

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ISLAM IN ERITREA*

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The study of Islam in Eritrea—the faith of approximately half of the country’s population—is still in its infancy. Similar to other fields of scholarly inquiry regarding Eritrea, research on the history of Islam in the region has become more feasible only since the early 1990s as the newly independent state became accessible to researchers, both locally-based and foreign. It is therefore pressing that new written sources and specific case studies on Eritrea’s Muslim societies and institutions see the light of day in order to add new layers to our understanding of the development of Islam in Eritrea and its role in Eritrean history.¹ This survey sketches an

* I would like to thank Haggai Erlich, Tricia Redeker-Hepner and Joseph Tubiana for providing comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this text.

¹ The standard survey on Islam in the Ethio-Eritrean region, is J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London: Frank Cass, 1965 (1st ed. 1952). It provides valuable information even if altogether the book is outdated in its approach to the subject. Recent efforts to map and catalogue Arabic and Islamic written sources in Eritrea are presented in Alessandro Gori, “Soggiorno di studi in Eritrea ed Etiopia. Brevi annotazioni bibliografiche,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXXIX (1995), Roma-Napoli, 1997, pp. 81-129 and Jonathan Miran & R. S. O’Fahey, “The Islamic and Related Writings of Eritrea,” edited by R.S. O’Fahey and J.O. Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 13, III, Fascicle A. The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003, pp. 1-17. Since independence, several Eritrean writers must be credited for having authored books in Arabic focusing on or containing strong dimensions on the history of Islam in Eritrea. See Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Bakr, *Ta’rīkh Iritriyā al-mu’āsir: arḍan wa-sha’ban*, Cairo, 1994; (id.) *Judhūr al-thaqāfa al-‘arabiyya wa-l-ta’līm fī Iritriyā*, Cairo: al-Maktab al-Miṣrī li-tawzī‘ al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1997 and Muḥammad Sa‘id Nāwād, *al-‘Urūba wa-‘l-Islām fī-‘l-qarn al-ifrīqī*, Jidda, 1991 and (id.) *Iritriyā: tariq al-hijrāt wa-‘l-diyānāt wa-madkhal al-Islām ilā Ifrīqā*, Kuwait: al-Hay’a al-khayriyya al-Islāmiyya al-‘alamiyya, 2001. For a recent synthesis of the history of Islam in the Horn of Africa, including Eritrea, see Lidwien Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa,” edited by N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, OH: Ohio Univer-

account of the history of Islam in the territory that became known as “Eritrea” in 1890; it especially covers the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twenty first. It is intended to serve as a brief introduction to a hitherto poorly covered subject that would, hopefully, stimulate more research into specific periods, themes and questions. The survey is organized chronologically and is based on an assorted combination of known and untapped sources, some of which I have recently collected in Eritrea and in Italy.

Both from a spatial and political perspective, the Eritrean region may be perceived as an historical meeting point of several “frontiers” situated between the Red Sea and the facing Arabian Peninsula, the Sudanese Nile valley, and the northern Ethiopian highlands over which it partly extends.² Accordingly, the history of Islam in the area has been markedly shaped by political, economic, migratory and religious developments in all these spheres and by their impact on the region and its inhabitants. In a very real sense Eritrea’s heterogeneous Muslim societies reflect this kaleidoscopic historical configuration: they belong to different ethnic groups; speak a variety of Semitic, Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan languages; practice various modes of production, and are socially and politically organized in diverse ways. More importantly, for our purposes, Muslim societies in Eritrea have adopted Islam in distinctive periods and in different ways, and have appropriated Muslim beliefs and practices in varying modes and intensities. For example, from one specific perspective, the historical layering of these influences is quite neatly exemplified by the regional distribution of the *madhāhib* (sing. *madhhab*, Islamic

sity Press, 2000, pp. 227-250 (2000). See also R. S. O’Fahey, “Sudanese (and some other) sources for Eritrean history,” *Sudanic Africa*, 12, 2001, pp. 131-142.

² From the fourteenth century, dominant highland Abyssinian polities—in their historically variegated forms—designated parts of the Eritrean region (but usually including Tigray province, in today’s Ethiopia) as the lands of the *Bahr Nagash* (“ruler of the sea”). After the decline and disappearance of the *Bahr Nagash* in the eighteenth century, the *Mareb Mellash* ([the land] across the Mareb [river]) was the term that designated the northern Tigrinya-speaking areas of the Abyssinian kingdom. This term is practically, if not precisely, equated in the literature with the territory that would become ‘Eritrea’ in 1890.

school of law) in Eritrea. It seems quite certain that the Shāfiʿī school, introduced by traders and holy men from the Yemen and adopted mostly by the ʿAfar and some highland Jabarti, was the earliest in the region.³ The Mālikī legal rite, predominant in the pre-Turkiyya Sudan, was influential with groups in the western lowlands, and the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, introduced officially by the Ottomans, gained the adherence of the Semhar groups and other Tigre and Saho-speaking groups of the eastern lowlands and northern highlands.⁴ It seems therefore apparent that, at least on one level, the historical trajectories of Islam in the region must be imagined and examined from within a broader, trans-regional perspective—one that transcends the borders of the modern Eritrean state. Influences from Egypt and the Nile Valley, from the Arabian Peninsula, and from a historical Ethiopian polity whose rulers and elites perceived it as inherently “Christian,” have all been instrumental in shaping the development and experiences of Muslim societies and their institutions in the Eritrean region. Notwithstanding, a dynamic trans-regional perspective does not preclude the creation of Muslim spaces and institutions on a local and regional level. For example, the activities of specific Sufi networks and holy families, the development of local and regional pilgrimage sites, and the confinement of Eritrea’s Muslim societies within a bounded territory in the Italian colonial period (1890-1941), were all instrumental in creating spaces of religious, political and social confluence among Muslims in the region. In one sense these processes culminated in the middle

³ The Jabarti are Muslims inhabiting the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands. They are mostly urban and are engaged in commerce and artisanal work. See Abdulkadir Salih, “Jabarti,” *Encyclopædia Aethiopica*, edited by S. Uhlig, Vol. 2, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (forthcoming).

⁴ An Italian census of 1931 gave the following proportions: Mālikīs 65%, Ḥanafīs 26% and Shāfiʿīs 9%. Pollera doubted these figures and presumed that the Ḥanafīs were nevertheless the majority. Both of Eritrea’s Grand Muftīs, originally from eastern Eritrea and educated in Egypt, have followed the Ḥanafī school. Arnaldo Bertola, *Il regime dei culti nell’Africa italiana*, Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1939, p. 163; Alberto Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell’Eritrea*, Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1935, pp. 285-286; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 232-233; Gori, “Soggiorno di studi in Eritrea ed Etiopia,” pp. 94-97.

decades of the twentieth century with the formation of pronounced notions of a specifically 'Eritrean' Muslim consciousness.

Islam in the Eritrean region before 1800

Since its emergence in the Hijāz in the seventh century A.D., Islam has been closely associated with the Eritrean region. To this day, Muslims in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia attach unique symbolic importance to what is known in early Islamic history as the *hijra al-ūla* (first emigration), perceived by them as the cornerstone of a unique cross-Red Sea Islamic relationship. Following their persecution by the Meccan Qurayyshi nobility, the Prophet Muḥammad's *ṣahāba* (companions) crossed the Red Sea, landed on the Eritrean coast, and sought refuge in al-Ḥabasha in 615 A.D.⁵ But Muslim influence in the region was more importantly felt beginning in the early eighth century A.D. when recently Islamized Arabs under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 AD.) occupied the Dahlak islands off the Massawa (Ar. Maṣawwa') coast and were thus one of the first East African regions to come under the influence of Islam. Approximately one century later several Arab tribes transplanted from the Arabian Peninsula and gradually assimilated into Bejja Hamitic groups introduced Islam to the Bejja tribes inhabiting the plains between the Red Sea and the Nile (covering also areas in northern and western present-day Eritrea).⁶ In the 12th and 13th centuries the Dahlak archipelago

⁵ Al-Ḥabasha is the name applied in Arabic to the land and peoples of Ethiopia (Abyssinia). On the *ṣahāba* and Abyssinia see among other sources Dante Odorizzi, *Note storiche sulla religione mussulmana e sulle divisioni dell'Islam con appunti speciali relativi all'Islam in Eritrea* (Asmara, 1916), pp. 15-18; A. Guérinot, "L'islam et l'Abyssinie," *RMM*, 34, 1917-1918, pp. 6-8; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 44-6; Joseph Cuoq, *L'Islam en Ethiopie*, Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1981, pp. 28-35, and Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994, pp. 5ff. A most recent text written by an Eritrean and highlighting the *ṣahāba* episode is Muḥammad Sa'īd Nāwad's *Iritriyā: tariq al-hijrāt*, pp. 41-51. Nāwad gives the names of more than a hundred companions who emigrated in three successive waves.

⁶ John Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, London, 1965. (1st ed. 1949), p. 10; A. Guérinot, "L'islam et l'Abyssinie," p. 9.

was the seat of an independent emirate ruled by a line of sultans, and served as a lucrative transit station in the trade between Egypt and India, but also in cross-Red Sea trade between Abyssinia and Yemen.⁷ The commercial revival and relative stability in the Red Sea area resulting from Fāṭimid predominance boosted the role of Islam in the wider region.

Trade and the migration of holy men from the Arabian Peninsula enhanced the diffusion of Islam on the southern Red Sea coasts and by the thirteenth century many of the 'Afar and Saho-speaking, and some of the Bejja peoples, had become Muslims. Eastern Eritrean Muslim traditions recall [and still venerate] *faqīh* Muḥammad, the Ḥijāzī cleric responsible for the initial spread of Islam among their societies. According to these traditions Faqīh Muḥammad crossed the Red Sea from Yemen into the coastal region known as Dankalia (or the 'Afar coastlands) in the eleventh century A.D. There he converted many Afar-speaking communities, most often by marrying the daughters of local leaders. From there he moved inland to the eastern highland escarpments (Akkālā Guzay region) where he converted the largest and most prominent Saho-speaking clans, the Asaorta and the Minifere.⁸ His sons, shaykh Sālim and shaykh Ṣāliḥ continued their father's holy enterprises and are regarded as the ancestors of several important holy clans and families in the region—present as far as the Barka in the west and the Sahel in the north. The most noteworthy Saho and Tigre-speaking holy clans that developed then or in subsequent centuries are the Bayt Shaykh Maḥmūd, the 'Ad Darqī,

⁷ Among various studies on the Daḥlak in the early Islamic period see René Basset, "Les inscriptions de l'île de Daḥlak," *Journal Asiatique*, série 9, vol. 1, 1893, pp. 77-111 and Madeleine Schneider, *Stèles funéraires musulmanes des îles Dahlak (mer Rouge)*, Cairo: IFAO, 1983. See also the studies of Giovanni Oman in Italian and a recent synthesis grounded in an archaeological historical approach in Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 49-58. For early Muslim influence in the coastal areas see also Joseph Cuoq, *L'Islam en Ethiopie*.

⁸ His descendants from his marriage within the Minifere founded the pious sub-clan Faqīh Ḥarak, of whom descended Eritrea's most important scholar in the 20th century, Grand *muftī* Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār Aḥmad 'Umar (1909-1969).

‘Ad Mu‘allim, ‘Ad Zubayr, al-Kabīrī, and others.⁹ Some of these became ‘religious clans’ catering to their wider social groupings or clan confederations with religious services such as providing *qādīs* and teachers. Most drew their legitimacy from claims of prestigious descent originating in the Hijāz or the Arabian Peninsula at large.

An approach balancing between external and internal dynamics reveals a new identifiable phase of intensified Islamic diffusion and activity beginning in the fifteenth century and culminating in the sixteenth. The politicization of Islam in the Horn of Africa, sparked by the rise to prominence of the sultanate of ‘Adal, attained its climax with the *jihād* of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ghāzī (nicknamed in Amharic Grañ, the “left-handed”). One result of the Muslim victories over “Christian” Ethiopia between 1527 and 1543 was to foster the diffusion of Islam in the Ethio-Eritrean region, prompting a more elaborate formation of Jabarti communities in the highlands. Furthermore, the conflict between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia rallied external imperialist forces in the Red Sea area and culminated in the Ottoman occupation of Massawa in 1557; an occupation that lasted until 1865. One process resulting from the presence of the most prestigious Muslim power of the day in the region and the practical “Ottomanization” of a commercially and strategically revitalized Red Sea was the migration of Arabs from the Hijāz, Yemen and Ḥaḍramawt to the African coastal urban centers, notably Massawa and Hirgigo. In terms of religious influence, the construction of several mosques and tombs/shrines (*qubba*), most notably the shaykh Ḥammāl al-Anṣārī religious complex and what became known as the ‘Ḥanafi’ mosque, was characteristic of the Ottoman era in Massawa.¹⁰ The Otto-

⁹ They are identified as *qabā’il shaykha* in most sources.

¹⁰ Federico Cresti, “Alcune note storiche su Massaua, con particolare riferimento ad un complesso religioso islamico: la moschea dello Shaykh Ḥammālī,” *Africa* (Roma), 45 (3) 1990, pp. 410-431 and “La mosquée du Šayḥ Ḥammālī a Massaoua,” *Etudes Ethiopiennes, Actes de la Xe Conférence Internationale des Etudes Ethiopiennes, Paris, 24-28 août 1988*, edited by Claude Lepage, Volume 1, Paris: Société française pour les études éthiopiennes, 1994, pp. 303-315. On the origins of the ‘Ḥanafi’ mosque see Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Rāwīya fī ta’rīkh mudun Iritriyā*, Unpublished manuscript, Completed in Asmara, 1953, p. 54.

mans introduced the Ḥanafī *madhhab* as the official legal rite and sent to Massawa Ḥanafī *qādīs* from the Ḥijāz in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹¹ The prolonged incorporation of Massawa and its close hinterlands into the Ottoman administrative and commercial setup in the Red Sea area, first and foremost vis-à-vis the Ḥijāz, thus positioned it even more firmly within a political, religious and cultural sphere of Muslim influence.

Expansion and revival in the nineteenth century: Sufis and holy men¹²

A pivotal phase in the growth and development of Islam in the region occurred throughout the nineteenth century. It was interwoven with the wave of religious renewal and reform movement throughout the Muslim world and Egyptian imperialism and expansionism in northeast Africa. It also coincided with and was generated by the transformation of the political economy of the region, resulting from the Red Sea trade revival and the increasing integration of the broader region into the world economy. The waning of Ethiopian central power in the period known as the *zāmānā mäsāfint* (Amh. “age of the princes”) is also a factor accounting for the specific dynamics and trajectories followed by Tigre-speaking societies inhabiting the increasingly vulnerable and unstable peripheral northern regions in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The set of movements frequently referred to as the “Islamic Revival” emerged in the late eighteenth and developed throughout the nineteenth century. They were in part a response to the increasing economic penetration of Europe into the Muslim world

¹¹ Members of the ‘Abbāsi family still recall the reason for their ancestors’ emigration from the Ḥijāz to Massawa. Their family traditions converge with *qādī* lists that mention several *qādīs* from the family in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *Al-Jāmi‘ li-akhbār jazīrat Bādi‘*, Unpublished manuscript, Completed in Asmara, 1958, p. 77.

¹² Significant portions of this section are based on chapter 5 in my doctoral thesis. Jonathan Miran, ‘Facing the Land, Facing the Sea: Commercial Transformation and Urban Dynamics in the Red Sea Port of Massawa, 1840s-1900s,’ Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University, 2004.

and the resulting weakening and decentralization of the Ottoman Empire. The stagnation and perceived “degeneration” of Islamic religious vitality and the creativity of its institutions produced what John Voll called a “spirit of socio-moral reconstruction,” inspiring Muslim thinkers to reformulate Islam.¹³ On the frontiers of the Islamic world—as in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa—the upsurge manifested itself in the missionary activities of Sufi brotherhoods, aiming at spreading Islam among non-Muslims and deepening Islamic practices and piety among those Muslim societies whom they perceived as morally and religiously adrift. In northeast Africa the ‘revival’ was especially marked by the emergence of several new *ṭuruq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*, brotherhood, Sufi order) drawing their inspiration from the teachings of Aḥmad b. Idrīs (1749/1750-1837)¹⁴ and the revitalization of the older orders, such as the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya in the context of the Eritrean region.¹⁵ The strenuous activities of several holy families and religious clans that were able to effectively extend their influence over societies in the region clearly reflected the new religious dynamism. By the 1880s all lowland groups but the Kunama and part of the Bilen were Muslim.

From the 1820s onwards, Egyptian expansion into the Sudan and the revitalization of the commercial axes connecting the Red Sea and the Nile Valley both fueled and accompanied the spectacular process of Islamic diffusion among the largely Tigre-speaking societies of the lowland Eritrean regions.¹⁶ The political decentralization of the Ethiopian state and the vulnerability of predominantly pastoralist societies on its northern fringes were also conducive to the success of the spread of Islam in the area. Northern Ethiopian

¹³ See John Obert Voll, *Islam. Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1982, pp. 34-9.

¹⁴ See R. S. O’Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad Ibn Idris and the Idrisi Tradition*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990.

¹⁵ Nicole Grandin, “Le nord-est et l’est de l’Afrique,” *Les Voies d’Allah: les ordres mystiques dans le monde musulman des origines à aujourd’hui*, edited by Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein, Paris: Fayard, 1996, pp. 428-441 ; Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992.

¹⁶ The most detailed ethnographic survey of the peoples and societies of this region in the mid-nineteenth century is Werner Munzinger, *Ostafrikanische Studien*, Schaffhausen: F. Hurter, 1864.

Christian chiefs tended to raid these societies intermittently but persistently in an attempt to extend their rule over them and exploit them economically. Conversion to Islam in this context vested mostly Tigre-speaking communities with a new identity and a powerful counter-hegemonic force and ideology, endowing them with a source of authority and political legitimacy.

Several holy families played pivotal roles in the transmission and propagation of Islamic religion, law and culture in the areas extending between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley during the period of “Islamic revival.” Their “holiness” usually derived from their claim to *sharīf* descent and from the possession of *baraka*, a heritable beneficent force of divine origin. The ‘Ad Shaykh holy family, traders and holy men associated with the politically potent Belew Nā’ib family of coastal Sāmhar,¹⁷ and the newly established Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa*, founded by Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghānī (b. Mecca, 1794-1852), were especially engaged in spreading and revitalizing Islam in this period.

Between the 1820s and the 1850s the ‘Ad Shaykh family and the Nā’ib’s agents were instrumental in converting the Bet Asgāde sub-groups (Ḥabāb, ‘Ad Tākles and ‘Ad Tāmāryam), the Mānsa’, the Marya, the Bet Jūk, and segments of the Bilen from various local forms of Christian practice to Islam.¹⁸ Tracing their descent to a *sharīf* Ḥusayn from Mecca, the ‘Ad Shaykh family began gaining widespread influence in the Sahel region since the early nineteenth century, especially through the preaching and miracle working of shaykh al-Amin b. Ḥāmid b. Naf’ūtāy.¹⁹ The ‘Ad Shaykh

¹⁷ Some time in the seventeenth century, the Ottomans delegated political power to the Nā’ib family. The Nā’ibs were a locally-based dynasty of power brokers, who—within the framework of Ottoman indirect rule—were able to successfully maneuver between larger rivaling powers and in the process extend their hegemony over societies in the eastern Eritrean region. The gradual transition from Ottoman indirect rule to Egyptian direct control in the 1850s and 1860s marked the end of Nā’ib autonomy, but did not fully extinct their authority.

¹⁸ Giuseppe Sapeto, *Viaggio e missione fra i Mensa i Bogos e gli Habab*, Rome: Propaganda Fide, 1857, p. 156 and p. 159; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 159-169.

¹⁹ A copy of the *nisba* (Ar. pedigree) of Shaykh Ḥāmid b. Naf’ūtāy was given to me during the *ziyāra* to the tomb of Shaykh Muḥammad b. Alī (d.1877) at Emberemi in May 2000. See also a *nisba* in Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Bakr, *Ta’rīkh Iritriyā*, p. 317 and in Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene*, p. 205. For the origins of the

operated in tandem with the Hirgigo-based potent Nā'ib family, to whom many of these societies were tributary. It also appears that they worked hard at initiating these groups into the Qādiriyya Sufi brotherhood, but we lack any substantial sources on this aspect of their activities.²⁰ The 'Ad Shaykh attracted entire families of *tigre* vassals to join their ranks by undermining the master/serf structure of Tigre-speaking pastoralist and agro-pastoralist societies. Increased pressures on the more vulnerable *tigre* class prompted by the ramifications of the commercial boom might in part explain the success of this process. The unsettling of the prevailing social structure constituted a form of social revolution culminating in the emancipation of the *tigre* serfs. But it also posed a threat and a serious challenge to the traditional chiefs, such as in the case of the Bani 'Amir.

In the course of time, the newly converted joined the holy family who was rapidly enlarged, developing gradually into a widely influential and wealthy independent 'tribe.' At some point the family split and began to spread throughout the western, northern and eastern regions of the Eritrean lowlands. Several of shaykh al-Amīn b. Ḥāmid b. Naf'ūtāy's sons settled in the 'Ansāba and Barka valleys while others stayed in the Sahel, yet others emigrated to the north, as far as Tokar in the Sudan.²¹ This process broadened the family's influence and networks, and considerably increased its wealth. Shaykh al-Amīn's grandson, shaykh Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. al-Amīn (b. Nakhra [?] c. 1210/1795—d. Emberemi, 14 Ṣafar 1297/27 February 1877)²² moved to Hirgigo where he spent twelve years before moving and settling in Emberemi in ca. 1840, establishing there the Semhar branch of the 'Ad Shaykh.²³ Shaykh

Ad Shaykh in the Eritrean region see also Maria Höfner, "Überlieferungen bei Tigre-stämmen (I) Ad Sek," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Tome IV, 1961, pp. 181-203.

²⁰ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 239-240. Another point that requires further enquiry is whether the 'Ad Shaykh followed the Mālikī legal rite.

²¹ Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell'Eritrea*, pp. 168-247; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 114-117, 153-179, 244-5. See also Jonathan Miran, "'Ad Shaykh," *Encyclopædia Æthiopia*, edited by S. Uhlig, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, Vol. I, pp. 68-9

²² According to other sources he was born in 1808.

²³ Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Jāmi' li-akhbār jazīrat Bādi'*, p. 65. Two of shaykh al-

Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Amīn was undoubtedly one of the more influential religious figures of the coastlands and the interior from the 1840s to his death in 1877. He was responsible for converting numerous Tigre-speaking people (especially from among the Ḥabāb) and was an object of great veneration in the wider area. His *baraka* attracted scores of pilgrims to Emberemī, which one mid nineteenth-century observer qualified as a “little Mecca.”²⁴

Three intermittent missionary tours undertaken between c.1817 and some point in the 1830s by the founder of the Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa*, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mirghanī (1793/4-1852), propelled the influence of the order in the Eritrean region.²⁵ The success of Khatmiyya influence in the Sudanese and Eritrean regions went hand in hand with the Turco-Egyptian occupation of the Sudan beginning in 1820. The Khatmiyya’s broad-based organization was well adjusted to the new political order of the Turkiyya in the Sudan, contributing to its success.²⁶ The Khatmiyya’s method of expansion was by the incorporation of pre-existing religious formations (notables and holy lineages) “into a new supra-community *ṭarīqa* network.”²⁷ In practice this was achieved by what the

Amīn’s sons settled among the Garabit and the Faydab and lived under the patronage of the Bani ‘Amir. The villages of Hirgigo and Emberemi are both situated in Massawa’s close environs, within several kilometers from the port town.

²⁴ Guillaume Lejean, *Voyage aux Deux Nils*, Paris: Hachette, 1865, p. 142.

²⁵ On Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mirghanī and his writings see R. S. O’Fahey, *Arabic Literature of Africa, The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c.1900*, Volume I, Leiden: Brill, 1994, pp. 187-198, 208-9. For a short and outdated treatment of the Khatmiyya in Eritrea see Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 244-5. On Muḥammad ‘Uthmān’s travels in the Sudan see Karrar, *The Sufi brotherhoods*, pp. 57-64; For the Eritrean region see R. S. O’Fahey, “Sudanese (and some other) sources for Eritrean history: a bibliographical note,” *Sudanica Africa*, 12, 2001, pp. 135-7. See also Archivio Centrale dello Stato (henceforth ACS), Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (henceforth MAI), Governo dell’Eritrea, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, ‘Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,’ Cheren July 1928 by Amerio Liberati, pp. 69-70. Aḥmad b. Idrīs b. Aḥmad al-Rubātābī, *al-Ibāna al-nūriyya fī sha’n sāhib al-ṭarīqa al-Khatmiyya*, (ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm), Beirut, Dāru’l-Jil, 1991 provides more elements to complete the picture. On the Khatmiyya in Eritrea see also Ercole Massara, “Islamismo e confraternite in Eritrea. I Morgani,” *L’Illustrazione coloniale*, Anno III, No. 8, August 1921, pp. 306-7.”

²⁶ John Obert Voll, ‘A history of the Khatmiyyah tariqa in the Sudan,’ Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University 1969, pp. 178-181.

²⁷ R. S. O’Fahey and Bernd Radtke, *Der Islam*, 70, 1993, “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,” p. 79.

historian Knut Vikør labeled the “grafting” model by which *khalīfas* and *khalīfat al-khulafāʾ* were initiated, appointed, and linked into a broad-based transethnic and crossregional organization covering a wide area.²⁸ *Ashrāf* descent and the possession of *baraka* were primordial factors in claiming holiness.²⁹

The Khatmiyya relied on local *faqīhs* and religious leaders—who continued to perform their religious roles locally—in order to create links between commoners and the Sufi brotherhood. Explaining the success of such a flexible and assimilationist method in the Sudan, John Voll has noted that “there was no distinction drawn between the functions of the *faki* as a Khatmiyya *khalīfa* and his other local functions. It all soon came to be looked upon as the actions of a Khatmiyya representative. In this way many old forms and customs were incorporated in what came to be seen as Khatmiyya practice.”³⁰ In other words, in stark contrast with the methods of the ‘Ad Shaykh, communities coming under the influence of the supra-ethnic Khatmiyya were able to preserve their pre-existing social and political structures, much as a sense of stability and continuity.

All in all, the two dominant religious-based formations in the Eritrean area, the ‘Ad Shaykh and the Khatmiyya, developed contrasting methods in spreading and reviving Islam among Tigre, Saho and Bilen-speaking societies in the region. In general, their activities were conducive to a veritable socio-religious revolution among societies coming under their influence.³¹

The intensification of Turco-Egyptian encroachments, especially following their conquest of Kassala in 1840, facilitated the entrench-

²⁸ Knut Vikør, “Sufi Brotherhoods in Africa,” in Levtzion and Pouwels, (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, p. 463.

²⁹ According to Voll *baraka* was hereditary in the Mirghani family. Voll, “A history of the Khatmiyyah tariqa,” p. 158.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

³¹ Some societies, such as the Marya, were at some point disrupted in the process—the Tigre class having been converted by the ‘Ad Shaykh, which some subsequently joined, while part of the ruling/aristocratic class was converted by the Khatmiyya shaykhs and yet another part subsequently by the ‘Ad Shaykh. On the Marya and Islam see Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 167-8 and Guérinot, “L’islam et l’Abyssinie,” pp. 53-7. See also Rhodes House Library (Oxford, U.K.), *The Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1, File 2: ‘The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Eritrea. A Survey of the Keren Division,’ p. 19.

ment of the brotherhood in the eastern Sudanese and Eritrean region. The Khatmiyya capitalized on the Turco-Egyptian imperialist drive in the region by maintaining a good relationship with its military-administrative organs, thereby extending its spheres of influence in territories coming under direct or indirect Turkiyya rule.³² After Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghani’s death in 1852 the Khatmiyya split into regional branches each with its own shaykh. Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrghani (1819-1869), known also as *al-sayyid* al-Ḥasan, and son of the founder of the Khatmiyya became de facto the head and consolidator of the northern and eastern Sudan branch of the order.³³ It was also under *sayyid* al-Ḥasan’s leadership that groups such as the Ḥalanqa and the Ḥabāb ruling class came under greater Khatmi influence.³⁴

It seems that an important detail about the establishment of the Khatmiyya in the Massawa area requires some revision. Most writers follow Trimmingham’s assertion that “the Mīrghaniyya was established in the Massawa district by *sayyid* Hāshim al-Mīrghani who first came there in 1860 when it was under Ottoman rule.”³⁵ However, on the basis of Italian colonial archival materials it seems that Hāshim settled durably in Massawa only in mid-April 1885 after fleeing from Kassala during the Mahdiyya rebellion together with his nephew Muḥammad ‘Uthmān b. Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatm (also known as Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Tāj al-Sirr, 1849/50-1903).³⁶

³² For a nuanced view of the ambiguous Khatmi-Egyptian relationship see O’Fahey and Radtke, “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,” pp. 82-3.

³³ Around 1840 he had had settled in al-Saniyya, at the foot of Kassala mountain, and established there the order’s headquarters. Karrar, *The Sufi brotherhoods*, p. 76.

³⁴ Voll, “A history of the Khatmiyyah tariqa,” pp. 224-5.

³⁵ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 245, 252. On Hāshim al-Mīrghani see *ALA*, I, pp. 208-9; Hofheinz, “Sons of a Hidden Imām: the Genealogy of the Mīrghani Family,” *Sudanic Africa*, 3, 1992, p. 25.

³⁶ The sources are: Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero degli Affari Esteri (henceforth ASDMAE), Archivio storico del Ministero dell’Africa italiana, (henceforth *ASMAI*), Pos. 3 / 4, fasc. 23, ‘Copia della lettera dello sceic Saied Mohamed Hascem El Morgani a S. M. il Re d’Italia, d’Africa e dell’Eritrea Vittorio Emanuele III,’ Massaua, 7 Sha’bān 1318 / 29 November 1900; ACS, *MAI*, b.1066, Allegato no. 9, ‘Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,’ Cheren July 1928 by Amerio Liberati, pp. 72-3. Also ASDMAE, *ASMAI* Pos. 3 / 4, fasc. 23, Genè to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 28 December 1886. On Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Tāj al-Sir see *ALA*, I, p. 201.

In the pre-Italian era Muḥammad ‘Uthmān b. Muḥammad SIRR al-Khatm interacted intensively with the eastern Eritrean region, especially with the Ḥabāb among whom he lived in the 1860s, but also with Saho-speaking societies of the eastern highland escarpments in the 1870s. Of the Mirghanī family members touring, visiting, and settling in the wider region between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley before 1885, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān SIRR al-Khatm’s role was greatest in consolidating the Khatmiyya’s influence and gaining adherence in Sahel, Semhar, Akkälä Guzay.

The *ṭarīqa* also gained significant adherence in Massawa’s burgeoning suburbs and satellite villages—a process that is attested by the erection of several mosques affiliated with the order or associated with its leaders. Over the next decades and following the lease of Massawa to khedive Ismā‘il of Egypt in 1865 the power balance between the ‘Ad Shaykh and the Khatmiyya shifted in favor of the latter, which came to be ever more dominant in the region. The gradual entrenchment of the Khatmiyya in Massawa’s mainland settlements was instrumental in consolidating the *ṭarīqa*’s influence in Semhar and Sahel. It was also crucial in gaining new followers from among the Saho-speaking agropastoralist clans who tended to migrate between the Red Sea coasts and the eastern highland escarpments, notably the Assaworta.

But the ‘Ad Shaykh and the Khatmiyya were not the only groups participating in and fueling the dynamics of Islamic revival in the region. Other smaller and more localized Tigre, Saho, and ‘Afar-speaking holy and religious clans such as the Bayt Shaykh Maḥmūd, Faqīh Ḥarak, Bayt Khalifa, ‘Ad Mu‘allim, ‘Ad Darqī, to name but some of the most influential, were active in the diffusion of Islamic learning and law among societies of the region. Some of these functioned as ‘religious clans’ serving their wider social groupings or clan confederations with religious services.³⁷

The Egyptian occupation of Massawa (1865-1885), coupled with a reinvigorated, commercially driven wave of Arab and Muslim

³⁷ Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Bakr, *Ta’riḫ Iritriyā al-mu‘āṣir*, pp. 99-100; Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell’Eritrea*, p. 286.

migrant merchants and entrepreneurs from Egypt, the Hijāz, Ḥaḍramawt, Yemen and beyond the Arab lands, enriched Islamic piety and practice in the town and its dependencies. The Egyptians reformed and regularized Islamic legal procedures and dispatched to Massawa several *qāḍīs* and *muftīs* from Egypt and the Sudan.³⁸ In general, Islam flourished in Massawa in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century an Italian colonial handbook identified some sixty-five mosques in its greater urban area.³⁹ Both the Egyptian administration and enriched Massawan entrepreneurs built and renovated mosques, shrines and other religious edifices. The Qādiriyya, Shādhiliyya and the Aḥmadiyya *ṭuruq* also had adherents and *zawāyā* (sing. *zāwiya*, Sufi lodges) in Massawa.⁴⁰ A branch of the Darqāwiyya (Shādhiliyya) appears to have been independent on the coast until its disappearance during the Mahdiyya.⁴¹ Members of the Qādiriyya erected a *mazār* to commemorate the founder of the old *ṭarīqa*, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1077-1166), who, some of them believe, had spent some time in Massawa. Until the mid-1970s, when the Ethiopian Navy constructed its base in the peninsula, a locally based yearly

³⁸ Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Jāmi‘ li-akhbār jazīrat Bādi‘*, See chapter 11 (Title: “On the *sharī‘a* court and the *qāḍīs* of Bādi‘”), pp. 72-97. See also Jonathan Miran, ‘Islamic Court Records from Nineteenth-Century Massawa: A Source for Social and Economic History,’ Paper presented to the First International Conference of Eritrean Studies, Asmara, 22-26 July 2001.

³⁹ Dante Odorizzi, *Il commissariato regionale di Massaua al 1° gennaio 1910*, Asmara: Tip. Fioretti e Beltrami, 1911, pp.119-120, 160-1, 168-9. Based on their names at least eight mosques are associated with the Khatmiyya: one on the island of Massawa, three in Hirgigo (Ar. Ḥarqīqū), and two each in Omkullo and Hitumlo. In addition to these, Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār identified in his 1958 manuscript five more Khatmi associated mosques in the mainland neighborhoods of Amaterre and Edaga Be‘rai. Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Jāmi‘ li-akhbār jazīrat Bādi‘*, pp. 59, 61.

⁴⁰ Several brotherhood *khalīfas* and *muqaddams* are identified in the records of the Islamic court of Massawa during the 1870s and 1880s. To this day I have been able to associate some of them to the Khatmiyya and the Shadhiliyya exclusively. Later, in the Italian period, a *zāwiya* of the Aḥmadiyya was established by Ja‘far Sa‘īd al-Nātī following his return from ḥājj in Mecca. The *zāwiya* was based in Amaterre in Massawa’s suburbs and a yearly *ziyāra* to commemorate *Sayyid* Aḥmad b. Idrīs was performed there around the 20th of Rajab. Interview with Muḥammad Abū Bakr al-Nātī, Massawa, 16 May 2000.

⁴¹ Alfred Le Chatelier, *Les confréries musulmanes du Hedjaz*, Paris: E. Leroux, 1887, pp. 126-128; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 236.

ziyāra (pilgrimage), the *ziyārat al-Jilānī*, attracted worshippers, especially from the Massawa conurbation on 11 Rabi' I.⁴²

Other local and regional pilgrimages and commemorative ceremonies (sing. *hawliyya*) to the tombs and shrines of local pious saints and holy Sufi leaders also developed in and around Massawa in this period. Most importantly the *ziyāra* to the tomb of Shaykh Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. al-Amīn of the 'Ad Shaykh in the village of Emberemi (on 13 *Ṣafar*), drawing worshippers from all over the lowlands.⁴³ The *ziyāra* to the shrine of Sayyid Hāshim al-Mīrghani in Hitumlo (2 *Jumāda II*) developed following his death in 1901; it was even more wide-ranging and instrumental in creating spaces of religious and social confluence among Muslims in the region.⁴⁴ The dynamism of Islam and the commercial revival in the nineteenth century had far-reaching effects on all the peoples of the area, but even more so in the lowlands.⁴⁵ On a regional level, the energetic *ṭuruq* and holy families fostered widespread spatial networks, or webs of connections, straddling the area between the Red Sea coasts and the inland regions in the eastern Sudan, with wider connections across the sea, on the one hand, and further west towards the Nile and beyond it, on the other.

The advent of European imperialism, the success of the Mahdist movement in the Sudan and the responses of highland Abyssinian rulers to these new external challenges, especially in the 1880s, had far reaching consequences for the history of Islam in the

⁴² The *mazār* was erected in the peninsula that became known as 'Abd al-Qādir. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp. 155, 239, 241, 249 and interview with Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Abbāsī, Massawa 15 May 2000.

⁴³ Odorizzi, *Il commissariato regionale*, pp. 169-170; Dante Odorizzi, *Note storiche sulla religione mussulmana e sulle divisioni dell'Islam con appunti speciali relativi all'Islam in Eritrea*, Asmara: Tip. Coloniale M. Fioretti, 1916, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁴ See more on Muslim pilgrimages in Eritrea in (n.a.), "*Maqāmāt al-awliyā' fī Iritriyā wa-hawliyyātihim al-sanawiyya*," *Ṣawt al-rābi'a al-Iritriyā al-islāmiyya*, No 147, 2 December 1952, pp. 2, 8 (I assume, cautiously, that the article was written by Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār. As a supra-political Grand Mufti, he published numerous unsigned articles in the Muslim League's newspaper). Another "small" Mīrghani *ziyāra* commemorated the sharifa 'Alawiyya (d.1940) on 22 Shawwāl. In Rās Midr in Massawa, there used to be the *ziyārat al-Najāshī* on 10 Muḥarram.

⁴⁵ The ways by which Islamic belief and practices have been incorporated into these societies remains to be studied. Most interesting is the process of conversion of nominally Christian Tigre-speaking communities such as the Bayt Asgāde.

region. A host of powers became involved in the new complex configuration of international and regional struggles in the Massawa-Adwa-Kassala triangle. Abyssinians, Sudanese Mahdists, Egyptians, British and Italians—all competed for influence over the Eritrean region's Muslim lowland ethnic groups, ultimately leading to the politicization of religion in the area and to deep internal divisions within these societies.

The Mahdist rebellion against the Egyptian administration in the Sudan was triggered by Muḥammad Aḥmad b. Abd Allāh's letters informing the notables of the Sudan of his *mahd*ship in June 1881.⁴⁶ In the course of the following few years the Muslim groups inhabiting the region between Kassala and Massawa found themselves in a delicate situation, increasingly caught and divided in between pro-Mahdist and anti-Mahdist positions and loyalties. Mahdist pressure and influence over groups loyal to the Khedive and to the anti-Mahdiyya Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa* proved effective, especially against the background of continuous northern Abyssinian encroachments, raids and imposition of tribute payment on societies in these regions in the context of Egyptian-Abyssinian struggles and trials of power in the 1870s and early 1880s.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Emperor Yohannes's nationalistic anti-Muslim policies politicized Christian-Muslim relations and increased lowlanders' sense of alienation from the Christian polity. It directly contributed to the success of Mahdist influence over them. As a result, Anglo-Egyptian attempts at forming an anti-Mahdist Muslim front between

⁴⁶ The *mahdi* is the 'Awaited One.' A divinely guided leader who is supposed to come some time in the future to restore the original purity of the Islamic faith and God's rule on earth. The best treatment of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan remains Peter M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881-1898*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970 [2nd ed.].

⁴⁷ The main Abyssinian (Tigrayan) figure in this context was Ras Alula Āngāda (c. 1847-1897), who was Emperor Yohannes IV's (r. 1872-1889) military commander in northern Abyssinia. For references to Alula's collisions with the Tigre and Sahospeaking groups see Haggai Erlich, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa. A Political Biography: Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1875-1897*, Lawrenceville, NJ., 1996, pp. 35, 51-4, 58-64, 71-2, 85, 90-4, 100, 112 and more. In general, the Bani 'Amer maintained an anti-Mahdist position throughout the period, while segments of the Habab and the 'Ad Tamaryam strongly supported the Mahdist cause and cooperated with 'Uthmān Diqna's envoys in the region.

Massawa and Kassala under the spiritual leadership of the Khatmiyya produced little results.⁴⁸

Dominant elements of the 'Ad Shaykh holy family took a pro-Mahdist stance, sided with 'Uthmān Dīqna's envoys and perhaps even took on a leadership role in rallying pro-Mahdist support among the Tigre-speaking groups in the area. After the fall of Kassala to the Mahdists in late July 1885 these struggles continued often through propaganda. Abyssinian victory at the battle of Kufit (23 September 1885) put an end to Mahdist aspirations to conquer the coastal zone north of and around Massawa but the loyalties of the lowland groups still vacillated between the Mahdi and the Khedive. The sudden appearance of a new force in the arena—imperialist Italy—spelt both continuity and change, at least in the short term.

The genesis and formation of “Eritrean Islam” in the Italian colonial era (1885-1941)

European imperialism articulated by Italian colonial imposition and the creation of the politically defined territory of 'Eritrea' in 1890 played a critical role in shaping the history of Islam in the region. On a broad level it confined societies which were different in terms of language, mode of production, social structure, culture, and last but not least, religion, within limited boundaries extending over the lowlands and the northern tip of the Abyssinian highlands. The Muslims, comprising approximately 60% of the population in the early colonial period, inhabited about four fifths (4/5) of the territory, mostly in the lowlands, while the Tigrinya-speaking Christians, constituting 40% of the inhabitants, lived on one fifth (1/5) of the colony, exclusively on the highland plateau. Italian colonialism formed the infrastructure within which a diverse grouping of Muslim societies would gradually develop a set of shared experiences (and institutions) as Muslims in colonial Eritrea. This process was shaped by Italian attitudes towards Is-

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 54-5.

lam and by the incorporation of Muslims into an entity almost evenly divided between Muslims and Christians.

Italian colonial attitudes towards Islam did not amount to a clear, linear and coherent set of policies; they were shaped throughout the period by a host of factors, both internal and external to the colony proper. Chronologically we can distinguish roughly three phases: a period characterized by the politics of conquest, the response to the Mahdist threat, and Governor Martini's "Muslim policies" (1885-c.1910), the phase following the conquest of Libya and the elaboration of Italy's attitudes towards Islam (1910s-1920s), and the period of overt pro-Muslim policies under the fascists and the more pronounced propagandistic articulation of Italy as a "Muslim power" (1920s-1941).

At the outset of their occupation of Massawa in 1885, the Italian colonial authorities proclaimed that the customs and religion of the town's inhabitants would be "scrupulously respected".⁴⁹ But early policies went even beyond the mere "respect" of Islam. The authorities continued, as the Egyptians did beforehand, to grant subventions to mosques and monthly stipends to Muslim community leaders and granted the *sharī'a* court autonomy in matters of personal status, family and inheritance. In some contradiction with the official liberal policy of equally respecting all religions in the colony, urban Muslims and their institutions in the Massawa area were privileged by the authorities, at least in the first two decades of colonial rule.⁵⁰ The inhabitants of Massawa and its region were perceived by colonial officials as the most "evolved," "civilized" and "westernized" among the societies of the colony.⁵¹

On a more general level, the initial favorable tendency towards Islam is also apparent in Martini's tolerance towards Muslim

⁴⁹ ASDMAE, Archivio Eritrea (henceforth AE), pacco 16, 'Proclama agli abitanti di Massaua,' by Rear Admiral Caimi, 5 February 1885.

⁵⁰ Cesare Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano (1882-1941)*, Milano: Giuffrè, 1982, pp. 41-5, 103-7 and interview with Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Sālim, Massawa, 20 March 2000.

⁵¹ For example, Ilario Capomazza, *Usanze islamiche hanafite di Massaua e dintorni*, Macerata: Giorgetti, 1910, p. 9 and Tribunale Civile e Penale di Massaua. *Relazione statistica de lavori compiuti nell'anno 1892 dal Tribunale Civile e Penale di Massaua. (Dal Pres. Avv. Luigi Scotti)*, Massaua, 1893, p. 3.

proselytism among non-Muslim societies while prohibiting Christian missionary activities in Muslim areas.⁵² In 1910 the Regional Commissioner of Keren stated that Islamic proselytism among the “pagans” should not be hindered but encouraged since it succeeded in “gradually modifying the barbaric customs of these populations.”⁵³ Following the transfer of the colony’s capital from Massawa to Asmara in 1899, and throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, several wealthy and influential merchants from Massawa (mostly of Ḥaḍrami and Egyptian origins⁵⁴) opened commercial branches and offices in the new capital. There, and along with Jabarti Muslims, they were instrumental in funding the construction of mosques and other religious institutions and in organizing the early Muslim community of Asmara, in collaboration with, and at times at the behest of, the colonial authorities.⁵⁵

The foundations of early Italian colonial attitudes were shaped by the need to maintain stability among the ‘tribes’ and, inseparably, by the need to respond to the divided Mahdist and anti-Mahdist loyalties of the Khatmiyya and the ‘Ad Shaykh. The Italian authorities were deeply concerned by the spilling-over of the Mahdist rebellion from the Sudan into the colony and feared the destabilization of their control over occupied territories. In the lowland regions, the politics of conquest and ‘pacification’ sought

⁵² Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Politica e religioni*, pp. 104-105.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 115-116.

⁵⁴ The role of assimilated Ḥaḍramis and Egyptians in the history of Islam in Eritrea and in Eritrean history is worthy of further study. Since the late nineteenth century, wealthy merchants, learned men and community activists, mostly originally from Massawa, have been active in funding mosques and schools, editing newspapers, recruiting teachers from the Arab world, presiding *waqf* committees and other activities such as politics in the British period. Notable examples include the following families: Bā Ḥubayshī, Bā Tūq, Ḥayūti, Sāfi, al-Ghūl and Hilāl.

⁵⁵ The *Jāmi‘ al-khulafā’ al-rāshidīn*, Asmara’s principal mosque, was constructed in 1900 with the significant financial support of Aḥmad Afandī al-Ghūl, of Egyptian origins and the most prominent merchant in Massawa at the time. Gori, “Soggiorno di studi,” p. 83, Giuseppe Puglisi, *Chi è? dell’Eritrea. Dizionario biografico*, Asmara: Agenzia Regina, 1952, p. 7, and Interview with ‘Alī Yūsuf ‘Alī al-Ghūl, Massawa, 26 February 2000. Another source puts the construction date at 1906. Edward Denison, Guang Yu Ren, Naigzy Gebremedhin, *Asmara: Africa’s Modernist City*, London and New York: Merrell, 2003, p. 130.

the cooperation of responsive elements in 'assisting' the authorities to control and secure the stability of their conquered territories and mobilize local forces against the Mahdists and their supporters within the colony and on its borders. The Bani 'Amer, under the influence of the Khatmi shaykh in Kassala, fought the Mahdist coalition in the eastern Sudan with zeal in 1884.⁵⁶ By contrast, sections of the Ḥabāb, possibly under the influence of the 'Ad Shaykh, showed pro-Mahdist tendencies and collaborated with the eastern Sudanese Mahdist leader, 'Uthmān Diqna.⁵⁷

The Italian authorities persuaded *sayyid* Hāshim al-Mīrghanī to stay in Massawa—to which he arrived but several months earlier in 1885—and assist them. They paid him a monthly stipend in return for which he was expected to exercise his influence over the lowland Muslim 'tribes' and also provide intelligence on the Mahdists and the Ethiopians gathered through Khatmi networks. But to little avail; relations often turned sour, mutual accusations followed, and governors were often frustrated with *sayyid* Hāshim.⁵⁸ Elaborating further this strategy, in 1898 Governor Ferdinando Martini (Gov. 1897-1907) exerted considerable pressure on *sayyid* Hāshim attempting to convince him to transfer his seat from Massawa to Keren, where his authority over Eritrea's Muslim lowlanders would deflect Kassala's influence from beyond the colony's borders. The return of Khatmi leaders to Kassala following the fall of the Mahdist state created a problem with 'tribes,'

⁵⁶ Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979, pp. 234-5.

⁵⁷ One British report stated that the principal chief of the Ḥabab, Shaykh 'Umar b. Muḥammad, had claimed that he had joined the Mahdist holy war. Ibid, 187-8. An Italian report from the 1920s remarked how the 'Ad Shaykh had secretly allied with the Mahdists (to fight the Khatmiyya) through a certain Shaykh Ḥājj Ya'qūb Muḥammad 'Alī who occupied an eminent position with the forces of 'Uthmān Dig-na, *amīr* of the Hadandowa. ACS, MAI, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, 'Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,' by Amerio Liberati, (Cheren, July 1928), p. 55.

⁵⁸ On the early contacts between the Khatmi leader in Hitumlo and the colonial authorities see especially ASDMAE, *ASMAI*, pos. 3 / 4, fasc. 23, 'Famiglia Morgani,' Gené to Ministro Aff. Esteri, (Massaua, 21 January 1886 and 28 December 1886) and Baldissera to Ministro della Guerra (Massaua, 13 June 1889); ASDMAE, *AE*, pacco 43, Ministro Aff. Esteri, Robilant to Gené (Rome, 6 December 1886).

notably groups of the Bani ‘Amer, who sought to follow them into the Sudan. But Martini’s pressure on *sayyid* Hāshim bore no fruits.⁵⁹ *Sayyid* Hāshim died in 1901 and the authorities sought calculatingly to transport his remains to Keren where they promised to build a shrine in his honor. This initiative was met with vigorous opposition by the Muslim community in Massawa and was eventually abandoned.⁶⁰ However, the colonial authorities were more successful with his nephew’s son, *sayyid* Ja‘far b. Bakrī b. Ja‘far b. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mirghani (1871-1943).⁶¹ *Sayyid* Ja‘far was discreetly persuaded to move into the colony from Kassala and establish his seat in Keren in 1903.⁶² Consequently, the colonial administration financed the construction of the tomb of Hāshim al-Mirghani in Hitumlo and a mosque in Keren.⁶³ All in all, Martini’s workings were conducive to the formation of an Islamic sphere within the confines of the colony by mobilizing a large number of Muslims around an “official” representative of the Khatmiyya branch in Eritrea—a process that was to ultimately benefit both parties.

⁵⁹ See correspondence and reports during 1898 in ACS, *Carte F. Martini*, s. 16, fasc. 54-55 and ASDMAE, *ASMAI* Pos 3 / 4, fasc. 23, Martini to Ministro Affari Esteri, Asmara, 3 May 1901. See also Ferdinando Martini, *Il diario eritreo*, Firenze: Vallecchi, 1947, I, pp. 43-5 (Massaua, 2-3 February 1898) and p. 52 (7 February 1898).

⁶⁰ See correspondence from 1902-3 in ACS, *Carte F. Martini*, b. 16, fasc. 54-55, ‘Morgani.’ See also Martini, *Il diario eritreo*, II, p. 15 (4 June 1902).

⁶¹ The dates are based on Puglisi, *Chi è dell’Eritrea*, p. 213.

⁶² ASDMAE, *AE*, 43, (Il direttore ?) to the Commissario regionale di Massaua, Asmara, 28 December 1902 (‘Oggetto: Sidi Giafer el Morgani’). For *sayyid* Ja‘far’s agreement to transfer to Keren see ASDMAE, *AE*, 43, Salvadei to Governor in Asmara (Massaua, 8 January 1903).

⁶³ Massimo Romandini, “Politica musulmana in Eritrea durante il governato Martini,” *Islam, storia e civiltà*, anno III, n.2, aprile-giugno 1984, 127-131 and Atti Parlamentari, Legislazione XXIII-sessione 1909-13, Camera dei Deputati, *Allegati alla Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea*, 32-3. The *hawliyya* that was until then performed at the mosque of Ja‘far al-Ṣadiq b. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mirghani (1822/3-1860/61) in Omkullo was now combined with that commemorating *sayyid* Hāshim al-Mirghani on 2 Jummād II, attracting followers from the wider region. A *hawliyya* (Ar.) is a commemorative ceremony in which the tour of the *qubba*, the chanting of *mawliids*, and usually a *dhihr* are performed. On Ja‘far al-Ṣadiq b. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mirghani (1822/3-1860/61) see *ALA*, I, p. 207. ASDMAE, *AE*, 43, Dante Odorizzi (Massaua) a Regente del Governo (Asmara), 3 November 1910 (‘circa la festa del Holl di Morghani’). On the *qubba* see Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Jāmi‘ li-akhbār jazirat Bādi‘*, p. 65.

The cooption of the Khatmiyya was accompanied by a virulent campaign of discrediting and denigrating of the 'Ad Shaykh. Governor Martini worked at undermining the legitimacy and influence of what colonial officials perceived as the 'tribalizing' and 'exploitative' 'Ad Shaykh. Colonial officials were highly suspicious of the expanding 'tribe', believed to sympathize with the Mahdists and perceived as a dangerous and potentially destabilizing element among lowland Muslims. Governor Martini did not make secret his wish that once the Khatmis set their stronghold in Keren they would be able to fight off the "potentially preoccupying" influence of the 'Ad Shaykh and maintain the integrity of the tribes in a period of upheaval and instability.⁶⁴

Colonial officials employed freely terms such as 'subversion' and 'plundering' in demonizing the methods and effects of the 'Ad Shaykh on the societies that came under their influence. Accordingly, the colonial authorities—under Governor Martini—devised a number of measures aimed at curtailing their influence and authority. Their traditional exemption from tribute was ended in 1904-5. In addition, Martini deliberately severed the group placing the Barka and Sahel/Semhar branches under distinct *commissariati* (1903). He also mustered all the dispersed elements of the family inhabiting Sahel and 'Ansaba into one group under one chief. In that way Khatmiyya influence was bound to be more effective.⁶⁵ Anti-'Ad Shaykh colonial measures seem to have achieved their goals; the settlement of *sayyid* Ja'far in Keren accelerated even further the decline of 'Ad Shaykh political and religious influence.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Atti Parlamentari, Legislazione XXIII-sessione 1909-13, Camera dei Deputati, *Allegati alla Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea*, p. 33. See also ACS, MAI, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, 'Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,' by Amerio Liberati (Cheren, July 1928), pp. 75-77.

⁶⁵ ACS, MAI, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, 'Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,' by Amerio Liberati (Cheren, July 1928), pp. 54, 75-77. *Atti parlamentari*, pp. 33-4.

⁶⁶ Anti-'Ad Shaykh discourses were pervasive in colonial literature throughout the period of Italian rule in Eritrea. Pollera's handbook on the populations of Eritrea reproduces the same arguments [and tone] typical of the beginning of the century. Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene*, pp. 204ff and 286-7.

All in all, policies setting apart ‘useful’ and ‘potentially dangerous’ Muslim elements in the colony, consolidated the Khatmiyya’s influence and enhanced the decline of the ‘Ad Shaykh. Indeed, in the 1920s the latter exercised but very little authority, limited mainly to the Ḥabāb. But there too, the influence of the Khatmiyya had already spread significantly and was still making progress in the 1920s.⁶⁷ By that period the ‘Ad Tāmariyya were under greater Khatmi influence than that of the ‘Ad Shaykh; the ‘Ad Tākles were all initiated to the Khatmiyya; and the Marya too had changed their allegiance from the ‘Ad Shaykh and Qādiriyya to the Khatmiyya.⁶⁸ Early in the century differences emerged within the Khatmi elite in Eritrea, most notably between *Sayyid* Ja‘far, the official leader of the *ṭarīqa* in Eritrea, and *sharīfa* ‘Alawiya, the daughter of the late *Sayyid* Hāshim, who had also come to settle in Keren in 1903. The Italian imposition of the leadership of the *ṭarīqa* was not accepted by all. Apparently, *sharīfa* ‘Alawiya was reluctant to recognize *Sayyid* Ja‘far as the paramount leader of the *ṭarīqa* in the colony. As daughter of *Sayyid* Hāshim, she saw the right to appoint *khalīfas* in the Massawa region. She gradually attracted followers—a process that undermined Italian attempts at centralizing the authority of the Khatmiyya, challenging *Sayyid* Ja‘far’s authority, and fomenting divisions and sectarian loyalties between the followers of the *ṭarīqa* in Keren, Massawa and Asmara areas.⁶⁹

A more wide-ranging and conscious articulation of Italian colonial attitudes towards Islam may be identified following the elaborate formation of the colonial state and the conquest of

⁶⁷ ACS, MAI, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, ‘Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,’ by Amerio Liberati (Cheren, July 1928), p. 55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7, 48.

⁶⁹ On the *sharīfa* see Giuseppe Caniglia, *La Sceriffa di Massaua (La Tarica Katmia)*, Roma: Cremonese Libraio Editore, 1940. Differences culminated when ‘Alawiya left the colony in 1919 to Sawakin (where her sister Maryam resided) before returning again to Eritrea where she settled in Hitumlo in 1923, pledging not to interfere in religious politics. ACS, MAI, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, ‘Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,’ by Amerio Liberati, (Cheren, July 1928), p. 78-9. A recent study that sheds more light on the *sharīfa* ‘Alawiya, including her controversial position in the fascist period, is Silvia Bruzzi, ‘Colonialismo italiano e Islam in Eritrea (1890-1941),’ Tesi di Laurea in Storia dei Paesi Africani nel Secolo XX, Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, AA. 2003/2004.

Libya in 1911. They were in part inspired and fueled by the proponents of a “philo-Islamic policy,” such as Enrico Insabato (1878-1963), and largely sought to empower Italy in the Mediterranean and vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁰ In post-conquest Libya, colonial officials expressed inherently contradictory discourses depicting Italy as a colonial power “protecting” Islam and Muslims in a seemingly intact *dār al-Islām* in which religious authority could be separated from political authority.⁷¹ Ruling over significant Muslim populations in Libya, Somalia and Eritrea, the Italians were now confronted with practical matters concerning the administration of Muslim communities and their institutions. In 1912 the Italian diplomatic representation in Cairo funded the construction of a separate *riwāq* for Eritreans and Somalis at al-Azhar University.⁷² In 1916 Dante Odorizzi⁷³ published a monograph on Islam in Eritrea for the use of colonial officials, and in the same year the colonial administration published a decree granting legal status to the *waqf* committees in Asmara, Massawa and Keren.⁷⁴ In 1917 the Italian authorities purchased hostels in Mecca, Medina and Jidda for the use of pilgrims from the Italian colonies.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Anna Baldinetti, *Orientalismo e colonialismo. La ricerca di consenso in Egitto per l'impresa di Libia*, Roma, Istituto per l'Oriente “C. A. Nallino,” 1997, especially chapter 2. It is interesting to note that in the early 1900s, in Egypt, Enrico Insabato worked closely under Giuseppe Salvago Raggi who was the representative of the Italian government in Cairo and who would become Governor of Eritrea (1907-1915). Carlo Gotti Porcinari, *Rapporti Italo-Arabi (1902-1930) dai documenti di Enrico Insabato*, Roma: E.S.P., 1965, pp. 9.

⁷¹ Salvatore Bono, “Islam et politique coloniale en Libye,” *The Maghreb Review*, 13 (1-2) 1988, pp. 70-76.

⁷² Baldinetti, *Orientalismo e colonialismo*, p. 50. The *riwāq* are the living quarters, dormitories and workrooms of al-Azhar University students. They are divided according to provinces and nationalities. Enrico Insabato was behind this initiative.

⁷³ During these years two colonial officials stand out as “specialists” of Islam and Eritrea’s Muslim societies: Dante Odorizzi (Mantova 1867- Mersa Fātma Heri [Eri.] 1917) and Ilario Capomazza (Pozzuoli 1875-Merca [Som.] 1932). Odorizzi, the higher ranking of the two, served as *commissario regionale* of Massawa from 1908 to 1915. Both published valuable monographs and dictionaries related to Islam, customary law, and the Tigre, ‘Afar, and Saho-speaking peoples of the colony. Puglisi, *Chi è? dell'Eritrea*, pp. 67, 222.

⁷⁴ Odorizzi, *Note storiche sulla religione musulmana*, and Yassin M. Abera, “Muslim Institutions in Ethiopia: the Asmara Awqaf,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 5, 1983, p. 206.

⁷⁵ Gaspare Colosimo, *Relazione al parlamento sulla situazione politica economica ed*

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Fascists deployed explicit pro-Muslim propaganda, appealing to public opinion in the Muslim world, and especially to the Arab nationalists in the Mediterranean and Arab lands. Mussolini sought to stir up regional instability and gain the sympathy of Arabs and Muslims for his imperialist objectives in Africa and the Mediterranean.⁷⁶ Following the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935, pro-Muslim policies were part and parcel of the Italian colonial project. Ruling a considerable population of approximately nine million Muslims in its colonies, Italy presented itself as the champion of Islam and as a “Muslim Power.” Favoring Muslims became official policy aimed at winning Muslim support by counterbalancing and undermining the legitimacy and authority of the traditionally dominant Christian highlanders.⁷⁷ The colonial administration built and renovated mosques and religious schools throughout the colony. In 1937 the Italian civil engineer Guido Ferrazza reconstructed and enlarged the *Jāmi‘al-khulafā’ al-rāshidīn* in Asmara. The architectural style of the mosque was undoubtedly inspired by Ferrazza’s previous experience in Tripoli.⁷⁸ Eritrean Muslims were able to travel more freely for religious education in the Middle East, especially to Egypt and the Hijāz. Through education and pilgrimage they met other Muslims from the Italian colonies and the wider Muslim world. Clearly, a more conscious Muslim urban intelligentsia emerged in Eritrea as a result of these combined processes.⁷⁹ However, unlike in Libya, pro-Muslim policies

amministrativa delle colonie italiane, Roma, 1918, pp. 467-481. (“Acquisti di immobili a Mecca, Medina e Gedda per i pellegrini mussulmani poveri o indigenti delle colonie italiane”).

⁷⁶ See for example John Wright, “Mussolini, Libya and the ‘Sword of Islam,’” *The Maghreb Review*, 12 (1-2) 1987, pp. 29-33. For a staunch promoter of such policies see Roberto Cantalupo’s suggestive book title *L’Italia Musulmana*, Rome 1928. See also Enrico Galoppini, *Il fascismo e l’Islam*, Parma: Edizioni all’insegna del Veltro, 2001.

⁷⁷ Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience*, London: Zed, 1985, pp. 161-165. See also Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, chapters 8 and 9. See also Nicla Buonasorte, “La politica religiosa italiana in Africa Orientale dopo la conquista (1936-1941),” *Studi Piacentini*, 17, 1995, pp. 53-114.

⁷⁸ *Guida dell’Africa Orientale Italiana*, Milano: Consociazione Turistica Italiana, 1938, p. 203.

⁷⁹ It is possible to trace the careers of several prominent and less prominent

were often in stark contradiction with the harsh racial policies applied by the Fascists in 'Africa Orientale Italiana.'⁸⁰

Italian policies and practice towards Islam, the establishment of Islamic institutions, and the shared experiences of Eritrean Muslims under colonial rule, all worked towards the genesis and formation of an 'Eritrean' Muslim consciousness, at least among the growing urban elite. The process of centralization culminated with the appointment of the al-Azhar University educated Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār Aḥmad 'Umar (1909-69) as *muftī li 'l-diyār al-irītriyya* ('Grand Mufti of the Eritrean Lands') as head of the colony's Muslim community, in 1940. The appointment came only a year before Italy's defeat in the War and the dismantling of its colonies. The Grand Mufti—now at the head of Eritrea's centralized Islamic institutions—was to become a central protagonist and driving force in the development of Islam in Eritrea over the next few decades.⁸¹

Organization, centralization, and politicization under the British Military Administration (1941-1952)

During the decade under the British Military Administration (BMA), Islam in Eritrea thrived and flourished in a way unparalleled in intensity and scope before or since. The establishment and organization of Islamic religious, legal, educational and cultural institutions and associations throughout the 1940s prompted the flourishing of Muslim communal life, especially in Eritrea's

members of this 'elite' engaged in Muslim religious and communal activities in Puglisi's biographical dictionary *Chi è? dell'Eritrea*. See for example 'Ahmed Effendi al-Gul' (p. 7), 'Idris Hussen Suleiman' (p. 169), 'Mahmud Nur Hussein Berhanu' (p. 189), 'Omar Obed Bahobesci' (p. 223), 'Saleh Ahmed Checchia Pasha' (p. 262) and many others. [I have left the names in Puglisi's Italianized transliteration].

⁸⁰ Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Politica e religioni*, pp. 290-291.

⁸¹ On the career of the Grand Mufti see Jonathan Miran, "Grand Mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen: note sur la vie et l'oeuvre de cheikh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār (1909-1969)," *Chroniques yéménites* (Centre Français d'Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales de Sanaa), 10, 2002, pp. 35-47. [Full text accessible on-line at <http://cy.revues.org/document126.html>].

burgeoning towns. Demographically, the number of Muslims in Eritrea increased from 175,000 in 1905 to 312,000 in 1931 and 528,000 in 1948.⁸² But the social, religious and cultural blossoming of Islam throughout the decade was accompanied by great turbulence in a highly charged socio-political climate. The emergence and development of liberalized politics in this era generated several ideologies of identity often articulated in terms of religion. The foundation of the pro-Independence Muslim League (*al-rābiṭa al-islāmiyya al-iririyya*) in Keren in December 1946 rallied many ethnically and linguistically diverse Eritrean Muslims under the banner of Islam, making religious identity an essential component of nationalist aspirations.⁸³ The Muslim League perceived Eritrea as a territory with a predominantly Muslim population (demographically and geographically). It looked for inspiration in other movements of liberation in Asia and the Middle East which rallied people on the basis of a Muslim identity (eg. The Moslem League in India).⁸⁴

The Italian-appointed Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, played a pivotal role in inscribing Islam on the Eritrean public sphere and in shaping an Eritrean Islamic community throughout the 1940s. Born in Akkälā Guzay to the Faqīh Ḥarak clan of the Saho-speaking Minifere group in 1909, Shaykh Ibrāhīm spent fifteen years in the Sudan and in Egypt studying Islamic religious studies and jurisprudence before his appointment and return to Eritrea in 1940. It should come as no surprise that the young bright man's lengthy stay in the highly politicized Egypt of the 1920s and 1930s was critical in shaping his political awareness.⁸⁵ In his three-decade-long career as Grand Mufti until his death in 1969,

⁸² Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*, Lanham, MD, & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1998, p. 266.

⁸³ On the Muslim League see Lloyd Ellingson, "The emergence of political parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950," *Journal of African History*, 18, 2, (1977), pp. 270-2 and Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991*, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2000, pp. 157-160. The *khatīfa* of the Khatmiyya in Keren, Sayyid Abū Bakr al-Mirghani was made [honorary] president of the Muslim League.

⁸⁴ Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation*, p. 270.

⁸⁵ Egyptian nationalism was on the rise in the 1920s as well as various expressions of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism in the 1930s.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm proved to be a remarkable religious and public figure who combined a rich career as an Islamic scholar with that of an influential community leader during Eritrea's tortuous history in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The Mufti was an indefatigable promoter of the organization and institutionalization of Islamic education and law in the country. He was also a prolific scholar, writing on a wide array of religious, historical, linguistic and literary subjects. His published and non-published writings on aspects of Eritrean history—some of which were produced in the 1950s, in a radically different political atmosphere—testify to his deep commitment to the Eritrean nationalist cause. On the basis of a cursory examination of some of his texts and as well as from writings about the Mufti, it seems clear that his historical and politically-related writings reflect his convictions concerning the existence of a distinctive Eritrean entity. As a Muslim intellectual in an intensely heated period of nationalist politics and politicized religion, the Mufti perceived Eritrea as an entity deeply inscribed within an Islamic historical framework. His, mostly unpublished, writings await further scrutiny in unveiling expressions of intellectual resistance to Ethiopian rule and early constructions of identity in the formation of Eritrean nationalism.⁸⁶ Unsurprisingly, during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s he was also actively involved—mostly away from the public eye—in nationalist politics.⁸⁷

The 1940s were characterized by the spectacular organization, reform and centralization of Eritrean Islamic institutions, especially in the field of law and education. In the year the British took over the administration of Eritrea, Shaykh Ibrāhīm issued a decree regularizing and reforming Islamic courts of law throughout the territory. Following several inspection tours to the *shari'a* courts, he issued a second, more elaborate decree in 1946. In 1943 the Grand Mufti became president of all the *waqf* committees of Eritrea, until then elected and administered locally.⁸⁸ In the early 1950s

⁸⁶ See a comprehensive list of his writings in Miran and O'Fahey, "The Islamic and Related Writings of Eritrea."

⁸⁷ See comments in Muḥammad Sa'īd Nāwad, *Ḥarakat taḥrīr Iritriyā: al-ḥaqīqa wa 'l-ta'rikh*, Jidda, no date, pp. 81-2.

⁸⁸ Aberra, "Muslim Institutions in Ethiopia," p. 207.

the Mufti convened two *qāḍī* conferences, eventuating in the regularization of *qāḍī* training and court procedures. In the field of education, between 1941 and 1952, more than a dozen Islamic religious institutes and schools were opened in Asmara, Massawa, Hirgigo, Keren, Mendefera, Aqurdāt and in smaller villages.⁸⁹ A collaborative relationship with al-Azhar University in Cairo enabled to sustain and develop the new schools through financial assistance, the dispatching of Azhari teachers to Eritrea and the employment of Egyptian curricula. The graduates of the *ma'had* (institute) King Farouk in Asmara were admissible to al-Azhar University.⁹⁰ Among the other new Islamic institutions and associations were the Supreme Islamic Council (*al-Majlis al-islāmī al-'ālī*), the 'Muslim Youth Association' and the 'Ulamā' Front' (*Jabhat al-'ulamā'*), all founded in 1946-7. The British administration granted Arabic the status of an official language on equal par with Tigrinya. Its growing dissemination owed much to the flourishing press, most notably the BMA's *al-Jarīda al-usbū'iyya al-'arabiyya* and the Muslim League's *Ṣawṭ al-rābiṭa al-islāmiyya al-iritriyya*. But in education too, the use of Arabic as a language of instruction had a significant impact on the crystallization of the linguistically and socially heterogeneous Muslim population and its gradual transformation into a unified community. In their attempt to develop an 'Eritrean' Muslim consciousness, Muslim nationalists, community leaders and intellectuals discussed the distinctiveness of Eritrea's Islamic past. Articles about Islamic religion and history, the Arabic language, Eritrea's Muslim societies, institutions, and pilgrimage sites, the town of Massawa, Hirgigo, the Dahlak islands, among other subjects, appeared regularly in both newspapers throughout the 1940s and early 1950s.

But, sadly, the politicization and manipulation of religion and

⁸⁹ Giuseppe Puglisi, "La scuola in Eritrea ieri e oggi," *Affrica*, VIII (5) 1953, p. 146.

⁹⁰ For the role of al-Azhar University in Africa in the 1960s see A. Chanfi Ahmed, "Islamic Mission in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Perspectives of some 'Ulamā' associated with the al-Azhar University (1960-1970)," *WI*, 41 (3) 2001, pp. 348-378 and (id.), "Al-Azhar et l'Afrique au sud du Sahara d'après la revue *Madjallat al-Azhar* dans les années 1960 et 1970," *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 14 (2000), pp. 57-80.

religious sectarianism during this period also bred bitter cleavages among Eritreans, eventually culminating in some violent clashes between Christians and Muslims in 1949-50.⁹¹

Oppression, retraction, and disintegration under Ethiopian rule (1952-1991)

At the term of the deliberations of the United Nations commissions on the disposal of Eritrea, the General Assembly adopted on December 2, 1950 a resolution placing Eritrea as an "autonomous unit ... under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown." Under the Ethio-Eritrean federation (1952-1962) the position of Islam and Muslims in the country began to wane considerably, signaling four decades of retraction, spanning the liberation struggle up to the early nineties.

In the early years of the federation, Haile Sellassie's manipulative attempts to appease Muslims and co-opt Muslim community leaders bore but limited success. One notable example was the Emperor's proposal to renovate the principal Hanafī mosque in Massawa in January 1953; an initiative that stirred some controversy among Muslim community leaders.⁹² But more characteristically, the politicization of religion under the British and the identification of Muslims with Eritrean independentist-nationalist aspirations prompted vigorous, systematic and overt discrimination against Muslim institutions and political/community leaders. Coupled with the identification of Muslims as anti-Ethiopian nationalists and fueling anti-Muslim discrimination, was the traditional equation of Christianity with the Ethiopian nation and Islam as its antithesis.⁹³

⁹¹ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*, Trenton, NJ.: Red Sea Press, 1989, pp. 144-149.

⁹² Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār, *al-Rāwiya fī ta'riḫi mudun Iritriyā*, pp. 54ff.

⁹³ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, London: Zed, 1990 (1st ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 74. A seminal revisionist article presenting a critical analytical framework for the historical dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia is Enrico Cerulli, "L'Islam en Ethiopie: sa signification historique et ses méthodes," *Correspondance d'Orient*, 5, 1961, pp. 317-329. See also the important work of Addis Ababa University historian,

The steady erosion of Eritrean autonomy prompted the regression of the institutional achievements that were acquired in the 1940s and the abatement of the Islamic sphere. The Ethiopian government continuously tampered with the autonomy of the Muslim judicial and educational systems. It transgressed the freedom of expression enjoyed by Eritreans in the 1940s and persecuted and incarcerated Muslim nationalist activists. The Ethiopian administration in Asmara eventually banned the Muslim League's Arabic-language *Ṣawf al-Rābiṭa* newspaper and imprisoned the members of its editorial committee in 1954.⁹⁴ In mid-1955, Ibrāhīm Sulṭān, one of the founders of the Muslim League and the leader of the Eritrean Democratic Front (a coalition of pro-independence parties), was accused of defaming a Sudanese official and put on trial.⁹⁵ In 1957 the regime replaced both Arabic and Tigrinya with Amharic as the official language to be used in Eritrea. The suppression of Arabic was a heavy blow for the Muslim community who subsequently and throughout the 1960s constantly petitioned the government to reverse its policy.⁹⁶ The general budget for 1954-5 omitted the *Dār al-Iftā'* budget and the subsequent government budgets of 1958 and 1959 left out the annual subventions for the Chief *qāḍī* and for mosques. In the field of Muslim education the administration changed Arabic and Islamic school curricula to Ethiopian school programs and the Azhari teacher delegations, critical for the running of schools, met administrative problems in the reissuing of their visas, permitting them to remain

Hussein Ahmed, as well as interesting comments in Jon Abbink, "An historical-anthropological approach to Islam in Ethiopia: issues of identity and politics," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11 (2) December 1998, pp. 109-124.

⁹⁴ For another version of these developments see Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, New Brunswick, NJ.: Transaction Publishers, 1997, pp. 94-6, 100.

⁹⁵ Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, resistance, nationalism 1941-1993*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 89.

⁹⁶ Yaqob Beyene, "La lotta per l'indipendenza dell'Eritrea ed i Paesi Arabi," *Studi arabo-islamici in onore di Roberto Rubinacci nel suo settantesimo compleanno*, edited by Clelia Sarnelli Cerqua, Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1985, vol. I., pp. 71-72. See also John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 366.

in Eritrea.⁹⁷ All in all, from the second half of the 1950s onwards the discrimination against Eritrean Muslims in the fields of employment, business, political freedoms, education and religion gradually led to their treatment as *quasi* foreigners or second class citizens at best.

The exacerbation of Haile Sellassie's policies and practice towards Eritrean Muslims and their institutions in the late 1950s must also be understood in the context of broader political developments in northeast Africa and the Middle East. Those included notably the consequences of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's 1952 revolution in Egypt, Sudanese independence in January 1956, and the vibrant wave of Pan-Arabism that was sweeping throughout the Middle East. The growing maltreatment and marginalization of Eritrea's Muslims under the federation pushed many into exile, mostly to Egypt and Sudan, at that stage. Many came in search of secondary and higher education—notably in Cairo—but there were also political exiles who had left the increasingly oppressive political environment in Eritrea. It was in this context that a number of these exiles established two pioneering liberation movements: the short-lived Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) in April 1958 in Port Sudan and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in July 1960 in Cairo.⁹⁸ The founding of the ELF in the Arab world's foremost capital in the heyday of Nasser and Arab nationalism undoubtedly influenced to some extent the organization's Arabist orientation.⁹⁹ The ELF sought to build up support

⁹⁷ Miran, "Grand Mufti," p. 41. The last representative of the Azhari delegations was expelled from the country in 1966.

⁹⁸ Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*, pp. 186, 195. See also Lloyd Ellingson, "The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement." In Robert L. Hess, ed., *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Chicago, 1978, Session B., pp. 613-628. The major figure behind the establishment of the ELM was Muḥammad Sa'id Nāwad who was inspired by the Sudanese Communist Party. The ELM proposed a secular, socialist-oriented nationalism. The ELF was founded by Idrīs Muḥammad Ādam and several other activists committed to initiating an armed struggle for the liberation of Eritrea. The main base of support for the ELF was from among the Bani 'Amer. On the ELM and the ELF see detailed accounts in Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, pp. 104-131.

⁹⁹ It is, however, important to note that the ELF included non-Muslim members, most famously Wolde-Ab Wolde-Mariam.

for its cause in the Arab world and drew ideological and organizational inspiration in its early years from the Algerian nationalist movement, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). The “Middle Easternization” of the Eritrean struggle at that stage was epitomized by the person of ‘Uthmān Ṣāliḥ Sabbī (1932-87) who joined the ELF in late 1961.¹⁰⁰ Sabbī was from then on the leading ideologue and activist promoting the inscription of the Eritrean struggle for liberation within a secular, pan-Arabist framework. Charged with the ELF’s external relations, Sabbī worked indefatigably throughout the decade in forming relationships and receiving logistical support from a host of Arab regimes and organizations both in the Red Sea area and beyond.¹⁰¹ The winds blowing from the Middle East—the invigorated atmosphere of Pan-Arabism and President Nasser’s charismatic leadership of the Arab world—inspired concern in Addis Ababa. The birth of the Eritrean liberation movements in the Middle East and the development and promotion of the idea of Eritrea’s Arabism had a significant effect on Haile Sellassie’s management of the Eritrean question and, at least partly, explains the amplification of his already distrustful attitude to Eritrea’s Muslims.

In 1962 Haile Sellasie abrogated the federal agreement and annexed Eritrea as Ethiopia’s fourteenth province. The infringements upon Eritrea’s Muslim institutions were thereafter intensified; anti-Muslim policies and repression were outright and brutal.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Of the sources on Sabbī see the less well-known, biased but heavily documented account of his companion in struggle Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Bakr, *‘Uthmān Ṣāliḥ Sabbī wa-l-thawra al-Iritriyya*, Cairo: al-Maktab al-Miṣri li-tawzī‘ al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1998.

¹⁰¹ On the broader Middle Eastern dimensions of the Eritrean liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s see more detailed accounts in Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, chapters 10 and 12 and Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983.

¹⁰² In Ethiopia (excluding Eritrea) Haile Sellasie’s attitude towards Muslims was less overt. Despite the 1955 revision of the Constitution granting Christians and Muslims equal rights, Muslims were ignored, marginalized and largely excluded from the centers of state power. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, pp. 73-4; Hussein Ahmed, “Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973-1993),” *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Proceedings of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian*

In 1964 Haile Sellassie appointed *Ras Asrate Kassa* as *endārase* (Amharic: ‘representative [of the Emperor]’) in the newly-annexed province. Asrate Kassa, who practically ran Eritrea until 1972, was known for his anti-Arab/Muslim stance and his favoring of an Ethiopian-Israeli strategic alliance in the Red Sea region counterbalancing what he perceived as the Pan-Arabist threat to Ethiopia.¹⁰³ Under him, the Ethiopian administration in Asmara intervened ceaselessly with the affairs of the Muslim community and eroded the autonomy of its legal and educational institutions. In 1964 the legal status of the Muslim courts was abrogated; they were re-baptized as “*qādī* councils” and at the center of their official seals, now in Amharic, a cross was added!¹⁰⁴

Qādīs were appointed in function to their allegiance to the government and Muslim school curricula were abolished altogether. The energetic protests raised by Mufti Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār seeking to curb these measures and retain the autonomy of Muslim institutions bore only limited success. Following his death in 1969, Asrate Kassa closed the *Dār al-Iftā’*; it remained out of service throughout the period under the Derg and until after liberation.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the ideological and logistical association of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and its breakaway factions with states and liberation movements in the Arab world backlashed against Muslims in Eritrea.¹⁰⁵ Ethiopian forces were given a free hand in quelling the separatists; the period was characterized by harsh and ruthless military repression in the Eritrean countryside resulting in the shattering of Muslim communal vital-

Studies (East Lansing, Michigan), edited by Harold Marcus, Lawrenceville, NJ.: Red Sea Press, 1994, pp. 776-778.

¹⁰³ Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea*, p. 58

¹⁰⁴ For the status of Muslim courts in Ethiopia see Hussein Ahmed, “Islam and Islamic Discourse,” p. 777.

¹⁰⁵ A few examples include Syria, Iraq, the Palestine Liberation Organization, South Yemen and Libya.

¹⁰⁶ The EPLF included both Christian and Muslim members and moved away from Arabism in favor of more pronounced socialist Marxist ideological orientation. Breaking off with past sectarian approaches, the EPLF emphasized the pluralist nature of Eritrean society. On the EPLF see David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front*, Oxford and Athens, OH.: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 2001.

ity. In parallel and in consequence, a large number of Eritrean Muslims (especially from the lowlands) fled the country, mainly to the Sudan, Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Middle East. The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 and the establishment of the *Derg* regime under the dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam only worsened this state of affairs. Mengistu applied even greater force in quashing the various liberation movements, including the now dominant Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), officially formed in 1977.¹⁰⁶ Arab-Middle Eastern rhetoric about "Arabizing" the Red Sea exacerbated Mengistu's aggressiveness, translated into forceful action against the liberation movements, and ultimately hit the Eritrean population at large. During these years the Khatmiyya *tarīqa* lost much of its former influence and in 1975 its leaders retreated to Kassala.¹⁰⁷

In the 1980s, the thriving of Islamist movements in the Muslim world was also echoed in the arena of the Eritrean liberation movements. Throughout the decade some Eritrean refugees in Sudan were exposed to Wahhābi and Salafi influences in Sudanese schools. Two Islamist movements articulating radical discourses, the 'National Islamic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea' (*Jabhat at-tahrīr al-waṭaniyya al-islāmiyya al-irītriyya*) and the 'Islamic Vanguard' (*ar-Ruwwād al-muslimīn*), were created in 1982. The two fused with another group creating the militant 'Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement' (*Ḥarakat al-jihād al-islāmī al-irītrī*) in late 1988, closely coinciding with the National Islamic Front's seizure of power in the Sudan in the summer of 1989.¹⁰⁸ From 1988 to the mid-1990s jihadi Islamist movements, mostly based in eastern Sudan, were actively engaged in armed operations against EPLF and later the Eritrean Defence Forces. The increased vulnerability of armed Islamist organizations in the post-9/11 atmosphere worldwide, but maybe more so in the Horn of Africa, might explain the 'Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement's' decision to change its name to the 'Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement' (*Ḥarakat al-Isḫāḥ al-*

¹⁰⁷ Killion, *Historical Dictionary*, p. 314.

¹⁰⁸ Tesfatsion Medhanic, *Eritrea and Neighbours in the 'New World' Order: Geopolitics, Democracy and "Islamic Fundamentalism,"* Bremer Afrika-Studien, b. 15, Münster/Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1994 (1994) pp. 78-92.

Islāmī al-Iritrī) some time in 2003. A second organization, the ‘Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement’ (*Ḥarakat al-Khalāṣ al-Islāmī al-Iritrī*) is also active nowadays. Both movements call for the removal of the current regime and attempt to rally support around an ideologically Islamist—albeit somewhat fuzzy—outlook.¹⁰⁹

Cautious and discreet resuscitation since ‘liberation’

Since liberation in 1991, and notwithstanding the self-avowedly secular ideology of the current Eritrean government, the revitalization of Muslim communal life and institutions has slowly and cautiously gained a certain momentum.¹¹⁰ The authorities in Asmara re-opened the Office of Mufti (*Dār al-Iftā’ al-iritriyya*) and appointed Shaykh al-Amīn ‘Uthmān al-Amīn Grand Mufti in August 1992.¹¹¹ The government also reinstated *sharī’a* courts, regional and local *waqf* councils and a *ḥājj* and *‘umra* committee, which all began operation. It also re-opened religious schools and institutes; ten teachers from al-Azhar were teaching advanced students in the mid-1990s. Saudi Arabia has provided significant financial and logistical support for the construction of mosques throughout the country.¹¹² Nowadays, some thirty mosques operate throughout the capital Asmara. Census data on religious affiliation is unavailable but if the full repatriation of exiles and refugees—especially from the Sudan—is achieved, the more or less equal balance between Muslims and Christians will be restored.¹¹³ Since independence the return and repatriation of Eritreans from exile in

¹⁰⁹ “EIRM’ s Military Communique and our Commentary,” [http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_2025.shtml] posted August 18, 2003 and interview with Khalil Mohammed Amer/ Eritrean Islamic Salvation Front [sic.], conducted on January 2, 2004 and posted on the Eritrean opposition website [<http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/articlek2918.shtml>] on January 11, 2004.

¹¹⁰ See Gori, “Soggiorno di studi,” pp. 83-89 for useful notes on Muslim institutions and religious vitality in post-independence Asmara, Keren and Massawa.

¹¹¹ See an interview with the newly-appointed Mufti with discussion of the role and history of the *Iftā’* in Eritrea. *Iritriyā al-ḥadītha* (Asmara), no. 104, 26 August 1992, p. 4.

¹¹² Louis Werner, “Forging Plowshares in Eritrea,” *Aramco World*, Vol. 47 (6) November/December 1996, p. 19.

¹¹³ Killion, *Historical Dictionary*, p. 267.

the Middle East and the Sudan, has boosted the use of Arabic throughout the country. It has also brought into the country some Wahhābi influences. Tigrinya and Arabic are considered by the Eritrean government as working languages of the state. Accordingly, newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasts in Arabic are an integral part of the largely government-dominated media landscape. Books in Arabic by Eritreans and about Eritrean issues are regularly published in the country and in countries of the Middle East.¹¹⁴ In the mid-1990s Muslim religious and communal vitality gained some momentum in Asmara, Keren, Massawa and other centers throughout the country. But limited funds, the highly turbulent state in which the country found itself during the conflict with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000, and the lack of a high degree of political freedom have all impeded further development.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Muslims and Christians fought shoulder to shoulder during the liberation struggle, creating a strong sense of *camaraderie* in arms among ‘fighters’. Conscious of the challenges associated with building a national identity and promoting a non-sectarian vision of Eritrean society, the EPLF (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front) leadership evenly divided itself between Muslims and Christians. The present government, directly issued out of the EPLF, has maintained this strategy, and today the balance between Muslims and Christians in the highest positions of the state apparatus seems to be carefully preserved. However, government attitudes—justified by some as the promotion of national stability and unity, and criticized by others as the ‘clinging to power by all means’—have sought to undermine the potential of the politicization of Islam, or the mobilization of the broad-based supra-ethnic Eritrean Muslims along the lines of a politicized identity. The elevation of vernacular languages of Eritrean Muslims such as ‘Afar, Saho and Tigre alongside Arabic, the holy language of Islam, is but one example.¹¹⁵ Government

¹¹⁴ See also Gori, “Soggiorno di studi” and idem. “Arabic in Eritrea,” *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 1, pp. 304-305.

¹¹⁵ Fouad Makki, “Nationalism, State Formation and the Public Sphere: Eritrea 1991-96,” *Review of African Political Economy* (70) 1996, pp. 483-484.

attitudes have undoubtedly been fuelled by several factors: the traumatic politicization of religion in the 1940s, the Arab/Muslim ideological leanings of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) and its breakaway factions, and the articulation of radical jihadist discourses by Eritrean Islamist movements since the 1980s. These stances, in turn, have played on easily disquieted Muslim sensitivities, which perceive them as the reflection of the pervasive hegemony of Christians in the new state. Unfortunately, it has contributed to the re-awakening (and the reification) of the historically charged mutual suspicions between Christians and Muslims in the Horn of Africa.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ See also relevant comments in Seifudein A. Hussein, "The conflict in Eritrea reconsidered," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 18 (1) 1998, pp. 159-168.