



# The Gonderian Period Bridges of Ethiopia: Status and Prospects for Tourism

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## Abstract

Heritage and Tourism are invariably closely interlinked. This article describes the Gonderian period (1508 -1784) bridges, their status and their uses for tourism. It provides insights and information about the bridges that were constructed in Ethiopia. A qualitative study approach was used which was descriptive in its research design. Both primary and secondary data were collected through focus group discussions, interviews, personal observations and document analysis. The targeted informants for the data collection were local historians, employees working in tourism offices and bureaux at all levels and various tourist guides selected purposively by means of a snowball sampling technique. The data was analyzed and presented thematically. It describes eight bridges of the period and ascertained that they are not yet used for any tourism purpose. All the bridges have a lack of conservation problem such as artificial maintenance, poor road access leading to heavy traffic on them, urbanization and development pressure, agricultural expansion, a lack of attention from the government's side, a lack of awareness from the local community, documentation problems, heritage zoning issues (core and buffer zone demarcation) and clear rights of ownership. The researchers recommend that the bridges should be promoted as tourism and heritage sites and infrastructure should be developed in order to use the bridges for tourism. Conservation management plans must be prepared, core and and buffer zones must be delineated and alternative roads must be constructed. Furthermore it is posited that community awareness must be boosted with constant training on the importance of heritage as a source of tourism income and of course, for better maintenance and conservation of the bridges which have great historical value.

**Keywords:** Bridges, conservation, Gonderian Period, heritage, tourism

## Introduction

### The Gonderian Period Bridges

The Gonderian period was a period between 1508 CE and 1784 CE. The number of bridges which were constructed during the Gonderian period is not known exactly, due to a lack of prior study and available sources. The bridges are estimated to exceed ten in number. Most of them are in and around Gondar, and some in Gojjam and Shewa. These bridges are often referred to us the Portuguese bridges although there is no clear source supporting such a designation. Hay (2002) writing about Ethiopia as the unknown land: mentioned that William Coffin, an Englishman who visited Gondar in 1814 stated that on approaching the town "he noted one of the old 'Portuguese' bridges, constructed in Fasilades' time". He was also told by a priest that there were several of bridges, called *Fasil Dildey* (Yared, 1999). Fiseha, (2010) has mentioned that the Emperor Fasilades (r.1632-1667) had constructed many bridges and Pankhurst (1969) has



stated that there were in fact seven bridges.

This clearly indicates that there is some confusion as to whom the bridge constructions can be attributed. Among the bridges constructed in the period, *Defecha* bridge (adjacent to the Angereb river dam), *Genfo Quch* or *Gobate* (also called *Seytan Metaya*) on Gilgel Megech are in the city of Gondar. Gobate bridge is found in Infranz, while Rib and Megech bridges are outside the city of Gondar, in the North Gondar administrative Zone. Alata bridge (on the way to the Blue Nile falls) and Qorata bridge are found in Gojjam and Gur (Next to Debre Libanos Monastery) Shewa respectively.

## Research methodology

The research method used for this article was entirely qualitative in its approach. This research described a current situation (Yin, 2002) and was thus descriptive in research design. This article seeks to describe the status of the bridges that were constructed during the Gonderian period and their possible uses in tourism development. Information regarding the work throughout the paper was based on physical observations by the researchers and the information they obtained through interviewing consenting respondents and a literature review of related works. The data that is both primary and secondary were collected through focus group discussions, interviews, personal observations and documentary analysis. The informants were selected purposively by snowball sampling techniques. The targets for the data collection were local historians, employees working in tourism bureaux and offices at all levels, and some tourist guides. Thematic analysis was used to analyze and present the qualitative data which was collected.

## A brief description of the bridges

### A. Alata bridge

Alata Bridge is supported by eight arches, and has an overall length of about 64m and a width of 2m. Its widest arch has a span of 8m. Chiari (2012) when referring to a well informed Jesuit Jerome Lobo, indicated that emperor Susenyos had 'procured' funds for the building of the first bridge on the Abay (Nile), namely, the Alata Bridge. It can be thus surmised from the above statement by Chiari that Alata Bridge was constructed by Emperor Susenyos (r.1607-1632).

Traditionally, people attributed the bridge construction to Emperor Fasilades. Chiari (2015) thinks that this is due to the unfavourable reputation gained by Susenyos after he embraced the Catholic faith. But, according to the informants and the researchers interviewed, they believe it might be due to the oral tradition passed down and which attributed its construction to him, as he had many bridges constructed. However, his affairs with his concubines, his marriage with two Roman sisters Zeliha and Meliha and the consequent killing of the 9,999 monks [there are arguments that monks were not the only ones killed] (Pankhurst, 1969) tainted his reputation. Wise counsel was given to him by his father's old slave to build a bridge so that those who cross would pray for his soul saying "May God save the soul of Fasilades!" (Pankhurst, 1969; Yared, 1999; Fisseha, 2010).

Another source, which explains the life of Saint Abune Hara Dingle, explains that during the 16th century, construction of a bridge connecting Begemdir and Gojjam was ordered by Emperor Fasilades, and Dejazmach Amoniyos was assigned by the emperor to supervise the construction thereof. The statement therefore suggests that this bridge was constructed during the reign of Emperor Fasilades (r.1632-1667).



*Alata Bridge*

*Source: Researchers own*

### **B. Gobatit bridge**

The Gobatit bridge It is also termed as the Guzara Bridge. It is in Gondar Zuriya Woreda Debisan Tikara Kebele on the river to the east of the road which leads from Imfiranz to Bahir Dar. This bridge is also known as a 'Portuguese' Bridge. This bridge is claimed to be the first ever constructed in Ethiopia. It was constructed in the same year that the Castle of Guzara was constructed by Emperor Sertse Dingil (r. 1563-1597). It was constructed by using limestone and stone and it is semi-circular in shape and its name 'Gobatit' relates to its shape. A participant in the study described it as "a manifestation of the then art of construction". Currently, this bridge is in use by the nearby community and the regularly use it as a cattle crossing point.



*Gobati (Guzara) Bridge*

*Source: North Gondar Zone Culture & Tourism office.*

### **C. Sebara Dildiy (The Broken Bridge)**

The Sebara Bridge ('broken' bridge in Amharic) is one of two stone bridges built over the Blue Nile River and it was constructed in the 17th century during the times of emperor Susenyos (r. 1607-1632). It is located to the north east of Motta Town and it takes roughly four hours to reach by foot . The name 'broken' bridge originated after the five years of Italian colonial occupation. During this occupation, the Ethiopian patriots deliberately broken part of the bridge to restrict the movement of Italian forces during the hostilities and so it became a part of the guerilla war against Italian occupation. This bridge was 60m long and 4m in width, as stated in a report by the East Gojjam Zone Culture and Tourism Office. After the liberation of Ethiopia from the oppressive Italian occupation from 1936 - 1943, the Sebara Dildiy people wishing to cross over to

one or other side, had to hold onto a rope while being pulled to the opposite side. Consequently, a new bridge, the 'bridge of hope', was constructed. This information was obtained from the East Gojjam Zone Culture and Tourism Office which reported that the bridge was repaired during the reign of Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia.



*Sebara Dildy*  
Source: *Perstine world*.

#### D. Genfokuch bridge

This magnificent bridge is also termed as either *Gobatit* and *Seytan Metaya* Bridge (literally meaning the place leading to the Devil) and it is located on the Gilgel Megech river. Gilgel Megech means 'small' Megech River. It is also often referred to as Qura Mewayya and is formed by the confluence of the two main rivers of the city, the Angereb and Qeha Rivers respectively. It is located in Gondar city Kebele 18 (Kebele is literally means district) near the village of Genfokuch, and is about 8km from the city center (Piassa). The Bridge is about 36m long and slightly more than 4 m in circumference round, while it is 4.20m long. Chiari asserted in 2015 that its design is unique in that one of its four arches is larger and more arched than the other three. The bridge extends to a 5.7m height. It assumed that the 'devil' linked reputation was gained due to its unusual structure (Monti and Alessandro, 1938). It is through the largest arch that the river flows and it is 8.95m wide. Each of the four arches (half circle shapes) are around 60cm thick.



*Genfokuch Bridge*  
Source: *Researcher's own, 2016*

### E. Defecha bridge

Defecha Bridge is located near the Angereb river water reservoir. The bridge is supported by four arches. The bridge is about 36m long and 4 m wide. At the south-eastern end, there is a partially ruined structure which probably functioned as a guardhouse. The height of the door-like arch of the guard house is about 2.60m and the bridge is about 2.90m wide at the base. The guardhouse, according to an informant, might have been used to control the long-distance trade route that goes all the way to Adawa in Tigiray. The river passes through the third arch. The walking surface is level unlike the Genfokuch and Guzara bridge surfaces.



*Defecha Bridge*

*Source: Researchers own, 2016*

### F. Bambilo Chigasa

The residents around this place call it Dildiy, which is an Amharic term which means 'bridge'. A respondent referred to it as Bambilo Chigasa (Kimant language term). The bridge is situated in Dildiy Mariyam Kebele which is a 5km walk from the main road around Shembekit, or 10km from the city of Gondar. This bridge connects Wegera and Lay Armachiho woredas. It is not possible, at this time, to realize the original structure of the bridge as it was ruined by a bombardment carried out by Mussolini's airforce during the period of occupation. From the researchers' observation, the bridge is assumed to be a three-arch bridge and the crossing surface was relatively flat.



*Bambilo Chigasa Bridge*

*Source: Researchers own, 2016*

### **G. Rib bridge**

*Rib* Bridge is constructed over the river Rib and located 26km from the town of Addis Zemen on the road which leads to the town of Debre Tabor. The bridge is 3km away from the dam which is under construction on the river Rib. This seven arch bridge is 120m long and 6m wide. The bridge was constructed during the reign of Emperor Susenyos and it connected Begemidir Awaraja (now North and south Gondar) to Gojjam. Henry A. Stern in his book wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia, written in 1862, has indicated that there was also a 'Portuguese' Bridge over the river Erib. He mentioned that people jogged on the bank of the river Erib, to cross onto a solid stone bridge comprising of seven arches. He also wrote, it is one of the few monuments left by the Portuguese and is a reminder of their fatal visit to the unfriendly shores of Ethiopia. During the reign of Susenyos this bridge helped him to ease the movement on his war effort waged against the Lasta, Agew and the Oromos. After the eviction of the Portuguese and the Jesuits, the Emperor Fasilades and other subsequent kings used to travel to Yigibaba via the bridge. Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) also made use of the bridge to strategically move his army from Debre Tabor to Gondar.

During the Italian occupation, the bridge was renovated. Even though, there were no changes to the original structure of the bridge, the upper part was filled with cement and concrete and the arch and beams were plastered over with cement.

### **H. Lower Megch River bridge**

This old Bridge which is believed to have been built by emperor Fasilades is located North West of Teda sub city next to the church of Teda Igziyabher ab (church of God the Father). According to informants, there is somewhat of a debate and often argument over who constructed the bridge. It may have been built by emperor Yohannes I, as the church just above the bridge was built by him. This five arched bridge has a 25m length and is 4m wide.



*Megech Bridge*

Source: Researchers own, 2016

### **Use of the bridges for tourism**

Only some of these bridges are used for tourism. A good example is the Alata Bridge which is constructed over the Nile River. Tourism in this area is however random and very disorganized.

## Why the bridges are not currently used for tourism purposes

### Infrastructural problems

Though Gondar and its surrounding is the home of age old Castles, churches and bridges, the area still has a plethora of infrastructural related problems. The area is still devoid of adequate road access to the surrounding rural areas where bridges are located. It is very hard to reach the 'Bamblo Chigasa' bridge due to the rugged topography of the area and the unavailability of even the most rudimentary roads. As there are no direction signs, it is also not possible to access the bridges found in Gondar city area without the help of someone who is aware of the location of a bridge.

### Marketing and promotion issues

The tourism industry has been recognised as one of the main factors in the promoting of national development. Gondar city, which is often termed 'The Camelot of Africa', is endowed with historical and cultural heritages comprising monasteries, churches, castles, historical villages, colourful cultural activities, traditional lifestyles, open local markets, religious ceremonies, church schools, festivals, local hand-crafts, traditional music, local dances, traditional cuisines, and many other things. Even though, the historic castles and churches of Emperor Fasiledes are still the main attractions of Gondar city, an identity area for Ethiopian history and a major reason for tourism development in the area, the bridges in the area that were key for the Caravan trade routes of bygone eras, are ignored. This is due to lack of effort from those involved in tourism in amalgamating the bridge with the well-known attractions and the noticeable absence of any meaningful promotion.

### Conservation status of the bridges

All the bridges are facing common conservation challenges. Since the construction of the bridges there has been no meaningful conservation work undertaken. Due to longer years of service the walls of some bridges are cracking and the limestone used is detaching from the stones. Due to this, gaping holes are emerging. These holes are also collecting and holding water. The water is further aggravating the problem as it erodes the mortar and the water penetrates through, and this penetration leads to the further cracking of the bridges substructures. Bushes are also growing on the bridges and the roots of these bushes are adding to the cracking effects. In some areas they are used for farming.



*Bush on the Bridge*

*Source: Researchers own, 2016*

There are development pressures, and heavy traffic of both animals and people. The bridges are still used to allow the residents and commuters and their herds of cattle to cross the rivers in

summer and winter. People crossing to the nearby local market also cross with loaded animals. A good example for this is the bridge at Genfokuch. But, currently due to the increasing population number of both the people and cattle, the capacity of the bridges is severely strained.



*Cattles Crossing Defecha Bridge*  
*Source: Researchers own, 2016*

The public transport and heavy construction trucks also use the Rib Bridge.

### **Artificial maintenance**

Some of the bridges (example the Broken and Rib Bridge) are artificially maintained with the use of steel and cement which is not in line with prior materials used.

### **Poor road access**

The absence of alternative routes to pass by is also another problem facing the bridges. People and animals are using the old bridge of 'Genfo kuch' to cross the river since there are no any alternative ways to cross to desired destinations, such as, for example, expensive 'suspension bridges'.



*Human Traffic on the historic bridges*  
*Source: Researchers own, 2016*



### **Urbanization and development pressure**

Urbanization and development pressures are affecting the old Gonderian bridges. Gondar is expanding horizontally on all sides and this expansion is creating further pressure for the sustainable conservation of the 'Genfo Kuch' bridge. The 'Megech' dam is also another threat to conserve the bridge located in the area. The development pressure on the area is thus enormous and flies in the face of conserving important heritage structures. The bridge will soon be fully covered by the big manmade lake at the end of the construction period of the dam.

### **Agricultural expansion**

Intensive agriculture has caused irreversible damage to many ecosystems and constitutes a major threat to local biodiversity. Agricultural-related practices such as land-clearing, intensification of inappropriate water-use, and the over application of fertilizers have all hugely accelerated biodiversity losses worldwide, and Ethiopia is no exception. The impact of agricultural expansion and land encroachment is not only limited to biodiversity losses, but also affects the cultural heritage of the rural areas. The image below shows the extent of crops growing on the 'Bamblo Chigassa' bridge, which is deteriorating rapidly and thus degrading local heritage.



*Crop over Bambilo Chigassa Bridge*  
*Source: Researchers own, 2016*

### **Lack of attention**

Even though, the Gonderian Bridges have various heritage values and significance, they have faced a lot of challenges. Besides the physical damage caused by human intervention and natural factors, the bridges are some of the most neglected heritage properties in the country. The negligence can be seen from the perspective of studying, registering and promoting them as a heritage site in one hand, and from the perspective of conserving and developing them as a tourist attraction, on the other hand.

In terms of history, location, and current condition of the Gonderian period bridges, very little is known. During the data collection, the team could not find much relevant information regarding the names of the bridges, how many there are, their locations and other related information. Almost all the government tourism offices have scant information regarding the bridges. This is



one indicator of how much they are neglected as important heritage sites. There is no registered document in the Culture and Tourism Office of North Gondar or the regional tourism bureau related to the bridges. Most of the information the researchers found was obtained from fragmented sources. The lack of detailed information and accurate registration shows how much these bridges are not considered as viable heritage properties and the negligence of the concerned bodies is harrowing since it is evident to anyone, that the bridges are amazing feats of construction that create enhanced heritage sites that tourists wish to see.

The other perspective of negligence is the fact that far less attention is given for the conservation and development of the bridges as tourist attractions. Thus, regarding conservation activity, there is no visible conservation activity undertaken for the bridges. The biggest problem is, however, that they are still serving the society as a means of crossing big rivers. They are perceived to be mere ordinary bridges and no one is looking after them and protecting them from damage. If they are considered as a heritage site, the concerned bodies could find alternatives and strive to build new alternative bridges to satisfy local transport and conveyance demands.

To sum up, even though these bridges have huge significance, negligence and lack of attention is contributing their fair share towards the destruction of the bridges.

### **Lack of awareness of the community**

The other problem faced, is a lack of attention from the local communities' perspective. The bridges are still considered as bridges for crossing rivers like the recently built one. Because of these practices, the bridges are critically damaged and are losing their significant features. Even during the field visit to the 'Bamblo Chigasa' bridge, one of the locals requested to repair the damaged part and be allowed to use it again. Though, it is important to understand the problem of the locals not having alternative ways of crossing the rivers, this clearly indicates how the bridges are under immense pressure and losing their valuable heritage status.

### **Absence of inventory**

The compilation and documentation of various inventories on the bridges, may have been done for a variety of reasons. Most of these reasons focus on the protection of the site and provide some form of public access to the information held. However, in Ethiopia, many of archaeological, historical and anthropological sites are not effectively recorded. Thus, most of them are not accessible due to lack of any identification markings. The same problems persist with the case of the Gonderian period bridges. There is no inventory undertaken regarding these bridges. The culture and tourism offices of the region cannot provide any information pertinent to the number, location, history, and the current status of the bridges. Due to absence of the inventory, it is not possible to access the bridges, unless one uses knowledgeable local residents. Aggravated by these facts, arriving at the sites is the hardest thing too. There are no directional signs and site identification marks of any sort are rare.

### **Documentation problem**

According to the Burra Charter (2013), the fundamental need of any conservation project is understanding the objects in question and gathering data about their physical condition prior to any action and intervention that might change the object's form and value as such. In this regard, the use of digital technologies in data acquisition and recording the object's condition could be very substantial. Digital technologies can considerably ease and expedite the documentation process, while ensuring a precise result and an accurate output for establishing the conservation phase. Diverging from this fact, it is not possible to access information about the Gonderian period bridges due to the problem of adequate documentation. It is not possible to get historical



traces and support them with photographs. There is no office which provides documents which shows the status of the bridges, which are of course instrumental for any conservation activity to be undertaken related to the bridges.

### **Heritage zoning Issues (Core and Buffer zone)**

Zoning is the primary mechanism through which land use and development are controlled in local planning schemes in Ethiopia. There has been a trend for increasing pressure for the expansion of agricultural land. In this regard, the Bambilo Chigasa Bridge is a good example of one that can serve a good purpose. It is located inside farm-land and the farmer even sows seeds on top part of the bridge. At places such as Genfokuch, due to the absence of appropriate zoning, the city residence house construction is expanding and almost near the bridge. Intensified residential development is occurring and measures to curb the effect on the bridges are not yet effected. At some point in time, if not considered carefully, this will harm the bridge forever. Buffer zones or an area peripheral to heritage areas are not applied in the case of the bridges of the Gonderian period.

### **Ownership**

Assuring the ownership rights of the historical heritage is not much of a debating issue. However, the current context shows us that heritage aspects found in different parts of the country are filled with controversies over / about the clear ownership of the site or to whom they may belong. The builders of the Gonderian bridges, even though, historically traced back to in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, are still unknown in real terms. What is known is based on oral tradition passed down the generations. Even today the bridges lack official ownership, they are neither used for tourism development nor under any conservation plan. The government has been negligent in this regard and the absence of clear administrative structures concerning the bridge, the existence of crop cultivation over the bridges, the absence of clear listing and registration, the absence of clear information, and absence of promotions of the bridges via the respected Woreda tourism offices, or other stakeholders, and the lack of applying conservation practices all demonstrate the challenges faced in driving initiatives to boost heritage tourism in the area.

Controversies as to whom any Gonderian Bridge belongs remains the main problem facing all the bridges. Even though, the Culture and Tourism Office of Gondar Zuriya Woreda, starting to promote the Gobate Bridge for tourism development, some bridges such as Genfokuch Bridge, Defecha Bridge and Bambilo Chigasa bridges lack clear ownership and thus anyone who is able to undertake conservation and tourism heritage marketing activities. Currently, the bridges are suffering from agricultural practices, natural problems, livestock and human transiting, overgrown vegetation, and most importantly, the stakeholders do not have any clear information about the bridges from an historical perspective, and there are simply no conservation practices.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Given that Gonder was the capital of Ethiopia for over two centuries, had a population of over 100 000 people and served as the cultural, economic and political capital of the country, the poor and ineffective efforts to preserve its heritage are beyond comprehension. While sites such as the Debra Birhan Selassie Church, the 'bath' of Emperor Fasiladas (1632-1667) which is used for the 'Timkat' or Epiphany celebrations and the castle of Empress Mentewab, are relatively preserved, the eight bridges of the study are facing severe conservation problems and the following are suggested as possible avenues to pursue:



- The case about the bridges constructed in the Gonderian period needs full-scale special research, documentation and the implementation of effective conservation projects.
- A conservation management plan should be prepared and conservation work should be done as a matter of urgency.
- Awareness must be created in the community on the use of these historical bridges and why they require care and conservation.
- They heavy traffic in terms of livestock and people, must be stopped.
- Attempts should be made by the parties concerned to promote and use the bridges for tourism purposes and the promotion of Ethiopia's rich historical heritage.
- Alternative bridges should be constructed for the community in order to stop the pressure on the bridges.
- To create a 'win-win' situation between heritage conservation and urban regeneration, urban planners and policy makers should think about some practical ways in which to solve this crucial problem.
- A balance must be forged between the new development and the old urban fabric and townscape.
- A comprehensive policy for heritage conservation must be crafted by involving the community as a partner and integrating the heritage conservation in the process of urban regeneration since this can lead the way to sustainable tourism development.
- It is vital to determine the exact owners (kebele, woreda, and managing organizations) of the bridges, who is responsible for ensuring their proper use and conservation.
- Core and buffer zones must be established to determine the land usage rules and zoning. Zoning will serve to control the development and reduce the uncontrolled expansion of urbanization and agriculture.
- The bridges must be packaged with the well know attraction such as the castles in Gondar and other important sites.

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