

## ACADEMIC NEWS

### **Gondar Archives Project Report on Experience Sharing Field Trip**

#### *The Gondar Zone Archives: A Summary*

Gondar used to be the country's political centre since its foundation around 1636 to the early nineteenth century. The central position of Gondar continued well into contemporary times. The Italians made Gondar the capital of the Amhara *governorato* ('province') and, later on, during the Haile Selassie I regime the city was the capital of the vast Begemdir and Semien *teqlay gizat* ('governorate general'). Successively, during the Derg regime the province of Begemdir was renamed Gondar *kifle hager* with Gondar as its capital.

Throughout the times the administrative archives of both *teqlay gizat* and *kifle hager* Gondar administrative divisions have been preserved at the North Gondar Zone Administration Office in Gondar city. Since its foundation the Office occupies a modernist building from the Italian occupation, the former *Commando Truppe*, i.e. the office of the chief of staff of the army, built in 1936-37. In addition to administrative files from the Haile Selassie I and Derg's periods, the archive also includes some earlier documents from the Italian period as well as more recent documents. These documents are typically stored in standard office folders. A rough estimate of the contents of the archive is 2,528 folders for the upper two rooms (those were visited by the team) and probably the same amount for the lower rooms (which were difficult to access). In total, the archive is estimated to contain a minimum of 5,000 folders and a maximum of 10,000 folders.

This important archive, however, is in a critical condition. The historical documents are threatened by several factors, from climatic (rain and humidity) and biological hazards (bird's dung, rats, mould etc.) to human mis-handling. Moreover, the folders have neither been catalogued, nor been inventoried or labelled properly so that its consultation is cumbersome. These conditions notwithstanding several researchers, local and foreign, have carried out important research in the archive and have stated the importance of this centre for the study of the recent history of the Gondar province and of the contemporary Ethiopian state.

In order to study the solutions that could save the archive from its dire current state and to render it suitable for public consultation and research, in early 2016 the University of Gondar, under the Department of History and Heritage Management established a committee. The members of the committee are Dr Andreu Martinez, Mr Girma Tayachew, and Mr Abebe Fantahun. The committee continues with previous efforts carried out by members of the Department of History and Heritage Management to study and

preserve the Gondar historical archives (see Debash Yimam, Ebrahim Damtew, Adera Getaneh, Awegichew Amare & Marshet Girmay, 2014; Debash Yimam & Ebrahim Damtew, 2015). Early in the year the committee drafted a proposal that was submitted to the university authorities. Based on the proposal, the committee prepared an experience sharing field trip in different archives and institutes located in Addis Ababa and Debre Markos University.



Figure 1: View of one of the storage shelves of Gondar Zonal Archives  
Source: Photo Andreu Martínez, 2016.



Figure 2: Detail view of damage caused by bird's dung in Gondar Zonal Archives.  
Source: Photo Andreu Martínez, 2016.

*Experience sharing field trip: Addis Ababa*

On November 28, 2016, the three committee members went by car from Gondar to Addis Ababa. On the next day, the committee visited the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES), where they met *ato* Ahmed Zekaria, coordinator of the IES. An interview was conducted with Ahmed. He explained that the buildings in Gennate Leul palace were given to Addis Ababa University by order of Emperor Haile Sillase I. The decision was taken at a critical time because by then it was known that several documents and objects had been looted and had been sold to foreigner collectors and dealers.

The IES officially opened in 1963 and it included three main centres or areas of activity:

- Studies and research
- Book centre
- Archival centre

The Institution was run by Stanislaw Chojnacki. Since its inception the IES functioned as a repository of public and private documents, objects and art. Government ex-ministers and top officials, seeing the value of such an institution, submitted their documents and collections to the IES.

Ahmed continued the interview emphasizing that archival preservation is a difficult task because it is like collecting the country's secrets.

Ahmed concluded the interview with the following recommendations:

- the first task shall be equipping the building with good quality shelves and making sure that the atmospheric conditions are suitable for the documents;
- implementing a digitizing programme that shall both help preserving the documents and make them easily available to the researchers;
- making the archive a repository not only of the Gondar city and region but also of the University, since this is the oldest institution at the country level;
- when the documents are stored and classified, the task shall be to arrange them based on themes like security, economics, history, tax, religion, justice and so on.
- finally, proper consideration must be given to the space, because IES has been suffering from lack of space for its archive. To remedy this situation the centre received the Wolde Mesqel residence in Kazanchis area where currently a large part of the archive is preserved.

The next day, the committee met with the President of the IES, Dr Ahmed Hassen. Dr Ahmed shared with us his views on archives. He explained that old archives are the vital properties of the society and they need our immediate action in order to preserve and transfer them to the next generation. According to him, a wide space such as a hall type room has to be arranged and the documents should be placed in sections according to their main thematic, such as religious, educational, political, socio-economic and oral

sources. Documents can be collected from individuals who had direct relation with the previous governments. This type of sources should be catalogued according to the place where they were obtained, the name of the person who delivered the document and the date of the delivery. Moreover, Dr Ahmed advised us to be careful when transferring the archive's documents from their original location due to the risk of losing pages and he also warned of the possible health hazards that might affect the documents, such as dust and chemicals from old papers.

Further points raised by Dr Ahmed can be summarized as follows:

- the first activity will be to constitute a permanent committee. The committee shall be formed by professionals from different disciplines but it should be led by historians;
- following this, a draft proposal should be written;
- the archive should be organized with categories based on themes;
- the documents should be digitized and converted into soft copy. Dr Ahmed reminded the situation he faced when the Ministry of Defence once had the intention to destroy all the archived documents that were older than 2008/09;
- an additional task of the archivists shall be to conduct oral history interviews in order to create an archive of the oral history of the Gondar region.



Figure 3: Abebe Fentahun and Girma Tayachew during the interview with Dr Ahmed Hassen

Source: Photo Andreu Martinez, 2016.

On December 1, the committee visited the Wolde Mesqel Centre in Kazan-chis area, the physical place of the archives of the IES. The Centre includes a large number of documents that seem to be properly kept. However, the Centre has some shortcomings, such as the fact that it is not opened on a

regular basis and so researchers can only access to it on demand and depending on the availability of the staff.



Figure 4: Main building of the Wolde Mesqel Centre Archives, Kazanchis  
Source: Photo Andreu Martinez, 2016.

On December 2, the committee visited the National Archives of Ethiopia (NAE). The Public Library “Wemezekir” currently the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency was established in 1944. The Public Library was first inaugurated by Emperor Hayle Sillase I and started providing service with books donated by the ruler. Since the NAE was founded when most African countries were under colonial rule, this institution became a symbol of Ethiopia’s freedom. Yet, the archives were only properly constituted in 1977 (Smidt, 2014). The building of the NAE, located at the heart of the city, is an impressive structure that dates from the 1970s and that hosts the National Library and a research centre as well. In 1999 A.M. (2007/08 A.D.), by proclamation No.179/1999, the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency was upgraded to national institution receiving the new name of Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency and with the values of effective and efficient service delivery, transparency, responsiveness, participatory leadership, respect professional ethics, and readiness to change (Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency Brochure, 2016). The Agency has been delivering service to researchers, scholars, academics, writers, higher education students and the public at large (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1999 A.M.).

At the NAE we first met Mr. Mekonen Kefale, director of the Customers’ Relation and Studies Directorate. Mekonen explained the ways how to preserve and organize the archives in terms of its legal framework. The archives found in the regions are considered the property of regional archive whereas the archives related to national issues are considered national

property and collected at the NAE. The NAE hosts more than 350,000 documents. Most of them are collected from the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior was an independent and centralized office serving from 1944 to 1991. All circular letters and messages of the country passed through this office.

After the talk with Mr. Mekonen we met Mr Abiy Hailu, the team leader of Microfilms and Manuscripts Service Delivery. Mr Abiy briefed us on the general services delivered by the NAE. He also advised on how to manage and organize archives centres. Thus, he shared his ideas about what the NAE expects from the University of Gondar in order to establish the Gondar archives. The archive will need a structure that encompasses crucial issues such as budget and manpower as well as a legal framework.

Following that, Mr Isayas, member of service delivery, offered us a short visit to the archives. This enabled us to see one of the huge rooms that shelters some of the 350,000 files preserved at the NAE. Mr Isayas briefed us on things related to the archive's organization, such as the document arrangement method. He also indicated some important collections hosted at NAE, such as the personal documents of Blata Mersienhazen and Kebede Tessema, two influential courtiers of Hayle Sillase I regime. He drew out a file from the collection of Zewdie Gebresilasse and showed us one of the latter's private letters written some fifty years back and which was dedicated to the benefits of building a dam on the River Abbay (Blue Nile).

The NAE has a Microfilm and Video Centre that is run by Ms. Martha Mersha, senior expert of microfilm and video. There, documents such as *menzuma*, psalms, traditional and modern songs, are preserved. This office also collects film documents by three methods: by purchasing, by proclamation (legal repository), and by exchange.

On Monday, December 5, the committee visited again the NAE in order to be shown the protocols and directives used by the institution. In 2012 the NAE developed an appraisal criterion in order to select the documents that could be archived and those that are not of interest for the centre. It also issued a legal framework policy that makes of the NAE a model institute at the country level.

The staffs of NAE conducted a study of the documents from the Ministry of Interior and selected those that fit a series of predetermined criteria. Following that all 'dead files' were transferred to NAE.

The collections today preserved in the NAE can be summarized as follows: newspapers published since 1925

- periodicals and magazines since 1941
- charts, pamphlets, photographs, private documents and research papers
- international organizations' documents
- official government and public documents
- audio and video recordings

- ancient manuscripts
- about 16,000 microfilmed documents
- legal deposit collections
- bibliographic publications
- ancient maps and books published abroad about Ethiopia
- posters and other products published in various languages.

Among its most valuable treasures, the NAE is the custodian of about twelve ancient manuscripts that were registered as world literary heritages by UNESCO in 2005. These include a *Psalterium Davids* (16th century), St Paul's Epistles (15th century), The Four Gospels (14th century), the Homily of the Passion of Our Lord and the Service for the Passion Week (15th c), the Book of Enoch (15th c), the *Fetha Negest* (Nomocanon; 19th c), the Anaphoras (17th c), A History of Menelik II (19th c), A History of the Kings (20th c). In addition, it has paramount documents dating to the nineteenth century, including a Letter of King Tewodros II to Queen Victoria of England, A Letter of King Menelik II to Tsar Nicolas, and a letter of King Sahle Sillase of Shoa to the Queen of Great Britain (Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency, Brochure, 2016).

*Experience sharing field trip: Debre Markos*

On December 6 and 7 the committee moved to Debre Markos. The aim was to visit the Haddis Alemayehu Culture and Studies Centre at Debre Markos University. The archive originally was kept at the 'Beta Mengest' (govern building or palace) of *negus* Teklehaimanot in Debre Markos town. The origins of the archive go back to Hayle Sillase I's regime when Debre Markos became the capital of the Gojjam governorate general, which was divided into seven *awrajas* (i.e. provinces). Then official government documents were simply kept on the floor at different rooms of the Beta Mengest and the officials did not care about them. Ultimately, soon after Debre Markos University was founded, its officials showed an interest in this regional archive and they received a positive response from the government officials. This led to the transfer of the archive to the University, which became its custodian.



Figure 5: View of one of the storing rooms of Haddis Alemayehu Culture and Studies Centre, Debre Markos University. In the middle at Gizachew Andargie, Director of the Institute; to his left, Mr Solomon, head officer of the archives.

Source: Photo Andreu Martinez, 2016.

Figure 6: Detail view of one of the rooms of the archive.

Source: Photo Andreu Martinez, 2016.



Figure 6: Detail view of one of the rooms of the archive

Source: Photo Andreu Martinez, 2016.

The responsibility of safeguarding and managing the archive was given to the Department of History and Heritage Management of the same university. According to *ato* Gizachew Andargie from Haddis Alemayehu Culture and Studies Centre the first task of the Debre Markos University's archives committee was drafting a proposal with the help of all department staffs. Then a catalogue number was prepared and the files were registered. Following this, an Id. number was given for each classifier inside the files. The work of registration and documentation took about six months. Thereafter, in 2011, the documents were moved and transported to Debre Markos University. The staff members also brought archives from Hulet Eju Enessie *woreda*, Motta town. The total documents are currently being preserved in four different locations. This fact makes the archive difficult to operate and it also renders it of difficult access for the researchers.

*Ato* Gizachew Andargie continued explaining that the documents were arranged according to eleven subjects, including financing, land issues, education, justice, boundary demarcation, and tax. The total number of folders is 11,000. Until the present date several researchers have used the archives, including national and foreign scholars. Among the problems faced by the Centre are shortage of rooms and shortage of manpower.

#### *Problems of the archives*

During the visit to different centres, the problems observed by the Gondar committee are the following ones:

- Institute of Ethiopian Studies: lack of storage room for its ever expanding collections and inability to digitize the documents
- NAE: lack of specialized manpower
- Debre Markos University: lack of a large storage room, shortage of office rooms and lack of manpower

#### *Ways forward*

After the field visit and experience sharing, the committee has established a plan to be undertaken by University of Gondar.

Short term plans:

- requesting temporary rooms
- purchase of request of standard shelving furniture to store archival documents
- preparing a project proposal in order to bring the Gondar Zonal Archives to University of Gondar
- provide training on archival science to University of Gondar staff members and officers from North and South Gondar Zones.
- make a temporary register (inventory) of the archival documents
- establish funding strategies

Long term plans

- construction of a standard building to host the archival centre
- organizing human resources
- make the archival centre open for researchers

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#### **Hiob Ludolf Centre Summer School for Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, 27 September to 1 October 2016**

An international school on Ethiopian and Eritrean Manuscript studies was held in Hiob Ludolf Institute of Ethiopian Studies (HLCES), Hamburg University, Germany. The school was organized by the HLCES at Hamburg University with support from Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures and the projects TraCES and Beta Maṣāḥāft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea

The school started on September 26, 2016, with a registered number of over sixty participants. The main objective of the conference was creating

platforms to share research experiences concerning oriental manuscript studies in the contemporary digital era. Senior scholars from within the discipline were invited from different countries, including Germany, Italy, and Russia. They shared their lifetime experiences and presented research papers on the thematic area.

The school was officially opened on September 27 with an inaugural speech by Prof. Dr. Alessandro Bausi, the Head of HLCES. The training continued for the following five days. The training begun by an introduction to Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript cultures and by a history of the research in these fields. The presenters pondered on more than a century old research tradition and progress in the discipline. Beside this, other lectures focused on research methodology and theoretical explanations of codicology on Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscripts, philology, indexing and cataloguing. The programme also included a practical session wherein trainees were invited to engage themselves on cataloguing manuscripts under the guidance of the higher-ranking scholars of HLCES. In addition, hindrances in field research and potential solutions were discussed among participant and researchers.

Junior researchers engaged with Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript studies participated in the training. Almost half of the trainees were Ethiopian and Ethiopian by birth and the rest European. Eritrea was represented by a fellow from Asmara. Mekele University sent a large group of participants compared with other Ethiopian institutes. Other Ethiopian institutes represented were Addis Ababa University, Bahir Dar University and my own centre, University of Gondar. The training finalized on October 1, 2016 and a certificate was given to the participants.

Personally, it was a great opportunity to participate, together with other Ethiopian and Eritrean scholars, in the summer school. The school gave us the chance to learn scientific methodologies in manuscript studies and to get experience from experts in the field. Another positive thing is that the HLCES has the intention to repeat the same program in the coming years, allowing other junior researchers from Ethiopia and Eritrea to profit from it. Yet, the length of the training, which was held only for a week, was too short to let me getting acquainted with the new city and the discipline. Additionally, the grant generously given by the HLCES to some of the participants, including myself, did not cover transportation expenses and only accommodation expenses and a per diem money was granted. I hope that in the future the HLCES will tackle this issue and thus help interested junior researchers from Ethiopia and Eritrea who live of modest incomes to benefit from the programme. Last but not the least, I am convinced that the knowledge and experiences acquired during the school will help me in supporting University of Gondar in launching in the near future relevant projects focusing on the important discipline of manuscript studies.

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