

Land and Society in Ethiopian History

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The historic society of Christian Ethiopia recognized two fundamental forms of land rights: rest and gult. Standard interpretations understand the former as the inherited right of farmers to till their land and to pass it on, by inheritance, to their children and the latter as essentially an administrative right to levy tribute in return for service to the state or church. Accordingly, Ethiopia's historic ruling class is viewed as lacking direct connection to the land and holding only tenuous rights to their positions of overlordship, positions which related them primarily to their subject farmers rather than to the land itself. However, a careful reading of the extensive material concerning land, contained primarily as marginalia and endnotes in church manuscripts, reveals a significantly different picture. While this material reveals little about rest rights, it reveals at length and in variety the different ways in which society established, held and transferred gult rights. Rather than seeing these rights as essentially administrative, I argue that they ought to be construed as property rights in land. I hope to demonstrate through examples of gult documents from the 18th century how the Ethiopian ruling class acquired, maintained and transferred its rights in land. Since overwhelmingly the material pertains to land in service to the church, I also hope to demonstrate that it also has application in the secular realm.