and tribute/taxation between the Endärtaans and their Afar and Təgrayan counterparts.

The *amolé* trade was developed in the context of traditional transport infrastructure. Pack animals were fundamental to the salt transport. Camel, mules and donkeys were critical assets that earn considerable income both to their owners and to those caravans who hired them for the purposes of salt transport. Thus, the introduction of lorry into the salt region provoked tension for some salt procuring Endärta districts(to which most salt producing Afar belonged). Because Endärta’s geographical proximity gave the locales a spatial advantage to monopolize the salt caravan/transport/activity. To the contrary, the lorry transport system that encourages equity of access to salt caravans from such further districts as Agamā, Káltā-Awlæelo, Tâmbein and Rayya-Azäbo, threatened to destroy the benefits of the Afar and Endärta. Indeed, informants report that the endeavours of Ras Mängäsha Seyoum (Tagray’s governor before the 1974 Revolution) to extend modern road networks into the salt plains was hailed by those districts, while the Endärta and Afar strongly opposed the move. Agamā and Káltā-Awlæelo salt merchants apparently took the principal initiatives to introduce lorry to outfit the Afar and Endärta camel- based salt transporters.

Currently, series of road networks are developing to integrate the salt districts in Afar land with central and northeastern regions of Ethiopia. Those projects could likely affect the livelihood of Afar and Təgray traditional salt suppliers, as much as the extension of the rail-way system has ruined traditional salt industries of Europe during the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, over twenty modern Industrial salt plants are engaged in commercial extraction of the Afdéra Lake salt. These developments could be the second huge blow to the Afar *amolé* industry in the modern period of its history (the first being the importation of a mass of commercial sea salts from the neighbouring colonies by the beginning of the 20th century- this issue will be discussed in greater details below). Indeed, the salt caravan culture is under threats from two razors-commercialization and expansion of lorry transport.

Attempts to appraise the impacts of the caravan salt trade on livelihood imply mixed pictures. In the 1970s, the traveler cum historian, O’Mahoney observes, the *arhotays* often make a round trip of over 400 miles in a very difficult environment for a pittance! That is, no proportion exists between the human efforts and hardship involved and the financial returns from the sale of a few slabs of salt. And yet its local impact on household economy seems quite significant. Indeed, as our senior informant, Asäffa Kahsay remarks, “The salt of Arho remains Təgray’s only prominent factory until recently”.

Stressing its impact on his life, “Having been displaced from agriculture due to recurrent famine in the 1960s, I have found refuge in salt retailing out of which I support my otherwise big family”. A veteran *arhotay*, Hailu Gəbrä-Yohännes also claims with pride that Arho was the foundation of his household

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34 Informants: Aläqa Täsfay Mäbrahtu, Ato Asäffa, Ato Gässässäw, Ato Gädäy.
36 *Ibid*.
37 O,Mahoney,“Salt Trails”,P.154
38 Informant: Ato Asäffa Kahsay
39 *Ibid*. 

economy for decades until 1984, when his camel folk were suddenly ransacked by the Afar rebels, the Ugugmo.\textsuperscript{40} Another informant, a wholesaler, Hajji Kahsay Mohammed reinforces the fact that salt transport provides peasants with access to cash, to meet their ends. Indeed, he estimates that peasants from Endärta on an average spent 3-4 months as salt caravans and could earn about $100 Maria Theresa thalers in the pre-Italian period.\textsuperscript{41} The bottom line is peasant caravans do get money but they often reinvest it on purchasing pack animals, to be employed to ferry more rock salt, hence, the proverb: “\textit{genzabya Arho’s tamalisu ne Arho!} (literally the money from Arho goes back to Arho)!\textsuperscript{42}

3.0. Salt, Trade Routes and Social Networking

The Ethiopian highlands were generally poorly endowed with salt (than their lowland counterparts).\textsuperscript{43} With the exception of Shäwa, which was also receiving salt from Lake Assal, these highlands were entirely relying on the amole supplies from the former Afar districts of Tigray. McCann saw the salt blocks as the foundation of Ethiopia’s trade and interregional connections.\textsuperscript{44} This assumption needs further investigations from multidisciplinary perspectives. While the salt trade existed at least since the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, it still remains an inherent feature of the Təgrayan economy in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Salt supply geared for marketing and redistribution reach highland Təgray through different local routes to be redistributed to other regional routes through mid-distance and long-distance trade networks. Informants in eastern Təgray identified three major salt trade routes that linked up the Afar salt plains with the string of highland salt market towns before subsequent redistribution. The first one was the south-easterly route that stretched along the Arho-Bärahä-Shekhät-Alamat’a route commonly but not exclusively taken by the Rayya-Azäbo caravans. The second one, the proper easterly route, which follows the Arho-Bärahä-Atsbi/Mäqälä route, is often used by arhotays from Kältä-Awlælo,Tämbién and Endärta. It is the shortest and probably the busiest route. The third one was the Arho-Bärahä-Tserae route that extends to Hawzén (one of the very prominent markets in central Tigray). Arhotays from Agamä apparently frequented this route. A concise sketch of the salt trails is provided below:

1. Arho-Bärahlä-Shekhät-Wäjärrat-Alamat’a
2. Arho- Bärahä - Bärahä-Atsbi/Mäqälä
3. Arho-Mägläla-Ala-Tsrae-Hawzén-Adwa

\textsuperscript{40} Ato Hailu Gährä Yohännes, Age 71, Mäqälä (April 2006). Ugugmo is an Afar term, meant Revolutionary, an Afar dissident group which later merged with the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF). This Front is now officially in charge of the salt district administration, though elements of it recently claim responsibility for the March 2007 kidnappings of British tourists in the Arho salt mines.

\textsuperscript{41} Informant: Hajji Kahsay Mohammed.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid}; Ato Hailu, Ato Assäffa


\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid}.
Map 1. Local and Medium salt routes and markets: Tǝgray-Lasta
Endärta’s arhotays constituted the biggest group with stronger traditions of salt caravan organization and operate much more swiftly than their other Tagrayan fellows. Salt transport remains their serious business complementing household income to the extent they considered it on a par with cultivation. For the steadily growing landless peasants and new house holds, salt transport was a full time activity more than cultivation in ensuring access to subsistence. The Tagrayans traded with the Afar fairy extensively. While Atsbi, Fisho and Hantalo were the best salt markets in the 19th century, informants stress that Bärahlä in the foothills of the escarpment and Mäqälä at the edges Tagrayan plateau relatively dominated the history of 20th century amolé trade while others underwent a steady decline. This was partly attributed to the centralization of the fiscal administration and the emergence of secondary/salt markets such as Sānçata, Wuqro, Qwuiha, and Koräm, on the Asmara-Mäqälä-Dässié motor road networks built not very far from the old markets.

The amolé trade gained greater importance in northern Ethiopian highlands in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The string of towns situated along the Asmara- Mäqälä-Dässié route emerged as the more prominent salt markets active in the process of amolé marketing and subsequent redistributions in the early 20th century. Early amolé transit stations that earned greater reputation by local tradition were Hantalo, Samrà, Sāqota and Bälässa (Gondär). These markets had effectively networked the trade routes of Eastern Tagray with the more prominent northwestern long-distance trade route, i.e. the Basso-Gondär-Adwa-Massawa.

Samrà’s position at the crossroads of three important regions-Wällo, Bágémeder and Tagray-might have clearly placed it at a relative advantage to be closely networked with the nearest markets in conducting salt from Tagray and procuring agricultural products such as butter, honey, coffee, and livestock in return. That the same informant relates the idea of Samrà’s closer trade relations with Sāqota(capital of Lasta, northern Wällo) and Bälässa in Gondär leads us to the same conclusion. Indeed, McCann’s important finding that Sāqota eclipsed its long time rival Samrà, in the period 1900-1935 reinforces this argument. It is also likely that Hantalo and Samrà could have flourished as precursors of Mäqälä before their decline.

Another important development concerns the roles of certain regions and their markets in Central Ethiopia that grew partly due to their strategic interactions with the salt trade routes. Sāqota and Lalibella, in Northern Wällo, are cases in point. Both lie at the strategic position to conduct the salt trade into south, west and south west of the northern Ethiopian region as a whole. The two towns seem to have had remarkable part that Tagrayan markets of Samrà and Hantalo could hardly substitute. James McCann underlines Sāqota market, within the district of Wag, command a central position on the diagonal route between Mäqälä, Gondär, Gojjam, Sämén, northern Wällo and further south into Wälläga. Towards north, Sāqota is also straightly accessible to another important Tagrayan salt market of Abayyi Addi, capital of Täm'bên district, which is in turn interconnected to Adwa, Mäqälä and Addigrat(via Hawzén) and ultimately to

45 Abir, Ethiopia:Era of Princes, P.46.
46 Informant: Ato Gássässäw.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 McCann, From Poverty to Famine, pp.72-73.
51 McCann, From Poverty to Famine, P.72.
Asmara in Eritrea. Informants unanimously saw Säqota as a proper bridge in the larger scale two-way traffic of not only of salt but also manufactured goods from Eritrea. Trade in livestock, especially of mules, horses and oxen from Wälo, Gojjam and Gondär found their way into northern Ethiopia (especially Tegray) via Säqota. Lalibella, to the south, lying in the same diagonal route, appears to be another important terminal that transited the items of trade flowing via Säqota.52

The decline of the principal north-western routes in the last quarter of the century, due to the Egyptian and Italian blockade of Red Sea ports, seem to have led to some reorientations of the northern Ethiopian trade routes. Conversely, the same events promoted the status of the northeastern trade routes attached to the salt trade from secondary into one of primary routes. Informants relate the emergence of Mäqälä as the principal salt trade entrepot was the result of these redirections of trade routes. The relocation of Emperor Yohannes IV’s (1872-89) capital from Adwa (terminus along the northwestern trade route) to that of Mäqälä was apparently related to these courses of events. Hence the theory that trade often follows the orientation of political centrality has pertinence with Mäqälä. The extraction of surplus from the salt trade not only sustained state revenue (in time of economic stress) but also facilitated urbanization in the salt routes in general and Mäqälä in particular. Returns to salt trade were at times equally if not more rewarding than the revenue from salt per se!

Moreover, the early 20th century witnessed the rise of new strings of trade routes due to combinations of salt transactions and external factors related European commercial interactions. Thus, the following routes seem particularly important for channeling amole salt into the rest of Ethiopia:

1. Mäqälä-Koräm-Wäldiya-Dässié-Addis Ababa
2. Mäqälä-Wäldiya-Wäräta/Yəfag-Burrié-Wälläga
3. Mäqälä - Säqota-Iste-Mota-Burie

3.1. Amolé Trade, Foreign Competition and Monopoly
The early 20th century was a landmark in the commercial history of the Ethiopian Region It introduced an era of fierce commercial rivalries between the different neighboring colonial powers, namely Britain, Italy and France.53 This competition brought about greater impacts on the subsequent orientations of the Ethiopian trade in general and that of the salt trade in particular. The Tripartite powers targeted salt as the prominent item to extract profits, hence as a vehicle of accumulation of capital. Thus, the essence of economic imperialism in Ethiopia had one of its tentacles extended into the salt industry. The British worked hard to develop the inland ports of Moyale (southern Ethiopia) and Gambélla (western Ethiopia), the French with Djibouti while the Italians with Assab and Massawa as outlets of Ethiopian trade, and they all invariably targeted salt among the chief export items into Ethiopia. This was a sharp edged razor to the technologically lagging indigenous Ethiopian amolé industry.

The construction of the Franco-Ethiopian railroad in 1917 enabled the French to outsmart their rivals in diverting most of Ethiopian trade. An estimate in the late 1920s indicates the Ethiopian transit trade via Eritrea was 12%, that of British share 18%

52 Informants: Ato Gässässäw; Aläqa Täsfay Mäbrahtu.
while the French handled 70% Ethiopian trade. These developments were the significant in strengthening both the political and commercial centrality of Addis Ababa, against Mäqälä’s growing marginalization in both spheres.

Meanwhile, the growing commercial importance of Eritrea made its capital, Asmara, the centre for the distribution of imported goods to northern Ethiopia and the outlet of export items from the same region. Mäqälä, the capital of Tǝgray, to an extent benefited out of this development in that it became one of the few transit and redistribution centers of on commodities plying in the Region. Mäqälä, nevertheless, lost greatly in the salt front. Although salt still continued to be a vital commodity in the Ethiopian trade, its commerce underwent some major changes both in the patterns of distribution, volumes and quality. Previous studies also underscored how the salt trade managed to become central to inter-state politics in the Horn of Africa for the decades to come. For instance, Abdusamad (1987) and Bahru (1987) underline that the French spectacular success in handling the Ethiopian export trade was replicated in producing sea salt in their colony of Djibouti which enabled them to control the culinary salt market, at least, in southern and southwestern Ethiopia. This development made salt ranked top in volume the list of goods the Franco-Ethiopian railroad transited in the 1920s and 1930s. Sudan also poured salt exports to western Ethiopia, which further suffocated amolé’s market in the region. Sudanese traders used to exchange salt with coffee. Bahru states that in view of amolé’s value as currency, British capital from the Sudan entertained the scheme of making salt into bars and selling them profitably in Western Ethiopia. This seems to have aimed at displacing the Afar amolé from the region.

The blow to the British scheme, especially to the Afar amolé trade, however, came in May 1930, when a Franco-Ethiopian company, known as ‘Franco-Ethiopine Pour le Commerce du Sel’) secured a monopoly on the Ethiopian salt trade. Bahru claims that 40% of the shares was possibly allocated to Nəgus Täfäri (the late Emperor Haile Selassie, r.1930-1974). Täfäri apparently granted the concession representing the Ethiopian government. Neither British reaction nor the northern resentment had any effect to restrain the monopoly status of the French company. Indeed, the Arho salt plains as centers of salt production for Ethiopian market suffered growing marginalization, threatened by the Djibouti coastal salt mines, which were promoted by the French monopoly privileges. Arho still staggered to survive at least by relying on the demands of northern Ethiopia. It was able to do so and even revived later.

The British, however, shifted their commercial strategy from salt suppliers to salt distributors in the Ethiopian markets. The Mohammed Allay British Indian firm pioneered the distribution industry in Addis Ababa and quickly saw successful ventures by opening branches in the (southeastern and southwestern) Ethiopian towns of Diredawa, Harar, Jijiga, Jimma, Läqämt and Wälayta. This strategic move even qualified the Mohammedally Co. to win a share in the Franco- Ethiopian Pour le Commerce du Sel. Another British firm, the Saferian and Co. doubled as agents in Western Ethiopia for the Franco- Ethiopian salt monopoly, while running the coffee business in return. Nevertheless, unable to stand Mohammad Allay, the Saferian and some other firms quickly retired from the salt distribution business. The period,

56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
The Ethiopian Salt Trading System in the 20th Century

However, saw incredible contortions within the salt trade, which were the ultimate results of expatriate domination of Ethiopia’s import-export trade. In relation to this, Bahru found out that the expatriate merchants, especially the Greeks, secretly agreed among themselves to drive down the price of such vital commodities as coffee and inflate that of imported items like salt and *abujädid* (cotton sheeting).60

Meanwhile, trade flourished in the direction of northern Ethiopia as well. The Italians apparently created a mild commercial environment where vital southwestern and western Ethiopian commodities such as pepper, coffee, honey, butter and flex were conducted to Asmara via Mäqälä and Adwa. The salt trade capitalized on the relatively better atmosphere of transactions as some of those caravans coming form the south of Tøgray were carrying salt on their return trip back home. The brief Italian occupation period (1935-1941) led to the emergence of some new market towns and the decline of others. This was attributed to the Italian construction of the first modern road networks in Ethiopia, especially northern Ethiopia. Asmara became the new hub of Ethiopian import and export trade. This had paradoxical results for Mäqälä. On the one hand, transition to the commercial sea salt was intensified to further compete the *amolé* market. On the other hand, the road networks at the same time facilitated the movements of *amolé* to the entire regions to the south and west, which extended its share from the wider regional salt market. The fact that *amolé* still commanded effective demand at least in medicinal and animal feed is significant for its survival. Tøgrayan salt merchants hired Italian lorries which helped them to aggressively penetrate as many bigger markets as possible to be further redistributed by local merchants. Moreover, much of rural Ethiopia was hardly affected by the Italian modern communication facilities remained more tied up with *amolé*, by the conventional trade networks and transport system.

3.2. The Post-Italian Legacy (1941-2000)

The legacy of foreign domination of the salt trade seems to have declined following Italian evacuation in 1941.The period 1941-1998 can be fairly characterized as the ‘proper sea salt era’ in Ethiopian culinary history. It was a product of the political/economic integration of Eritrea and Ethiopia that led to the commercial exploitation of the huge Red Sea Coast salt. *Amolé* still staggered to survive market leftovers, particularly by tailoring utmost to the demands for animal feed and vendors and, of course, as an option for culinary purposes, especially to those who kept subscribing to it by virtue of cultural preferences. Salt merchants from Mäqälä thus kept up supplying the entire Ethiopia through the trade networks already discussed above.

In the long run, however, Ethiopia’s dependence on the Eritrean salt supplies undermined the development of alternative inland salt resources and marginalized *amolé* trade. This was particularly the case in view of Eritrea’s protracted war and the subsequent secession in 1991. The challenges of salt supply, indeed, came into the fore with the outbreak of the 1998 Ethio-Eritrean conflict. The effects of the war were immediately reflected in the salt trade. The cession of salt supplies from Eritrea apparently precipitated a political crisis, albeit briefly, by exposing the grim reality of Ethiopia’s dependence on Eritrean salt products. The state managed the crisis by taking two prompt policy measures, including direct imports from Djibouti and Yemen and the granting of salt mining concessions to develop Ethiopia’s own neglected inland resources.

60 Ibid.
In the interim period, amolé enjoyed a brief revival and boom for the five years until 2002/2003. Then Afdera large scale-salt production sector overtook much of amolé’s market. It may sound ironic that Ethiopia with 290 million tones of a proven salt reserve only from Afdera still imports 50% of its local consumption which is estimated at 3 million quintals a year.61 Needless to say, as most salt bearing villages are situated in the hotly contested Ethio-Eritrean border zone which made them a virtual source of political tension vis-à-vis the controversial rulings of the Hague Border Commission of 2002.

4.0. Salt Marketing and Organization in Mäqälä

Mäqälä was the principal centre of amolé salt marketing in the 20th century Ethiopia. There were considerable changes in the patterns of salt trading, market organization and the composition of salt merchants. At the opening of the century when the demand for amole was quite high, considerable merchants apparently specialized in salt trading alone. Fresh entrepreneurs from rural Təgray found it easier to enter into salt trading in Mäqälä. This was partly due to the mild taxes and partly due to the fact that amolé trading often remains opened to any one due to the little initial capital. Emphasizing this fact, one of my informants Gədäy Mängisté remarks, “Virtually there was no body from Mäqälä who had not started salt trading. Yet, only handful individuals have taken salt transactions as their specialty.”62 In fact, he claims to be one of those exclusive amole wholesalers, while many of his fellows switched trading between different items.

There are three categories of traders who made their livelihood partly or entirely out of salt. These are: the arhotays, whole sellers (distributors) and retailers. This categorization tends to exclude the labourer group such as porters in different towns. The arhotay (together with their Afar salt workers) who procure salt can be reckoned the basis in the linear cycle of amolé trading Not only do they supply but also simultaneously engage in trading during weekly market days. The retailers, on the other hand, are better networked both to the arhotay and wholesalers, a strategy which guarantees them optimal salt supply in two alternate forms: rock salt or in its raw form. Their advantage lie in their mobility and flexibility to trade in small towns or occasional markets or every quarters of towns including Mäqälä city often hardly frequented by wholesalers and the arhotay. Thus, they have better access to clients who wish to buy small quantities (or measures)of salt than the wholesalers or distributors might offer. Women entrepreneurs particularly prevail in the sale of raw salt that they usually obtain from wholesalers. The latter initially hardly considered the “waste” or residues left over during the process of cutting salt slabs (gäräwāynay) into pieces of amolé for shipping or redistribution. They used to give away to women retailers for nominal prices, like a quintal of raw salt for as cheap as Eth $6.00 Birr.63

Subsequently, however, Tagrayan women entrepreneurs discovered a new method of appreciating raw salt’s value by processing or sweeping off its impurities and shipping into the nearby small weekly markets. The notable market destinations include Samrā, Mayčāw,Qobbā, Arit’at’a, Sāqot’a, and Alamat’a towns. Retailer women used to bartering raw salt with ranges of agricultural goods such as grains, spices, eggs, honey, etc.), of the Amhara-Agaw peasants who needs specific amounts salt for household consumption. The next step is that, the same women returned to Mäqälä and other nearby bigger Tagrayan markets to retail their newly acquired agricultural items (in

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61 The Ethiopian Reporter Bi-weekly, October 2003.
62 Informant: Ato Gedäy Mangeste , Age- 72, Mäqälä, (Salt Whole seller), April 2006.
63 Informants: Ibid, Ato Gāssāssāw.
return to raw salt) for a handsome price. This retailing strategy indicates an aspect of gender divisions in the salt trading where women’s ingenuity and the dynamics of salt marketing and networking in northern Ethiopia could be evidently demonstrated. It should, however, be noted that the women retailers (usually single household heads) could hardly evolve into an affluent or bigger merchants but survive well and support their often large households in a region suffering from recurrent food insecurity. Retailing developed very gradually leading to the emergence of a separate group since the 1950s.

Meanwhile, the wholesalers quite often succeed in business by employing not only due to their advantages of capital, stocks and interregional networking but also owing to their own specific market strategies. Among others, the wholesalers either held the arhotay in clientage for mutual benefit, or manipulate the arhotays into fierce competition to lower the price. And rarely, wholesalers compete amongst each other to hoard salt in their stocks in order to sell it at higher rate to the distributors, retailers or consumers in times of amolé scarcities. The other vital market strategy of wholesalers is to engage in the merchandise of highly demanded industrial or raw items parallel to amolé salt trading. Indeed, my research trip to Mäqälä revealed that some of the big trading families in the city owe their initial career to salt though same group mostly end up in either switching into another business. Others would opt to sustain themselves by combining salt along with the other items, industrial or agricultural. Most informants report cereals, coffee, sugar, kerosene, abujedid (cotton clothes) and cotton threads were the main items of trade in Mäqälä town used to be often handled by salt merchants.

Part of the ex-salt traders also them also resort to the provision of social services such as transport, mills and restaurants. Local construction of few houses in urban areas also seems another way out for merchants to retain the meager savings generated from transactions of salt and agricultural / industrial commodities.

Apparent y, one can observe salt marketing in Mäqälä, being an open type, is often alternated with other merchandise by all categories of salt merchants. The situation, coupled with the essentially subsistent nature of the Tagrayan economy seems to have delayed the evolution of big salt trading families. The Tagray Region did not produce any significant export item (save for incense and oil seeds briefly) to reinforce the creation of a merchant class either. Above all, however, the introduction of cheap and huge quantities of industrial salts from abroad seem to have further decapitated salt merchants from Mäqälä to create big trading firms. Despite the constraints to the evolution of big salt trading families in the 20th Century, however, we still have cases of successful amolé wholesalers who used to derive sizeable profit by monopolizing the task of salt redistribution to the Ethiopian national and/or provincial capitals such as Addis Ababa, Dässié, Gondär and Däbrāmärqos besides other district towns en route. They succeeded in creating their own clients from across the country that they regularly supply them with vital industrial/agricultural goods in return to salt.

These clients constitute their own category of merchants the redistributors’ category. This group was deriving some profit out of amolé trading by virtue of their networks to the Mäqälä whole sellers. They in turn have local networks of retailers in different

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid; Hajji Kahsay Mohammad, Aläqa Täsfay Mäbrahtu
66 Informants: Ato Gedäy, Ato Gässässäw., Hajji Kahsay Mohammad, Aläqa Täsfay Mäbrahtu.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
towns of Ethiopia to the south of Dässié and Gondär. Provinces in southern and southwestern Ethiopia, especially those lying along the old principal trade routes still demand some amole (for medicinal, animal feed and some for culinary purposes), even long after the introduction of masses of iodized salt had long overtaken the market for the northern amolé. Retailing some amolé, thus, still prevails in almost all Ethiopian towns for different purposes. As many modern salt plants cropped up, still considerable marketing opportunities are still reserved for the conventional amolé salt transactions.

Informants (wholesalers) from Mäqälā emphasize they still periodically ship amolé salt to their clients all over the south. However, in times of scarcity, their clients directly venture as far as Mäqälā (or through trading agents) to fetch salt while at the same time supplying them with the much needed industrial (sugar, cotton, building materials, etc.) or agricultural goods such as sugar, pepper, spices, coffee, honey, grains (teff, maize, etc.). Indeed, the trading families of Aläqa Abraha Wälđu, Balambaras Dawit Wälđa-Mariam, Grazmac Gäbrä-Mikael, Balambaras Atsbeha and of my two informants Gedäy Mängesté and Gassässäw Gäbrä-Egziabher could be cited as cases of emerging big salt trading families. Most of them kept up salt shipping and distribution business for the last three to five decades. While the two informants focused exclusively on salt business, the rest of the group largely account their success to their skillful combinations of salt shipping with the redistribution of other consumer goods coming from outside Mäqälā. The salt market constitutes the nucleus of the city’s commercial zone around which the very essence of urbanization and physical expansion was to be sought. One can safely argue that the urban growth of a string of towns in north eastern Ethiopia could be attributed to the salt transactions, trade networks and its returns (goods exchanged in return).

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