

How did the community surrounding the Horn's oldest monastery survive the Tigray War? - Dabba Selama revisited



The Dabba Selama monastery, at the far left edge of the mesa, is reputedly the least accessible monastery in the world.

Jan Nyssen^{1,2,*}, Hailemariam Meaza¹, Sofie Annys², Emnet Negash^{2,3}, Biadgilgn Demissie^{1,2,4}, Zbelo Tesfamariam¹, Tesfaalem Ghebreyohannes¹

1 Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Mekelle University, Ethiopia; 2 Department of Geography, Ghent University, Belgium; 3 Institute of Climate and Society, Mekelle University, Ethiopia; 4 Laboratoire d'Analyses Géospatiales, ULB Brussels, Belgium

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Setting

The remote Dabba Selama monastery in Dogu'a Tembien (Tigray) is thought to be [Saint Frumentius' first monastery](#) in Ethiopia. The [landscape comprises](#) the edge of the Tembien highlands at around 2500 metres elevation, with many steep basalt slopes growing semi-natural vegetation or eucalypts, and croplands on shallow clayey soils on the flats. At the lower side, a full 500 metres lower, the rocks

are sandstone and the soils of the wide level croplands are sandy. The sandstone geomorphology is very similar to that of the Grand Canyon and the monastery is established on an isolated mesa. [Saint Frumentius](#) is commonly known in Ethiopia as Abba Selama. Here, we adopted the colloquial form that is utilised in the local discourse: “Dabba Selama”, which is the [short form of “Inda Abba Selama”](#) (the house of Abba Selama). Since the [schism of the Tigray Orthodox Church](#), away from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the former has taken the [name of Abba Selama](#), though this is not materially implemented at the monastery itself.

The Amani'el church in the neighboring village of May Baha was likewise carved in the same sandstone formation. [The rock church](#) is built with cruciform columns, a single arch, and windows let light into the church. Emperor [Yohannes IV was baptized at this church](#).

We [studied this monastery and its surroundings](#) in 2019, shortly before the start of the [Tigray War](#). Soon after Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, we returned to the place in January 2023, [revisited typical landscapes](#) and discussed the changes with the community.

Landscape changes

The main changes observed in the landscape comprised a lot of tree cutting so that the vegetation cover has been reduced locally. Gullies have also re-emerged in places because soil and water conservation structures were not maintained, and because of the heavy rainfall of August 2022 that led to floods.

Importantly, neither the Dabba Selama Monastery nor the May Baha rock-hewn church sustained damage during the war. Local monks and peasant-pilgrims traditionally do [not acknowledge state authority](#) over the Dabba Selama monastery, defending this sacred site from outside interference. The Ethiopian and Eritrean armies only made one foot pass through the village on their way from Hagere Selam to Getski Melesiley. They didn't notice the monastery or the rock church because no one had informed them of their existence; otherwise, they might have invaded them as they [believed that the Tigray leadership was hiding in caves](#) and other inhospitable locations, and also as they took [destroying Tigray's historical sites as a mission](#).

That was what happened at the Debre Damo monastery, which is likewise perched atop a mesa and where [Eritrean forces murdered one monk](#) and caused significant damage.

The local people did also not seek refuge from warfare in churches; by the time the war reached Dabba Selama, the news had spread that churches and monasteries would not be safe heavens, in view of the massacres at [Debre Abay](#), [Aksum](#) or [Dengelat](#). There was however intense warfare in the neighbouring villages of Kolla Tembien, and an airstrike shelling of the mountains between Dabba Selama and Ferrey, a neighbouring village. The three or four impacts hit farmlands and nobody was injured; the local people believe that the Ethiopian army was targeting a supposed hideout of the Tigray leadership.

The findings of our focus group discussion in Dabba Selama were consistent with interviews of independent individuals at other places in the village. We utilized a [basic level transcription](#) of the

recorded interviews because our major goal was to analyze their substance. We created verbatim transcriptions of utterances but excluded repetitions, word and phrase cut-offs, fillers, and non-lexical sounds. Utterances that were plainly out of context were also excluded.

We invite the reader to sit down with us at a magnificent viewpoint under a tree in Dabba Selama and listen to the community; the longread will yield a better comprehension of the situation than quantitative information that could be drawn from it. We conclude by contrasting the findings at Dabba Selama with the [story of nine other villages](#) of the same district, recorded in another 31 interviews.



Birds-eye view of Dabba Selama with landmarks indicated, looking towards the east. [Photo 19360129-2-AbbiAddi-Kaciama-2-1-5](#). 1 Dabba Selama village, 2 May Baha, 3 Addi Welo, 4 Zala, 5 Ferrey, 6 Dembela, 7 Addeha.

Agricultural activities

The farmers told us that farmlands in Dabba Selama, especially those in the plain, are relatively productive and many farmers had cereals in their granaries when the war broke out. Additionally, at the foot of steep slopes, such as in Ferrey and May Baha, there are springs, which the farmers use for

small-scale irrigation. With its rugged terrain, good rainfall, and tepid temperatures, the area is suitable for keeping livestock as there are ample water, grasses and bushes. Nevertheless, the farmers said, “Many farmlands were not cultivated on time in 2021 and 2022.”

In 2021, the farmers tried but failed to timely plough their farmlands. For example, “I was not fully engaged in the agricultural activities during the [onset of the] rainy season in 2021. When noises of weapons were heard, my family fled to the mountains. Farmers were afraid of staying in their houses and farmlands. Although seeds and fertilizer were available in 2021, we had to hide with our livestock in the mountains during the cultivation period.” This was also observed in an [earlier quantitative study](#).

In 2022, there was no fertilizer nor seeds; farmers sowed mainly tef due to absence of other seeds, as [also observed in an earlier study](#). The farmers furthermore stated, “After the crops were already sown at the village, a limited quantity of fertilizer was distributed; it was not enough and it came too late, hence it did not bring change in agricultural yields.”

They added: “Before the war, farmlands which were used for growing maize, sorghum, wheat, beans and the like were covered by tef during the war time. This is due to the fact that [for the same volume] tef seeds can cover larger areas. This is simply due to lack of access to other types of seeds. Even half of the tef crops failed as we did not apply fertilizer. We can say that we harvested straw rather than crops.” And, anyway, “As compared to other crops, tef gives lower yields per farmland area”.

“Our area became very adapted to fertilizer and when we sowed without fertilizer, we didn’t get adequate yield as we used to get in the previous years. Relatively, our yield was better in 2021 as we applied fertilizer.” Generally, the farmers believe that after a decade of fertilizer applications, the land has become addicted to fertilizer, and one farmer reflected that “like our village leaders, our farmland expects bribes.”

“We had also shortage of seeds due to hunger.” [Due to famine, many farmer households had to consume the seeds they had conserved from the previous harvests.]

“Rainfall was late in our area [in 2022]. Due to the late rainfall and shortage of seeds we were forced to change from sowing wheat and sorghum to sowing tef.”

“Crops were poorly managed due to the war. In this context, we ourselves and our oxen worked hard to cultivate. However, the yield of 2022 was worst, and was incomparable with that of the peace time.”

“The war affected agricultural activities in the village. However, these impacts were lower than in other areas such as in Werkamba and its environs.”

Natural resources

The farmers further stated, “We had worked hard to improve our environment in the last 30 years. In that time, farmers used to plant tree seedlings every year. However, there was not any conservation activity in the last two years.”

“Forests were damaged for firewood and charcoal (which fetched better prices).”

“Our forests have been severely destroyed over the last two years due to wood harvesting and charcoal preparation. Of course that income allowed to save our lives but what we restored over the last decades has been consumed in a matter of two years.”



Charcoal kiln in Dembela Giyergis, west of Dabba Selama. Despite the practice is well known in local communities, such operations were carried out in secret prior to the war since regional laws prohibited them. During the war and ongoing blockade, charcoaling occurs in the open, typically near homesteads.

“The guards that were protecting the forests before the war stopped their duties as they had no salary and bye-laws were not enforced anymore. Especially the exclosures which are far from the villages have been deforested. Only recently [after the Cessation of Hostilities], some guards have been selected to resume the protection of forests.”

“During these tough times, exclosures were [only] partly protected. Indeed, the level of forest protection in the wartime was much lower than the peace time.”

“We were not protecting our forests as we used to do in the previous years due to mainly war-induced hunger.”

Rains and water availability

Regarding water availability, the farmers stressed that “Rainfall was sufficient for crop cultivation in 2021 and 2022.”

“The rainfall extended up to the end of September of 2022, unlike in the last years (e.g., 2021).”

After arrival in the mountains and gorges, people camped in caves, gorges and forests; food was prepared on the spot; only to bake bread the women went to nearby homesteads and obtained permission to use their kitchen. As a consequence:

“The impacts of the war on the livelihoods of the households at the village were not seen elsewhere in the world. We were in a complete siege.”

“The war hit the farm households very hard; this led to food insecurity in the village.”

“[Before the war], we were peacefully cultivating our lands, we used fertilizer and selected seed and we were earning very good yields that enabled us to feed our households. Moreover, we used to sell our agricultural products at relatively good prices.”

“[Due to the war], the farm households became food insecure. Consequently, we severely suffered from hunger.”

“I had no cash money because the banks have been closed all the time.”

“Health services were totally stopped. The health workers had no salary. Hence, they migrated to their original villages to get food from their relatives. There was also no medicine.”

“A couple of times during the war, health workers suddenly came to the village to help children. However, there was no medicine in the village.”

“We were living in stress during the war time. In this context, more than 70 civilians were killed due to the active fighting in 2020 in Werkamba and its surroundings. Of these victims, four people were my relatives. I could not go to their funerals due to the presence of soldiers in Werkamba.”

“The communities were horrified and unstable during the last more than two years.”

Impact on day-to-day life and functioning of the community

According to the statements by the interviewees, “The community is not functioning properly.”

“The war interrupted the day-to-day activities in the village.”

“There was good interaction among the residents in the last two years.”

“Our social relationships have been weakened. Before the war, we were helping each other. Now we are all equal. We do not have anything to share. All social events such as baptism, ceremony, commemoration, etc. have stopped.” Interviews in [other villages learned](#) that such social events were not organized, or at a very minor scale, because the host could not serve food to his guests, and the guests would avoid participating because they had no gifts to offer.

The farmers further explained, “Before the war, if somebody in the village was in shortage of food, the village community used to help them by contributing cereals or money. This has been reduced. Consequently, those who have no close relatives or children (who can support them) have suffered more.”

“During the war when somebody sold an ox or a goat and bought food, they shared it with others. That’s how we survived.”

“Generally, we in the uplands do not have adequate yield (even at normal times) as our farmlands have shallow soils. Hence, we had not much to share during the war. The lowlanders such as the Dabba Selama village itself have *fertile* [productive] farmlands and had dozens of quintals of cereals stored at their home [when the war started]. Thus, these communities had more chance to save the lives of their relatives by sharing their cereals.”

“All in all, though it was not enough, we were able to survive by sharing what we had.”

“We were cooperating among each other before the war. But after the war broke out, we were exposed to several problems. At the beginning, we shared what we had with others. Later, the war and the blockade led to the poor cooperation or even absence of it. We can say that the social bonds dwindled with the available food.”

“There was cooperation among the households. All people in the community perceived that the world was unfair [as nobody seemed to care about Tigray’s starving population]. We tried to help each other, and contributed food to the poor during the war. Such relationship saved lives of needy farmers during the war.”



Focus group interview with community members at Dabba Selama’s uplands

Impact on the administrative system

The farmers were also asked about the impact of the war on the administrative system, and they gave different responses. Some said, “The village leaders, though not as efficiently as it was in the peace time, have administered the community. When the enemy came, they moved away from the village like everybody.”

“In [the first months of] 2021, villagers without links to the government of Tigray were selected to distribute food aid. Otherwise, the administrative system was operated by the elected local administrators.”

“The village leaders were administering us; they were with their people during the critical periods.”

Some also said, “The administrators of our village are those who were previously administering us. But the administration system is changed. The laws are not strong as they used to be.”

“The administrators have become very careless.”

“We were led by ourselves during the war.”

Regarding security, the farmers said that “it was not comparable with peace time. There were gangsters and bandits in the forests and gorges during the war.”

Marketing and rural-urban linkages

“Before the war, the urban-rural linkage was very strong. People used to frequently go to the town to sell and buy and or to engage as daily laborers. During the war time, it was difficult for us to go to the towns especially for men and boys. It were usually the women who went to the market. Even it was not safe for them.”

“We had also no money to go to the market.”

“After the war broke out, we have decreased the frequency [of marketing] due to the presence of soldiers and absence of safety in the towns.”

“We were especially afraid of going to Abiy Addi due to fear of airstrikes on that town.”

“Our relatives who were residing in the urban areas were also displaced and have come to us in the village, which is another factor which reduced our frequency of visit the urban areas.”

“The absence of transportation and its high cost is another factor which reduced our frequency of travel to the urban areas.”

“Due to the war, the village lived in isolation.”

“When there were soldiers in Abiy Addi and Werkamba towns, we did not take goats and sheep to sell in the market. How could we go to the fire or to be shot? The soldiers killed farmers. We preferred to remain at our houses.”

“We tried to sell our livestock so as to save the life of our children but due to lack of money were not able to sell our livestock even at lower prices. As there were no buyers, there were days when we failed to sell the livestock we took to the market and returned them back to home while suffering from hunger.”

For safety reasons, when enemy soldiers were around, only children, women over 40, or men over 50 went to the market as they were less exposed, that is, as long as there was no active warfare along the market route: “We used to send our wives but there were not much goods in the market. Moreover, prices were high while the prices of the items we sold were very low.”

“For example, I sold a very fat ox for 7000 Birr and bought only 50 kilo of wheat.” Other interviews equal the price of an ox to 80 kg or sometimes 100 kg of cereals. [Before the war, an ox equated 400 to 600 kg of wheat, depending on its grade.]

“There was no proper marketing in the last two years.”

“Consumable goods were not available in the market in 2022. Prices of items and commodities were expensive for the villagers mainly in 2022. Uncommon in other years, for example, I paid 100 birr for one *shehane* [traditional volumetric measure for wheat]. Besides, I paid more than 100 birr for a glass of salt or pepper. If you sold an ox for 10,000 birr, you would not get sufficient food to feed your family. Therefore, [only the] better-off residents afforded the prices of the market.”

“Before the war, we were highly dependent on the market because we were going there with many products. But the war negatively affected us.”

“We couldn’t go safely to the market because the soldiers were looting our products on the way. As a result, we were selling our products in the nearby areas for a cheap price.”

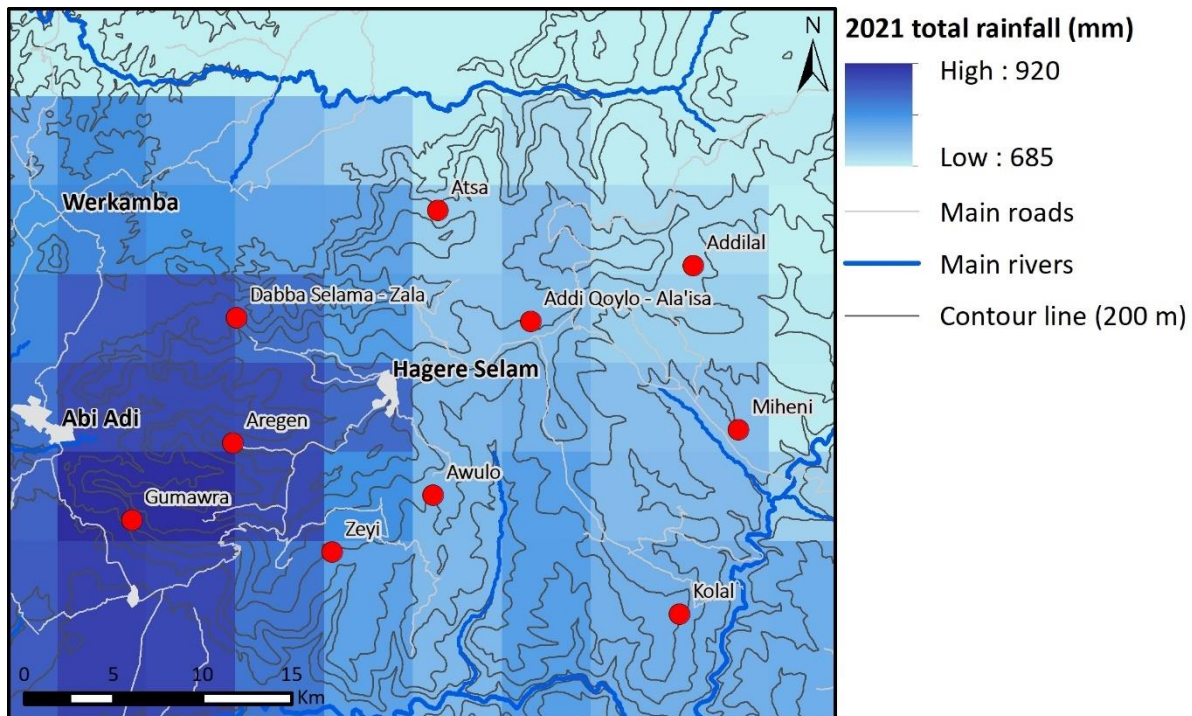
“Commodities in the market were very expensive during the war and even after the war.”

After all, Dabba Selama considers itself lucky

Agricultural activities were strongly disturbed and the production dropped to unknown lows. Many of our findings here are the [same as in other villages](#): hunger, wood cutting, no fertilizer in 2022 and very bad *azmera* rains, extremely bad “exchange rate” between oxen and grains.

However, overall, Dabba Selama seems to have suffered a little less than other villages. There was no warfare in the village itself, the interviewees did not mention killings. Unlike other villages, there was no mention of children or elderly dying from hunger. The independent interviews mentioned that despite the suffering, people helped each other. This contrasts with other villages some dozens of kilometres away, where the big complaint was that social bonds had become so much weaker. There is also no precise mention of village leaders diverting the aid to their family members, as was frequently mentioned in other villages of the district.

Obviously, Dabba Selama is relatively better endowed than the other villages; a basic reason could be that it is located on the rainy side of the Dogu’a Tembien massif.



Rainfall distribution over the Dogu'a Tembien massif in 2021 according to [CHIRPS](#). Rain distribution over the massif shows the same pattern from year to year, with orographic rains at the West-southwest. Markers stand for the 10 studied villages; Dabba Selama is at the northwest.

The woody vegetation grows better and crop yields are relatively good at the lower plains near the monastery. Moreover, many farmers traded fruit from the Addeha irrigation areas at the north of the village, and sold it at Abiy Addi and Werkamba markets, at least during times without active fighting. Furthermore, income from selling goats and sheep, which have wide browsing areas could be better than elsewhere. Unlike other villages, fortunately, “enemies” did not occupy the village. Hence, their grain stores and other assets have neither been looted, burned, wettened, nor mixed with soil.

Consequently, these farmers had food even during the critical period. They also had less death of children and elders as they could afford buying some food and medicines from shops and private pharmacies.

In the [other villages in the district](#) shortage of food and cash led to weaker social bonds. At Dabba Selama, the farmers were helping each other as far as they had what to share during the difficult times. The relatively good economic situation allowed maintaining farmers’ social capital or social bonds in the village.

Finally, Ethiopian and Eritrean troops passed only once through the village, people fled and the elders supervised the homesteads from afar. They all have been lucky that the soldiers didn’t know of the monastery, the underground church and their food stores, otherwise they would have raided the village for those reasons. A report [by Africa Watch, dating back to 1990](#), describes the style of warfare in Ethiopia over the centuries. It serves as a textbook example for almost all the war atrocities Tigray

has witnessed over the last two years. Fortunately, Dabba Selama could avoid food raids by soldiers, which, according to the Portuguese Jesuit B. Tellez who visited Ethiopia in the 17th century, are worse than locusts, because the latter do not visit homesteads.

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