The Negede Woyto Minority Group in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Ethiopia is one of the oldest countries, inhabited by different ethnic and cultural groups. One of the minority groups in the nation, the Negede Woyto of the Lake Tana Catchment Area, has been marginalised in terms of various aspects. Besides reconstructing the history of this minority group, this article strives to investigate the changes and continuities in the social, economic, and political lives of the minority group from a historical perspective. To this end, both primary and secondary sources were collected and used. Based on the analysis, the study found that communal life, low social capital, marginalisation, conflict of values, a lack of institutions that protect minorities, low political participation, and a lack of secure means of survival are identified as the main causes for the majority of the Negede Woyto Community to lead a life as subhuman with (in) dignity and chronic poverty.

Keywords

Negede Woyto – hippopotamus hunter – red boat – marginalisation – occupational minority

1 Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the oldest countries and the only independent African country with its own indigenous political system (Bahru, 2022; Getachew, 2018). Since its existence as a state, Ethiopia has been a land of diversity. However, the approaches and ways governments manage diversity or pluralism,
as elsewhere in other countries of Africa, vary, ranging from mobilising the people under Pan Ethiopianism (Bahru, 2022) to leading the diverse society under the Socialist Unitary Republic and ethnic federal democratic state (Alan, 2006; Getachew, 2018; Markakis, 1979). Historians and political scientists have indicated that each system of government has its merits and demerits (Bahru, 2022; Getachew, 2018).

Considering the crises in state-society relations in the 20th century as the outcome of ethnic operations, proponents of the nationality question led by the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Revolutionary Front) devised ethnic-based federalism following its ascendance to power (Getachew, 2018). It also accommodated ethnicity as a formal political element (Abbink, 2011). Besides providing each nation, nationality, and people (ethnic groups hereafter) the right to self-determination ups to cession, an ethnic-based federal system was introduced, and the country’s internal state boundaries were restructured along ethnic lines (Assefa M., 2019; Beza, 2013). Practically, however, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF-led government was not much better than the previous regimes with regard to protecting the rights of historically marginalised minority groups. The Negede Woyto minority group can be a good case to illustrate this point. Though the Negede Woyto passed from politically autonomous and economically self-sufficient people before the early 20th century to a marginalised minority group in the post-Italian occupation period, it was in the post-1991 period that the human rights condition of the minority group worsened (Data Dea, 2012) and they were stricken by chronic poverty (Ajala, 2008).

1.2 Objective of the Study
The objective of this research paper is to examine how the Negede Woyto were reduced from politically autonomous and economically self-sufficient people before the early 20th century to indignities stricken by chronic poverty from a historical perspective.

1.3 Research Method
This study is qualitative research based on the historical method. The research relied on primary and secondary sources. The researcher accessed firsthand information from the archives of Addis Ababa University and Lake Tana Transport Enterprise, formerly called Navigatana in Bahir Dar, in May and June 2021. The researcher accessed the archives of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) of Addis Ababa University between May and June 2022. He has also conducted personal interviews using interview guides in Zege and Bahir Dar towns with informants selected using snowball and purposive sampling.
methods. The sample included informants from Amhara and the Negede Woyto community. In addition, the researcher excerpted primary data from relevant policy and legal documents such as the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution, national development and poverty reduction strategy documents, proclamations, and environmental policy. The researcher collected second-hand information through intensive reading of published and unpublished works. Though it was hard to find full-fledged work about the Negede Woyto, two articles by F. Gamest (1979) and Ajala (2008) about the history and present situation of the Negede Woyto community are very useful. Other scholars who dedicated a few pages to the community also accessed websites and carefully analysed them.

2 The Negede Woyto: From Obscurity to Autonomous Egalitarian Community

The Negede Woyto minority community has experienced different changes and continuities while residing in the Lake Tana catchment areas from ancient times to the present. The economic, social, and political developments that the minority group underwent from the beginning of time until the post-1991 period are given and explored in this section of the article.

2.1 Origin and Early Settlement Pattern of the Negede Woyto

The early history of the Negede Woyto is obscure. Even the community’s tradition is not articulated. To begin with the name of the community, Woyto, Christian traditional writers such as Taye (1922) confirmed that the name Woito is derived from the Amharic term Watto, literally defined as a person who swallows items considered food indiscriminately. In this sense, the name Wato is a misnomer for “impure”. Some elders from the group, however, argue that the name Woito is derived from the Amharic word “wateto ader.” The Amharic word ‘wateto ader’ is used here to refer to people striving through ups and downs to win their livelihood. In any case, the group name is “Wato.” Woito, or woyto, is considered by community members to be a pejorative name. ‘Wato’, a derivative of Woito or woyto, which is regarded as a derogatory name by the community, was used by the larger society up until the 1970s.

Though some writers, such as Zerihun (2010:3) and Temesgen (2016:9), relate the Negede Woyto to the Agaw ethnic group, oral traditions link the origin of the ‘Woyto’ community to Ancient Egypt. Both church scholars and the Negede Woyto elders agree that the community was from Misir (Ancient Egypt). But there is no clear information about how and when the Negede...
Woyto forefathers arrived and settled in the Lake Tana region. Explaining how the Negede Woyto came to Ethiopia, informants recounted that when Moses led the Ancient Jews (Israeli) from Egypt to Canaan, the Negede Woyto people were with Moses, whom they called Musa. But the Negede Woyto could not cross the Red Sea and hence came to Ethiopia following the Nile (Abay) River and eventually settled in the Lake Tana region. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church monks in Zege Monastery, one of the ancient churches in possession of ancient manuscripts, have a different story. The monks claimed that the Negede Woyto were not with Prophet Moses. Relating their origin with Ancient Egypt, the monks of the Lake Tana region described the Negede Woyto as Terefe Freon (literally remnants of Pharos). ¹ Both legends attribute the Negede Woyto Community’s origins to Ancient Egypt. Besides this, the Negede Woyto reed boat, locally called “thankwa” can be taken as evidence to support the justification for tracing the origins of the group to Ancient Egypt. The Ancient Egyptian boats and those constructed by the Negede Woyto look similar in design.

The Negede Woyto’s arrival in the area around Lake Tana is not known with certainty (Daniel 2011; Kinfe-Rigeb 1975). However, according to church scholars and elders from the Negede Woyto community, the minority group had already existed in the Lake Tana region before the building of churches and monasteries. Ever since the Negede Woyto arrived there, the wetlands and other ecological features of Lake Tana have been crucial to their way of life.

As pointed out by Temesgen (2016:10–11), the evangelisation process in Lake Tana started during the reign of King Yikuno Amlak (1270–1285) and strengthened during the period of King AemdeTseon (1313–1344). In the process, King Aemde Tseon sent a series of expeditions and fought against the “pagan” ethnic groups of Agaw, Felasha (Jewish), and Woyto (Temesgen, 2016:10). During the war between the Christian kingdom and the Muslim forces, 1529–1543, the Negede Woyto stood on the side of the Muslim force (Temsegen, 2016). Other academics and local elders, however, do not make reference to the Negede Woyto’s involvement in warfare.

Following the transfer of the administrative centre of the Christian Kingdom from Shewa to the Lake Tana region in the last quarter of the 16th century (Tadesse, 1988), a successful evangelisation process converted the

¹ Informant, Abba B.T., Memhir of Zege Giyorgis, 84 years old during the time when the interview conducted in May 2021; Abba Y. B. At the time of the interview, he was 79 years old and served as the abbot of the renowned monastery of Dimma Giyorgis. His educational background is from Lake Tana. Amare Tadesse, a leader of the Negede Woyto group, and Taket Gedeme, an elderly 60-year-old woman from “Woyto,” were both questioned in Bahir Dar Town on June 4, 2021.
Agaws of Gojjam. During the same period, King Susyneous (r.1607–1632) had asked the Negede Woyto to embrace Christianity. As pointed out in the King’s Chronicle, the Negede Woyto stated that their eating practices, which violate the food taboos of Christian society, could not make them Christians. By quoting from the Bible, the King made an effort to persuade the Negede Woyto to accept Christianity. In his attempt to convince them to accept Christianity, the king advised the Negede Woyto elders, “It is what goes out of the mouth, not whatever goes into the mouth that defiles a person” (Alemu Gedle, 2005; Gedef, 2014). The emperor did not attempt to convert them forcefully, and the majority of them are still Muslims. But from the point made in the chronicle, it can be inferred that the Negede Woyto of the 17th century had high social standing compared to their current poor social status.

3 The Negede Woyto as Autonomous and Self-Sufficient People

In one of his accounts, James Bruce, a Scottish traveller who discovers the source of the Blue Nile, describes the Negede Woyto as a sorceress whose only profession was hunting crocodiles and hippopotami (Bruce 1790:402–403). Since their arrival and settlement in the Lake Tana region, the Negede Woyto’s livelihood has rested upon aquatic foraging (hunting, fishing, and gathering) and hippopotamus hunting. Hunting, in particular, had been the main source of their food. As pointed out by Frederick Gamst (1979:233), the carcass of an adult hippopotamus that weighs about two tonnes could feed fifty adult Woyto for a considerable time (Gamst, 1979). Besides, the Negede Woyto diet was supplemented by fish and the roots of some soft plants, such as papyrus root. Because the Negede Woyto could not either graze cattle or cultivate crops, the Negede Woyto used to exchange or batter locally grown food items such as maize and sorghum with hippopotamus tusks or hides (Gamst, 1979; Gedef, 2014).

In the past, the marshes in the Alafa Takusa, Fogera, Dembya, and Gorgora areas (on the borders of the modern-day north and south Gondar zones; Bahir Dar and Bahr Dar Zuria (Gojam)) and the coasts of Lake Tana were home to the Negede Woyto. They have chosen to live in the Lake Tana area since they arrived in the area for two reasons. For decades, the Amhara/Agaw agrarian people regarded the wetlands of Lake Tana as marginal and malaria-infested locations. It was a free place for settlement because the agrarian society of the Agaw or Amhara did not wish to reside in a malaria-infested and hostile fringe territory. Second, large and small aquatic and terrestrial creatures, including
hippos, fish, and other wild animals, inhabited the lake’s coastline in large numbers (Gedef, 2014). One of the informants discussed this topic with the researcher, explaining how the Negede Woyto was dependent on Lake Tana and its resources for their way of life as,

We had never gone far from Lake Tana and the Abay River. The papyrus reed for constructing canoes and reed boats, the fish, and the wild animals we used to hunt were available in excess amounts in Lake Tana. Even when the enemy came to harm us, we used to go into Lake Tana and disguise ourselves from the enemy.²

Before the end of the 19th century, the Negede Woyto had been a politically autonomous, egalitarian society. Economically, they were self-sufficient hunters living in the wetlands of Lake Tana. The community had its own organisation and system of administration under a local chief with the title “Negad ras.”³ Prior to the early 20th century, the Negede Woyto’s political structure operated independently of the government. Additionally, they kept to themselves in Lake Tana’s peripheral wetlands. However, the “Negad ras” also acted as the Negede Woyto’s envoy as well as the province governor’s and the king’s agents. When serving as governor of the Negede Woyto, the “Negad ras” used to work with the elders of the community to oversee all administrative matters, including upholding law and order (Gamst, 1979; Germew, 2018).

Besides serving as the main source of food, hippopotamus hunting had been a source of social prestige for the Negede Woyto males. For an adult Woyto man, killing a hippopotamus had been the badge of manhood and a source of social prestige. Unless he hunted and killed a hippopotamus, a Negede Woyto adult man could not anoint butter on his hair as a sign of distinction. Success in killing his first hippopotamus qualified the Woyto man to initiate and take his lovely bride in marriage. After he killed a dangerous hippopotamus, the

² informant, Amare Tadesse, Negede Woyto, Age 50, education status, Grade 9 complete, occupation guard in public institution, he is one of the knowledgeable informants and active participants on Negede Woyto affairs, interviewed in Bahir Dar, May, 2021. The informants used the word sea to refer Lake Tana. They also recounted that when one of the Ethiopian Emperors, Emperor Yohanis (1972–1989) attempted to convert the Negede Woyto to Christianity, they refused and disguised themselves in the sea and escaped from conversion.

³ The Amharic term “Negad ras” is literally used to refer to a merchant chief [1], and his main responsibility was tax collection from merchants (Geremew, 2018). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a chief with a similar title was appointed for the Negede Woyto. The Negad Ras was appointed by the provincial governor of Gojjam with the approval of Negede Woyto community elders (Gamst, 1979).
young Woyto man was accorded prestige as a hero by his bands; his would-be wife looked at him with great respect and could not hesitate to marry her hero. An adult Woyto who could not kill a hippopotamus, on the contrary, could not take his lover in marriage. Instead, he was ostracized and chided in public discussion for being no better than a woman. The girl he loved and relatives on both sides were ashamed of him for being a crowdie (Gamst, 1979:235).

Hippopotamuses were hunted for their meat as well as for their skin and tusks (Gedef, 2014). Shields and whips made of its skin were in high demand. The hippopotamus tusk was bought and sold in Gondar’s neighbourhood marketplaces, the goods were in high demand. Dentists in the 18th and early 19th centuries replaced decayed human teeth with hippopotamus tusks as ornaments. Hippopotamus hunting was a significant source of income for the Negede Woyto as a result (Gedef, 2014; Gamst, 1979). Even though they controlled alluvial lands near Lake Tana, the Negede Woyto did not engage in agriculture before the 20th century. Because they were hunters’ members of Negede Woyto were not allowed to work in agriculture (Gedef, 2014).

3.1 The Negede Woyto as Reed Boat Makers and its Propellers

Following the formal establishment of British colonial control in the 19th century, the Ethiopian Long Distance Trade (LDT) was expanded to include the Lake Tana Region and Sudan, providing the Negede Woyto with an extra economic opportunity. The LDT traders who wished to buy coffee from the Zege Peninsula travelled from Yejube, now in East Gojjam, to Bure and Yismala Giyorgis, now in West Gojjam (Abdusamad, 1997; Bahru, 2002; Seleten, 1988:15–16). They then accessed the Zege Peninsula from Yismala. After buying coffee in Zege town, they headed over to Mettema by way of Delgi, crossing the lake.

Until the introduction of motorboats in the 1930s, papyrus reed boats locally called “thankwa” had been the only means of transportation across Lake Tana (Abdusamad, 1997; Grabham and Black, 1925:125). The boom in the Zege coffee trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries offered the Negede Woyto a good job opportunity. The Negede Woyto had made a decent living from transportation services as makers and propellers of reed boats (Abdusamad, 1997). On the one hand, they used to construct and sell reed boats; on the other hand, the Negede Woyto provided coffee merchants with transportation services across the lake between the ports of Zege and Delgie.4 [1] After it was packed in skin bags, coffee was transported on a papyrus reed boat from Zege in the south-east direction to Delgi, located in the opposite direction on the

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4 Zege Port is located on the southeast side of the lake in Gojjam, and Delgie Port is on the north side of the lake in Begemider.
north-west side of Lake Tana (Abdusamad, 1997). Depending on the direction of the wind, the journey from Zege to Delgi took six to fourteen days. For a load of coffee goods transported in one reed boat, the Negede Woyto charged merchants from ten to twelve Maria Teresa Thalers (Abdusamad, 1997:551). The Negede Woyto, therefore, had a good opportunity to accumulate wealth (Abdussamad H. A., 1997).

Merchants and travellers who wanted to buy a papyrus reed boat in the early 20th century had to pay eight Maria Theresa thalers for each one (Cheesman, 1935:491). In addition to offering a variety of services to diplomats and travellers, the Negede Woyto of the late 19th and early 20th centuries also actively participated in local politics and had great potential to make money from the increasing coffee trade and other ventures. During the 1920s, Robert Chessman, a British Consul in Dangila, made the following statement regarding this:

I [Chessman] had ordered tankwas, or reed rafts, to be built in Zegi and to meet me near the estuary of the Small Abbai. Tankwas are the only craft plying on the lake. They are created and driven by members of the Waito tribe. They cost eight shillings each. I [Chessman] ordered two, but eventually had to add a third to take all my baggage.

CHEESMAN, 1935:491

According to Robert Chessman’s report, the Negede Woyto enjoyed a respectable reputation in the early 20th century. They had actively taken part in community affairs, serving not only as escorts for visitors and diplomats but also as transportation service providers. In relation to this, Chessman (1935) claimed that:

From the river mouth, I was glad to see the Waitos get out their rowing poles, and we cut across the bay to the promontory at Mokal with a following wind. The Waitos wanted to drive our tankwa (reed boats) into the reeds by the falling of the wind, which is what they usually do; but we had no food, it was bitterly cold, and when we were accidentally driven into the reeds, as we frequently were, swarms of mosquitoes were disturbed, so I decided to go on at all.

CHEESMAN, 1935:494

All of these connections and activities demonstrate that Negede Woyto had many options to improve their lives and earn a good living. However, the
Negede Woyto did not have a positive experience with conserving money because they are an egalitarian community that eats and lives together.

Underlining their lack of interest in saving, one of the Negede Woyto informants recounted that their Amhara neighbours criticized them as “eneayasadrie.” The Amharic term “eneayasaderie” is used to mean those who commute all that they have overnight with no saving or leaving part of it for tomorrow.

4 The Negede Woyto: From Autonomy to Subordination and Marginalisation, 1930s–1974

As a result of the introduction of sophisticated rifles, on the one hand, and the rise in demand for their ivory, on the other hand, the hippopotamus herds of Lake Tana were intensively hunted in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Better weapons have become available to hunters since the start of the 19th century (Gamst, 1979). The availability of modern guns made hunting and killing hippopotamuses extremely simple and caused a sharp decline in hippo herds (Gedef, 2014). The Negede Woyto experienced a food deficit as a result of the decline in hippopotami due to unrestricted hunting. The Negede Woyto couldn’t catch enough fish using traditional methods to replace the hippo flesh (Chessman, 1936; Gamst, 1979:353). As a result, the Negede Woyto of the 1930s faced a greater food shortage than those in the early 1900s.

During their invasion of the Lake Tana Region of Ethiopia (1936–1941), the Italians introduced motorboats to speed up the war of conquest on the sea and for transportation across the lake. The introduction of motorboats affected the Negede Woyto’s economic life in two ways. Firstly, the introduction and operation of motorboats as a modern means of transportation made the Negede Woyto papyrus reed boat less valuable. Secondly, when its service had become less valuable, the demand and cost of reed boats decreased, and hence Negede Woyto’s income from the sale of reed boats decreased (Abdusamad, 1997; Sabatchi, 1977).

When the food from hippopotamus meat and income from reed boat service decreased, some members of the Negede Woyto began to take up agriculture by renting land, oxen, and agricultural equipment from Amhara farmers (Freeman, 2003:9; Gamst, 1979). In return for using rented land along with agricultural implements and oxen, the Negede Woyto peasants used to pay Amhara farmers tribute and tax in cash. The emerging Negede Woyto

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5 Negede Woyto Elder, Age 70 years old; interviewed in Kebele 16, Bahir Dar, 05 June 2021.
peasants had become subordinates to Amhara farmers. Unless the landowner hired the main means of production, the Negede Woyto could not engage in agriculture. The Negede Woyto peasants usually pay more than half of their produce to the “rist” landowner⁶ as tribute (Freeman, 2003). All these burdens made agriculture less rewarding for the Negede Woyto’s emerging farmers (Gamst, 1979:236).

When hunting and reed boat service became less valuable, besides fishing and ferrying services on Lake Tana, many of the Negede Woyto community members took various other occupations such as traditional mill stone carving for sale (Gedef, 2014; Yohanis, 1965). Young Woyto men used to sell grinding mills in local markets of Bahir Dar, Gondar, and Debre Tabour (Gamst, 1979; Taye, 1963). However, the income from each activity was not adequate to maintain food security for each Woyto family. Thus, Negede Woyto of the late 1920s and 1930s faced greater food insecurity (Gamst, 1979; Freeman, 2003).

4.1 Imperial Government Consolidation and Aggravation of Marginalisation, 1943–1974

During their occupation period, from 1936 to 1941, the Italians showed a tendency to support the interest of minorities. Their empowerment and support of ethnic and religious minority groups were based on pragmatic reasons (Teclehaimanot, 2003). Nicolas, (1972:42) pointed out that the Italians were in support of minority groups to widen the gap between the dominant and minority groups and to exploit it to their advantage. However, the Italians did not gain the intended result from widening the difference between the two groups (Nicolas, 1972). However, the Italians did not include minority issues in their overall colonial policy (Sabicchi, 1977:34; Salole, 1978).

⁶ The Rist land system was one of the traditional land tenure systems in use in Ethiopia prior to 1974. Rist was the title to the land that the bearer inherited from their ancestors and grandfather, as well as the right to possess, use, and inherit it. A person who owned this land was known as Baleabat in this sense; the Amharic word ‘Baleabat’ literally translates to “one who has a father.” As a technical or colloquial statement, “one who has a father” refers to those fathers who may have also been siblings’ fathers. Thus by implication, people who are biological dads and do not possess property to use or inherit could not be regarded as fathers, and their sons, who do not have a title to land, could not be considered baleabate. For instance, low-status groups like slaves, the Negede Woyto, and others were not referred to as Baleabat in Ethiopian traditional society prior to 1974. The terms “rist landowner” and ‘balabat’ are used interchangeably in this article. Rist landowners were also subject to a number of responsibilities, such as the need to provide tribute in kind, in cash, or provisions to the local government or gulf holder and the prohibition on selling inheritable rist land (Ahmed M.M., 2002:5; Teshale Tibe, 1995). An official or administrator who held the position of ‘gulf’ was in charge of administration, ensuring tax collection, and assembling and deploying an army of rist owners. The term ‘gulf’ is an Amharic word for the office.
The Negede Woyto was unable to meaningfully support the Italians, despite the Italians’ attempts to rally minority groups to their cause locally (Seletene 2012; Setegn, G. 2020). Maybe the Negede Woyto did not make a significant contribution to the Italian invaders since they were not powerful and had a smaller population. The Negede Woyto and other minority groups were urged by the Italians to participate in the new Residenzia government (Seletene, 2012). Local Negede Woyto community members participated in and supported the Italian government (Sbacchi, 1977; Seletene, 1988). In fact, the Negede Woyto and other members of the larger community known locally as banda, or collaboration, supported the Italians and participated in different aspects of their management (Binayew, 2014).

In the post-Italian Occupation period, Bahir Dar town began to grow as a centre of business and as a district and sub-province administrative centre. Thus, after 1941, investment by the government and some business owners began to grow. At the same time, the demand for and value of land in the town and its nearby areas increased. The government and local landlords took Neged Woyto’s inhabited areas, which formerly were considered marginal lands (Geremew, 2018; Seletene, 2012). Explaining how their lives were affected by the post-1941 period of political and social developments in the Lake Tana region, the Negede Woyto informants stated that

Our birth and growth is around Lake Tana. We do not leave Tana and Bahir Dar. However, when the balabat took our land we began living precariously; our women were gleanling trashing ground and we males were giving free labour service to the land owner.7

Some community members moved to Bahir Dar town in search of employment when the government and the “baleabat” took their land. Other members who decided to live in rural areas began to engage in farming by hiring oxen and land from the rural landowners in a sharecropping agreement (Simons, 1960). Their women, too, used to work on the landowner’s land and got permission to glean trash in return for their service. Regardless of close economic interdependence in the form of dominant and subordinate relationships, the Negede Woyto were excluded (Yohanis, 1965). In addition to their low social status, illiteracy contributed to their political exclusion (Gamst, 1979:235). In a hierarchically organized society, being a stakeholder had the connotation of becoming a member of the privileged class who could get access to power and other opportunities. On the other hand, being a member of a low-status

7 An old informant, Age 80; interviewed in kebele 16, Bahir Dar, 15 May 2021.
group implies exclusion from natural resources and opportunities, such as politics. Thus, status-based exclusion or marginalisation made the Negede Woyto members economically poor and politically excluded. At this point, informants complained that

During the time of emperors, to let us remain deaf (illiterate) it was only the siblings of the landlord and the laity who attend education. Especially the community called Woyto and Shankla (now Gumuz) who called it an issue.8,9

It is true that education was a resource that could change the lives of the poor. Even during the imperial government of Haile Selassie, I, people from marginalised groups who had the opportunity to attend school were not only free from exclusion but also took higher leadership positions in the government.

4.1.1 Restoration and Consolidation of Emperor Haile Selasie I’s Government

Following his restoration to power in April 1941, Emperor Haile Selasie I (1930–1974) undertook three important measures: reorganizing the provincial administration, establishing a standing army, and re-instituting the financial system (Bahiru, 2002) for the modernisation of the state and to strengthen his authority. Concerning reorganizing internal administration, the emperor passed an administrative decree, Decree No. 1 of 1942, and made all provinces administered by salaried governors directly appointed by a newly established Ministry of Interior10 (Mulatu, 2017). “Awraja” (sub-province), “Wereda” (district), “Mislene” (sub-district), and “Mikitil Mislane” (parish) were the four administrative levels that were established as a result of this edict (Mulatu, 2017:110). The Ministry of Interior Affairs advised the monarch while choosing the sub-provincial governors. By placing the 12 sub-provinces directly under his control, Emperor Haile Selassie I was able to increase his personal control over the government (Bahiru, 2002).

In 1946, the emperor carried out a substantial administrative overhaul. Under the new Imperial Order, Decree No. 6 of 1946, the parishes were converted to sub-districts, and the sub-districts were upgraded to districts (Mulatu, 2017). In 1947, the emperor issued a new decree called the Parish

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8 Informant, Shikh Segid Ali Jebril, religious leader; age during the time of interview 78; interviewed in Zege, Bahir Dar, on 08/02/2009 E.C.
9 Informant, T.G. from N. Woyto, age 64, interviewed in Keb.16, B/Dar, 06 June 2023.
Judicial Establishment Order that mandated the appointment of three judges to each parish. The parish, the lowest tier of government in rural areas, had four administrators who were responsible for a variety of tasks, including those of the top administrator (gult holder), “chika shum” (literally, “mud chief,” or “mud chief”), and the parish judges.

The objective of the internal administrative reforms was to decentralise power and provide public service to the people at the grassroots level. As per the administrative reforms, in Bahir Dar Awraja (sub province), administrators, local judges, and tribute collectors were appointed to the parish levels. In practice, however, the reforms were made to extend the imperial government’s power and control popular revolts. One Negede Woyto elder reflected on how the Negede Woyto community had been treated by governors in the 1950s and 1960s as:

*During the time of the “atsewoch” (emperors), our relationship with the Amhara was limited. During the reign of Haile Selassie, the ‘chika shum’ did not want to listen to our problems. If we raised our issues, the ‘chika shum’ was used to beat us with a stick. They did not consider us, the Negede Woyto, as humans. The checksum did not trample on the land trampled on by the Woyto community.*

The parish judges and the “cheka shum” were unable to view the Negede Woyto case independently once the Local Judges Establishment Proclamation (Vibhute, 2015) came into effect. The community’s problems were disregarded by the new leadership, nevertheless. Negede Woyto was not treated any better as a result of decentralisation and the extension of the central government structure to the local level. Maltreatment and exclusion occurred to them. The Negede Woyto community members were at the very bottom of the Amhara social hierarchy as marginalised groups with little social standing. According to Abdusamad (2000) and Gamst (1979), they were merely superior to the Gumuz and slaves in terms of status. The status or occupational categories were arranged as “Muslims, Qimant, Falasha, Wayto, and the Gumuz slaves” (Abdusamad, 2000:165).

By the 1960s the Negede Woyto was one of the most marginalised groups in Northwest Ethiopia. Here, one important and argumentative point should be raised is the question of why the Negede Woyto was marginalised. The next section explores in more detail why this was so.

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11 Informant, Negede Woyto Elder, 80 years old, was interviewed in Bahir Dar, on 24 May 2021.
4.1.2 Why Were the Members of the Negede Woyto Communities Marginalised?

Based on the literature, the Negede Woyto can be identified as an occupational minority group (Ayalew et al., 2008; Freeman, 2003) and an ethnic minority group (Dessalegn, 2013; Gedef, 2014). Some academics even refer to the Negede Woyto as an occupational caste. This suggests that their marginalisation stemmed in part from their work (Epple, 2018). However, it doesn’t make sense to suggest that Negede Woyto’s marginalisation is related to their occupation. Some historians, particularly Abdusamad (1997) and Seletene (2012), who conducted extensive research on the socioeconomic history of the Lake Tana region, claim that the Negede Woyto’s occupation made them important to the local community, including to the landlords.

The British diplomat Chessman (1936) also confirmed that the Negede Woyto’s occupation and reed boat-making and propelling skills relieved them from enslavement and displacement. Seletene (2012:83) recounted that Negede Woyto’s skills in making and providing the rist landowner’s utensils impressed him and his wife in Bahir Dar. As a result, the landlord granted the minority group members land for settlement. Social anthropologists such as Gamst (1979:238) and Freeman (2003) also agree that the Negede Woyto’s occupation was not the main reason for their marginalisation, and considering them as an occupational caste does not reflect the reality of the Negede Woyto.

Gamst (1979:235) explained that the Negede Woyto were marginalised because they “eat ritually polluted and unclean hippopotamus meat and are, therefore, considered fundamentally distinct by all their ethnic neighbours, such as the Amhara, Qemant, and Felasha (Bete Israel) and Agaws.” Dena Freeman (2003:23) added that the Amhara have kept a large social distance from the Negede Woyto because they consume hippopotamus meat, which is seen as polluting by the Amhara people. Both the Christian and Muslim Amhara have cut connections with the Negede Woyto despite having extensive economic links with them. Thus, the Negede Woyto community members were reduced from once autonomous people to landless, “caste-like, ritually polluted people” (Freeman, 2003; Subedi, 2013).

The Negede Woyto community members officially worship the Islamic religion. However, they are not acknowledged by Muslims from other neighbouring ethnic groups as true Muslims. Thus, they worshipped in their separate mosque located in “Kebele 16”. When asked to explain why they exclude the Negede Woyto, one Amhara Muslim informant responded, “The reason that creates the difference between the Amhara and the Woyto is their lack of sanitation.” Poor sanitation is considered by the informant to be the main reason for marginalising the Negede Woyto.
Members of the Negede Woyto community, for their part, relate the reason for their marginalisation to poverty. One informant explained how poverty became a cause of marginalisation as:

Like the other people, we, the Negede Woyto, want to wear clean clothes and eat fresh food. However, since we are poor, most of us cannot wear the clothes we aspire to have. Since we cannot feed them properly, our children used to go to the garbage to collect and eat leftover food if they found it there.

Taket Gedeme, interviewed in Bahir Dar, 06 June 2021

Though some members of the community related their lack of sanitation to poverty, their neighbours did not accept it. An Amhara informant rejected poverty as a convincing justification for a lack of sanitation. When explained her view, the informant asserted

The Negede Woyto people are human beings like ourselves. We share a kebele where we live together. Some of us went to school in a single room, and we frequently attend conferences and meetings as people who live in the same “kebele”. We do not despise them. But it’s their filth that we find repulsive. There are other poor individuals in our community besides the Negede Woyto. There are additional underprivileged folks who do not have enough food. However, the non-Woyto poor can wash their clothes and wear clean ones. However, the majority of Negede Woyto is unique. They are unclean if you see their clothing, face, or anything else of theirs. As a result, we don’t share anything that is theirs.12

The literature makes it very evident that poor sanitation is the main cause of discrimination against the Negede Woyto. They are marginalised due to poor hygiene, poverty, and a history of eating hippopotamus meat, which is taboo in Amhara society. The Negede Woyto community’s continued marginalisation is largely attributable to its transgressing food taboos in Amhara and Agaw society (Freeman, 2003; Gedef, 2014). Negede Woyto informants, however, disagree with this accusation and claim that, “In the past, we used to hunt and eat hippopotamus meat. But now it has been more than fifty years since the community abandoned eating hippopotamus meat. Even if there is a person

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12 Informant, Meseret: Female, from Amhara, during the interview she was university graduate and 35 years old, interviewed in Bahir Dar, 06 June 2023. Since she grew up near one of the Negede Woyto village, located in kebele 16 and attended high school with them, the informant knows the community very well.
who wants to eat hippopotamus meat, the hippopotamus is now extinct in the Lake Tana region. They keep blaming us for our old practices or habits.”

According to Freeman (2003), Locals view the Woyto as polluting subhuman who like eating disgusting food and living an irregular lifestyle. In a common tale about them, there is a story about the Negede Woyto’s “fall from grace”. It asserts that one of four brothers—one of whom was cursed and ostracized—was their ancestor. Because he slaughtered and ate a hippopotamus, which was an unclean sort of flesh that God forbade, the Negede Woyto father cursed (Yohanis, 1965).

Even though the Negede Woyto are Muslims, their Amhara coreligionists discriminate against them and do not consider them as genuine Muslims (Zerihun, 2010). Lack of strict adherence to Islamic rule (canons) and poor sanitation are served as an excuse for marginalising the Negede Woyto. In the one hand, the Negede Woyto Muslims are blamed for not regularly performing prayers and ablution. On the other hand, they are accused of incorporating alien elements into their Islamic religion. Negede Woyto informants, however, disagree with this criticism and attribute the reason for the lax adherence to Islamic law to poverty. The majority of them, according to a Negede Woyto informant, “cannot afford to wear clean clothes and don’t give alms because they are poor in food and money.”

In relation to the issue of including alien elements in the Negede Woyto religion, experts like Gedef (2014) and Zerihun (2010) affirm that there are certain differences between the Negede Woyto Islamic faith and other varieties of Islam. Gedef (2014) confirmed that the Negede Woyto still revered the ghosts of Lake Tana and the Abay River. The name of the sprite is ‘Abinas’. The Negede Woyto were adherents of the more traditional school of Islam, which permitted pilgrimage to reverently visit the tombs of holy figures, according to Zerihun (2010). These differences thus result in Negede Woyto’s exclusion.

Regarding how religion has historically been used as an excuse for marginalisation, throughout periods of imperial administration, the religion of the emperor was automatically considered to be the official religion. Therefore, even though Ethiopian emperors were not uniformly conservative, most of them favoured co-religionists and used to exclude others. Diversity acceptance was viewed at the time as a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation. A Christian king or a Muslim sultan would do this

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13 Informant, Amare, one of the community members who actively participate in their affairs, interviewed in Bahir Dar, May 2021.
14 Informants, Taket Gedeme, elder from Negede women, interviewed in Bahir Dar, May 2021.
in order to protect his fellow believers. The Negede Woyto, who resided in a mostly Christian area, were marginalised in this regard. However, it is pertinent to note that the Negede Woyto were principally subjected to social marginalisation. The Negede Woyto continued to coexist with Amhara society in distinct villages during the 1960s, both in rural and urban regions (Germew, 2018; Teclehaimanot, 2003). In the Pre 1974 Ethiopia, the discrimination against them was a serious problem. One Negede Woyto informant reflected on how the discrimination against Negede Woyto looked like in the 1960s as follows:

> Our community continued to live with the Amhara society, both in towns and in rural areas. However, they discriminated against us; even though we may feed and drink in their homes on some occasions, they used to break and throw away the utensils that we used for drinking and eating.15

From the views of informants, one can understand that in the post-occupation period, marginalisation of the Negede Woyto community became a serious social problem. On some occasions, like annual holidays and during crop harvesting time, the Negede Woyto used to go to the ‘rist landowner’s’ house for eating and drinking on invitation. This invitation can be considered a reward for Negede Woyto and the slaves, who used to serve the landowner trustfully. However, even in such lavish holidays, the invited slave and the Negede Woyto were not free from marginalisation. They ate and drank in a separate space and the utensils they used were never used again. They were broken or tossed away after use. The landlord and his family members believed that touching the Negede Woyto and using the utensils used by them could pollute them (Gedef, 2014; 218).

Regardless of “leading a multi-ethnic state that emerged from centuries of interaction and acculturation between ethnic groups” (International Crisis Group, 2009:3), the emperor made ethnic or nationality issues taboo. On the diplomatic front, emperor acted as a multiethnic state leader who ruled over his people by giving them equal opportunity and freedom. Practically, however, Emperor Haile Selassie’s empire state had no room for diversity (International Crisis Group, 2009).

Besides administrative reforms, Emperor Haile Selassie I attempted to modernize the country with British and American support. However, the Imperial government of Haile Selassie I faced popular revolts in different parts of the country (Markakis, 1979; Mulatu, 2017). When the revolts intensified in

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15 Informant, Worku Libemogn. Negede Woyto; age is 65; interviewed in Bahir Dar, on 16/05/2021.
the late 1960s, the student movement brought two pressing issues, the land question (“Land to the Tiller”) and the “nationality question,” to the forefront of national politics. The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), which took power as a result of the 1974 popular revolution, tried to address the two questions (Crummey, 2000).


The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), popularly known as the Derg, implemented a number of reforms after assuming power in the wake of the 1974 popular revolution (Andargachew, 1990; Markakis, 1979). The radical land reform introduced by Proclamation No. 31/1975 was one of the significant reforms carried out by the PMAC. Peasants and tenants received rights to use the land as a result of this proclamation, which also eliminated the previous system of land tenure (Andargachew, 1990).

A newly established political-administrative unit locally called a kebele (neighbourhood) was charged with the authority to enforce the reform (Daniel, 2012; Markakis, 1979:6). When the neighbourhoods were authorized to distribute rural land for people who could plough it themselves (Miller & Eyob, 2008:354), the Negede Woyto also participated in different committees and offices as implementers from the kebele to the Aweraja [sub-province] levels. The PMAC also gave the Negede Woyto community members land for constructing their huts in the villages where they are settled today, in Abay Mado and Kidane Mihert (Fasilo). Politically, the Derg provided the Negede Woyto an equal opportunity and legal protection to participate in the newly organised administrative systems, such as Kebele [neighbourhood]. Indeed, the Derg government also granted all ethnic groups equality.

The Derg changed the community’s pejorative name ‘Woyto’ to “Negede Woyto,” a term which was thought to be marginally more positive than Woyto (Ayalew et al., 2008). Additionally, the Derg government had implemented strict steps to reduce prejudice and marginalisation of the Negede Woyto minority group. In order to achieve this, it empowered and inspired the minority group to take an active role in local affairs. According to archival evidence, marginalised and downtrodden individuals were granted power at various levels in order to both empower them and safeguard the revolution.

To clear [protect] the authority of the peasants’ association at different levels from the landowner, feudal [oppressor], and the chiqa Shum (mudchief), the oppressed selected based on class have to take power
and maintain justice, security, and ensure the advancement of development activities.16

Although the main thrust of the notion in the report is to prevent feudal landlords from regaining control, it is clear from this archival source that for the first time, marginalised communities, like the Negede Woyto, obtained the right to own and use farmland from the Degr. The Negede Woyto, who lacked oxen, could not, however, plough it themselves like the other impoverished, who simply possessed land-use rights (Miller & Eyob, 2008).

Several ethnic groups' languages, cultures, and histories were examined and made public during the Derg government. The research was carried out by teams of academics assembled under the supervision of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES)17 (Getachew, 2018; Mulatu, 2017). Likewise, the Negede Woyto informant claimed that it was the Derg that made them known as humans. The Negede Woyto give credit to the Derg government for granting them equal opportunity, freeing them from marginalisation, and from “subhuman” treatment.

In fact the Derg government avoided promoting ethnic identification because they saw it as a danger to the country’s territorial integrity and unity (Beza, 2012). The Derg, like its predecessors, forbade discussion of ethnicity. Practically speaking, the Negede Woyto had also granted equality and freedom under the Derg government. However, the reforms and initiatives to give the community members more power were unsuccessful. Although the government provided them with legal protection, their low status and lack of education precluded them from having a say in important local decisions that affected them (Eppe, 2018). Their manner of life and social interactions with the larger society didn't improve their condition as much as was hoped.

Gamst (1979), who published a study on the Negede Woyto four years after the revolution, discovered that there was still a significant social distancing between the Negede Woyto and Amhara society, despite improvements in their access to public services and participation in political life under the Derg government. In other words, the Negede Woyto were nonetheless marginalised and subject to social exclusion despite existence of economic interactions between the two groups.
Economically, under the Derg government, the Negede Woyto of Bahir Dar continued to engage in reed boat construction, fishing, basket making, carving stone mills, and employment in low-salaried, arduous jobs. However, fishing, which until 1986 had been the monopoly of the Negede Woyto, was taken up by members of mainstream society. In comparison with the Negede Woyto the newly organized fishermen from mainstream society who equipped themselves with motorboats and better fishing technology controlled the potential fishing areas and made Negede Woyto fishers less productive (Vijverberg et al., 2009). Traditional fishing made the Negede Woyto less competitive (Gedef, 2014; Shewit et al., 2018).

6 Exclusion of the Negede Woyto Minority Groups Under Minority Friendly Federal System

As stipulated in the transitional period charter Article 2 (sub-arts 1–3) and later in the FDRE (1995) Constitution Art. 39 (sub-arts 1–4), nations, nationalities, and peoples or ethnic groups were given the right to self-determination and up to cession. However, as provided in a proclamation for national and or regional self-governments, Proclamation No. 7/1992, Article 3(1), only ethnic groups with a large population size were awarded the right to self-government. Regardless of the existence of more than seventy-six ethnic groups to inhabit the country in the early 1990s, only fourteen national and regional governments were established, and following the adoption and enforcement of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution in 1995, the number of national and regional states was reduced to nine. Though the nine regional states were established in the names of major ethnic groups, they were not inhabited by homogenous ethnic groups (Assefa, 2017). As indicated in the same proclamation, Proclamation No. 7/1992, Article 3(1) that provided the names of ethnic groups granted the right to establish self-government at district or above levels, some minority groups were left to live as minorities in administrative regions established by other ethnic groups.

The Negede Woyto were one of the minority nationality group denied the ability to form their own local government because they were a minority nationality with a small population. Concerning constitutional provisions that permit non-titular ethnic groups to live in other national regional states concurrently, the EPRDF-led government did not give them the authority to set up their administration. Despite its rhetorical attempts to portray itself as a defender of minority rights by establishing institutions and legislation that favour minorities, the EPRDF-led administration treated minorities essentially no better than previous governments had (Barata, 2012).
6.1 The Negede Woyto; Human Rights Violation and Indignation

Under the EPDRF [1]-led government, the human rights situation for historically excluded groups deteriorated more than it had under the previous regime. The Negede Woyto can serve as an excellent example of how the EPRDF-led administration made minorities’ lives and human rights conditions worse. The Negede Woyto lost its legal protection and the right to participate in local politics. In contrast to the Derg, the EPRDF-led government made ethnicity a formal element in national politics (Abbink, 2011), and under Ethiopia’s ethnic-based federalism, citizenship rights are not a useful tool to protect minority groups living in regional states created by an ethnic group or society not affiliated with the minority (Beken, 2015; Temesgen, 2019).

Besides being minority nationality, the Negede Woyto of Amhara Regional/national state are non-territorial minority groups. Non-territorial minorities are those who reside in regional states that were founded and are owned by ethnic groups that are not related to them, according to Assefa (2017). No land is recorded in the name of a minority group residing in a regional state created and controlled by other ethnic groups with no blood or kinship links with the minority in question. The Negede Woyto are consequently unable to exercise their right to self-government because of their numerical disadvantage and position as a non-territorial minority.18

Even though they could cast a vote in the national elections, the Negede Woyto minority group does not have any candidates for public office. They are represented by delegates from Amhara. Like other non-territorial minority groups, the Negede Woyto doesn’t have political representatives that act on their behalf (Beken, 2015). Nevertheless, because elected officials’ priorities individuals from their own ethnic group, the interests of non-territorial minority groups could not be reflected in local and national parliaments.19

In a country where ethnicity has been a formal element in national politics and serves as a basic political resource to mobilise society (Aalan, 2006), the non-Woyto political representatives who got their votes before joining local or national parliaments cannot reflect the voice of the Negede minority group. Like other non-territorial minority groups (Assefa, 2017), the Negede Woyto of

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18 According to Proclamation No. 7/1992, which defines self-governance, a minority nationality is one that, due to its tiny population, is unable to establish self-governance at the district level. According to Article 39 of the FDER Constitution, every ethnic group has complete self-government over the land they occupy. a public official, a member of the Negede Woyto who had actively participated in local affairs, and an informant. Interview conducted on May 17, 2021, in Bahir Dar.

19 Informant, Negede Woyto member who had been actively participated in community affairs, and public servant. Interviewed in Bahir Dar on 17/05/2021.
Bahir Dar, besides their numerical inferiority, are considered a non-territorial minority. Thus, their present-day status as a non-territorial community does not qualify them to establish self-government at the district or kebele level.\(^{20}\)

To show how a lack of political representation harms the Negede Woyto, it is pertinent to raise two cases. When the wetlands of Lake Tana, which were historically inhabited by the Negede Woyto as abode land and to which their belief system practised attachment, were converted to other land use forms such as construction sites and recessional farmland, the Negede Woyto presented their grievances, stating that their natural resource-based livelihood would be endangered. But they did not get a positive response from the local authorities. When the wetland of Lake Tana degraded and converted their livelihood, which rested on fishing and papyrus as raw material for making utensils and papyrus boats, both would be endangered. (Ayalew et al., 2008).

On the contrary, recessional farmers who illegally expand their farmland by destroying wetlands and natural resources are not only given land use rights certificates by local government agents but also encouraged to produce twice or three times at any cost (Ibrahim and Menweylet, 2018). Nor were the Negede Woyto consulted before the decisions on the distribution of the land to the local youth. Local government officials gave out the wetland to the youth as farm plots (McCartney et al. 2008:18; McCann & Blanc, 2018).

Lack of tenure security is another major problem the community has faced since 1991. As pointed out by Zerihun (2010:3), since the Negede Woyto has no tenure security, most of the time they construct their huts in areas where they consider them unusable by the government. Informants also confirm that in couplets as

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\text{during the imperial period, we were in Shum Abo; we were in Fasil during the time of Mengistu/Derg; and after pushing and pushing, they reached us at Debanke, a burial place on the outskirt of the city}^{21}\]

When Bahir Dar has grown and expanded continuously, the Negede Woyto community of Bahir Dar has been pushed into shantytowns (Dessalegn et al., 2013; Zerihun, 2010). The EPRDF-led government did not even give ownership certificates for the land they received during the Derg government in 1979 E.C. in Kebele 16. Informants confirmed that when the Negede Woyto asked

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\(^{20}\) Proclamation No7/1992 (chapter 1, Article 1(sub art.6); one electoral constituency is established for million (1,000, 000) people (Beza, 2013: 97. The Negede Woyto of Bahir Dar who was less than 2000 according to 1994 national census was not ethnically represented.

\(^{21}\) Abdella Hassen, an elder from Negede Woyto, age 76, was interviewed in Bahir Dar, on 5 April 2021.
the Bahir Dar City Service Administration (Mezegaja Bet) for an ownership certificate, they did not get a positive response. Sometimes experts used to go and measure the land where Negev huts were built. But they did not give the owners an ownership certificate. When the owners asked the City Service Administration, its experts usually responded to the Negede people as follows: “Since the huts have no cadastral plan and do not register to the title, the lands our huts are built on are squalor.” At present, the Negede Woyto has lived in chronic poverty (Ajala, 2008; Gedef, 2014), and some members are indignant to the extent of collecting spilled food from the garbage.

7 Conclusion

The Negede Woyto have experienced numerous life trajectories since they first arrived in the Lake Tana area. At least until the 17th century, the Negede Woyto people were able to thrive and sustain an independent existence in beautiful isolation because of their native knowledge and capacity to adapt to harsh situations both surrounding the sea and on dry lands. Following the shift of the administrative centre of the Christian kingdom to the Lake Tana region, however, in one way or another, interaction with the Amhara/Agaw society increased.

Regardless of unfriendly relations between the Negede Woyto and the Christian society, their valuable services as reed boat makers and propellers to the wider society protected the Negede Woyto from displacement from their territories until the first three decades of the 20th century. However, for centuries, the socioeconomic interaction between two groups had been limited to exchanging items and working together in cultivating and harvesting crops. The expansion and consolidation of the Ethiopian long-distance trade that extended to the Lake Tana region in the 19th century brought the Negede Woyto new job opportunities and transformed their occupations.

Before the 19th century, the Negede Woyto had self-isolated and lived as an autonomous society. Between the late 19th and first three decades of the 20th centuries, the Negede Woyto and the Amhara societies established close economic interdependence. However, since 1930, local and global developments such as the exhaustive hunting of hippopotamus and the

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22 Informants: Enguday Agmasie; Misganaw Abaw; Sendeke Tadesse, were interviewed in Bahir Dar, in May 2021. W/ro Enguday Sayid, since we are very poor we cannot build a standard or better house, and the other informants told the researcher that some of the houses have a plan. From my observation, their hosting is not only low in quality but also very much condensed.
introduction of motorboats by the Italians have seriously affected the entire life of the Negede Woyto and reduced their status from economically self-sufficient and politically autonomous to marginalisation. Most importantly, in the post-Italian occupation period, the community was considered a “ritually polluted caste-like minority group” and treated by members of the wider society nearly as "subhuman".

There is no specific incident that can be pointed out as the starting point for the marginalisation of the Negede Woyto. Local and global developments that led to the introduction of better rifles for hunting hippopotamus, their main source of meat, and the introduction of motorboats drastically affected their livelihoods and made the Negede Woyto dependent on the Amhara society in the form of dominant and subordinate relationships. Traditional fishing and income from precarious activities could not prevent Woyto from suffering from hunger. Following the development of towns such as Bahir Dar and the subsequent increase in demand for land, the Negede Woyto were affected by push and pull factors to move into urban centres, leaving their traditional inhabitable land located in and around the wetlands of Lake Tana.

In the 1950s and 1960s, while some members of the minority group decided to lead a life in rural areas by hiring oxen and land through sharecropping agreements, the other members migrated to towns in search of labour-demanding jobs. Both agriculture in rural areas and daily work did not secure food for mere survival, other than increasing their dependence on landlords. Consequently, in the 1960s, the Negede Woyto had become socially and economically marginalised and politically excluded.

Though the PMAC (Derg) and EPRDF-led governments tried to address minority questions in their own ways, the Derg, as a socialist, gave equal recognition and legal protection to all who it called oppressed sections of society, and the EPRDF, by empowering and protecting minority groups under ethnic-based federalism. Though minimizing marginalisation and social exclusion was not an easy task to accomplish within a short period for the Derg, it provided the Negede Woyto equal opportunity in accessing material and non-material resources, such as public resources, and ensured political participation. Though the EPRDF-led government introduced a minority-friendly constitution, it practically ignored historically marginalised minority groups such as the Negede Woyto. The national constitution did not protect minorities and non-territorial minority groups living in regional states established by other ethnic groups. The Negede Woyto of Bahir Dar is one of these groups that are economically found in chronic poverty; political participation is highly restricted, and their rights are worsened than before in post-1991 Ethiopia.
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