

Digital Feudalism: How the Eritrean Regime Revived the Medieval Soke

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Preface: Why This Parallel Matters

*This article is the result of a moment of profound recognition during a mindful reading of Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson's *Power and Progress: Our 1000-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*. As I turned the pages of Chapter 4, "Cultivating Misery," I found that the historical descriptions of medieval English peasants were not merely stories of a distant past. Instead, they were a mirror reflecting the lived reality of the people of Eritrea today. This recognition led me to formulate what I call "Digital Soke" – a modern form of technological monopoly that mirrors medieval systems of control.*

My perspective on this is not purely academic. I come from a farming family; my roots are deeply embedded in rural peasant life. Because of this background, I do not just analyze the concept of coercion – I understand it in the "language of the peasant." I know the value of the harvest, the weight of the tool, and the crushing feeling of having the fruits of one's labor siphoned away by those who control the "mill (መጥላጎ)." This lived experience allows me to see the "broken bandwagon" not as an abstract economic theory, but as a visceral injustice.

As someone deeply engaged in the struggle for a democratic transition in Eritrea – through writing, public seminars, and activism – I have watched the regime systematically dismantle the autonomy of our people. By comparing the medieval "Soke" (the elite's monopoly over mills) to the regime's current monopoly over internet access and social media monetization, I argue that the Eritrean struggle is part of a much older, global fight. We are not just struggling for a "connection"; we are resisting a modern form of digital feudalism.

Introduction: The Broken Bandwagon

The history of technological advancement is often narrated as a teleological march toward universal prosperity. However, as Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson argue in *Power and Progress*, technology's benefits are determined by who controls it and under what institutions. When a narrow elite monopolizes the means of production – whether thirteenth-century watermills or twenty-first-century fiber-optic cables – the result is what the authors call a "broken bandwagon" (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023,

110). In such systems, innovation does not lift all boats; it equips elites with more efficient tools for extraction.

The Medieval Mill: Technology as Coercion

In Medieval England, the watermill represented a significant leap in productivity. Compared to labor-intensive hand grinding with stone querns (መጥሐን), the mill was a marvel of efficiency. Yet for the peasantry, this innovation became a burden. Secular and religious elites – lords and abbots – used a legal right known as soke to establish a monopoly over milling.

Peasants were legally barred from owning mills or even using hand-mills at home. Manor officials conducted raids to seize and destroy private querns (ከምዚ ናይ ኣደታትና መጥሐን). In a notable case at the Abbey of St. Albans in 1274, the abbot confiscated millstones and used them to pave his parlor floor – a stark symbol of domination (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023, 102).

Extraction occurred through “*multure (ሐፍንቶ)*,” a toll in which the lord took a portion of the grain. This system combined coercion and persuasion: the church provided moral justification, while the lord enforced compliance. The result was a Malthusian trap in which productivity gains were siphoned upward, leaving peasants in perpetual subsistence. While this system appears distant in time, its underlying logic persists wherever elites monopolize access to productive technology.

The Eritrean Digital Soke: Controlling the Bit

A strikingly similar dynamic exists in modern Eritrea. Just as medieval lords controlled water access to the mill, the Eritrean regime controls the flow of data. With internet penetration estimated at less than 2%, connectivity is treated as a strategic resource rather than a public utility (Freedom House 2023).

Broadband access is restricted to the state-run telecommunications monopoly, Eri-Tel, and a narrow circle of regime loyalists. This digital “soke” extends to social media monetization. While most citizens are excluded from the internet, privileged actors operate YouTube channels and Facebook pages, uploading cultural productions created by artists who lack connectivity.

The regime thus functions as a digital “lord of the manor.” By controlling access to the “mill” (internet infrastructure and monetization), it captures the revenue produced by others. Artists and creators are forced to surrender their content to gatekeepers who control access. The resulting hard-currency earnings sustain a sanctioned government while consolidating information control. As the medieval peasant could

not grind grain independently, the Eritrean creator cannot reach an audience without passing through the state's digital tollgate.

The Synergy of Persuasion: Propaganda and Digital “Multure”

Acemoglu and Johnson emphasize that coercion is often reinforced by persuasion. In Medieval England, the church presented hierarchy as part of divine order (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023, 105). Just as the medieval church normalized economic domination, Eritrean state media frames restricted access as necessary for national security and unity.

The content creators themselves receive only a fraction of the revenue – a modern form of “*multure*.” Regime-affiliated channel owners take the lion's share simply because they control platform access. This creates a parasitic system in which cultural and intellectual labor is extracted to fund the very structure that suppresses it.

Resistance: Secret Querns and Digital Workarounds

Medieval peasants resisted by hiding hand-mills and grinding grain at night (Langdon 2004, 258). Similarly, Eritrea has a form of digital underground. Some citizens access the internet through expensive cyber-café's, while others rely on “Sneakernet” – the physical sharing of files via flash drives.



These acts of resistance, though limited – reveal that technological monopolies are never fully secure. They must be constantly enforced through surveillance and coercion. As medieval lords destroyed illicit querns, the Eritrean regime sustains fear

through monitoring and detention, preventing these alternatives from scaling into systemic challenges.

Comparative Realities: Life for the Majority

In both contexts, “cultivating misery” becomes a lived reality when technology is captured by elites:

Economic Stagnation for Producers: In Medieval England, culture prevented capital accumulation. In Eritrea, lack of internet access excludes citizens from the global digital economy, reinforcing dependency.

Suppression of Autonomy: The destruction of hand-queens parallels modern digital isolation; both eliminate alternative means of production and force reliance on centralized authority.

Extraction of Hard Currency: Control over access to global markets – such as YouTube monetization – creates a captive creative class whose profits are siphoned by those controlling the gateway.

Lessons and Reflections

This comparison yields several critical insights. First, technological progress does not guarantee social progress. When elites dictate the use of technology, innovation reinforces inequality rather than dismantling it.

Second, the “broken bandwagon” is often intentional. The deprivation experienced by medieval peasants and modern Eritreans is not accidental – it is structurally produced to prevent the diffusion of economic power.

Finally, the struggle for digital rights today is part of a millennium-long conflict over who controls productive technology. Breaking Eritrea’s “Digital Soke” requires more than infrastructure – it demands dismantling the institutional monopoly that enables extraction.

Until access to the “mill” of the digital age – is democratized, Eritrea’s citizens remain subjects within a system of modern technological feudalism.

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