



MEKELLE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

**DISSERTATION TITLE: COLONIALISM IN THE HORN OF
AFRICA AND ITS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT ON
THE AFAR PEOPLE, 1841-1977**

BY

Habib Mohammed Hassen

MARCH 2026

MEKELLE, ETHIOPIA

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Acronyms and Abrevation

ALF- Afar Liberation Front

FRUD- Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy

FLCS-Front de Liberation de la Cote des Somalis

WSLF -Western Somali Liberation Front

EPRDF-Ethiopian people revolutionary democratic front

ELF -Eritrean Liberation Front

PLF -People's Liberation Forces

EPLF-Eritrean People's Liberation Front

RSADO -Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization

TPLF- Tigray People Liberation Front

PFDJ -Front for Democracy and Justice

LAV- Lower Awash Valley

AV- Awash Valley

CIE -Compagnie Impériale des Chemins de Fer Éthiopiens

Glossary

A'farre (Qafarre)– The traditional legal system of the Afar people that regulates social conduct, marriage, inheritance, and conflict resolution, serving the same role as a constitution.

Dagu (Xaagu)– A communication network used by the Afar to share information about rainfall, grazing, deaths, conflicts, and the movement of outsiders.

Mad'a(Madqa) – The customary law of the Afar that governs restorative justice and communal accountability, especially in cases of homicide or inter-clan conflict.

Afar Koasso – A traditional sport of the Afar people, played in a manner similar to American rugby

Gadda- Wealth

Affeehinna(Affeecinna) – The creation of a strong alliance between two clans, in which both parties pledge mutual respect and agree to abide by each other's decisions, recommendations, and counsel.

Kilbatti Rasu- Northern zone

Gabbi Rasu- Souther zone

Fanti Rasu- Central zone

Harri Rasu- Western zone

Mahi Rasu- Eastern zone

Alsa – moon

Wada- saver

Biló – The beginning of the moon.

Fir Awni Salot – The pharaonic form of female circumcision.

E'rer(Qerer) – A payment rendered by the male bride's family to the female bride's clan leader as part of the marriage formalization.

Dardar- Sultan

Banoyta – The title of crown prince.

Dinkara – A ceremonial drum employed to summon the local community during enthronement ceremonies.

Mallaasay – In Afar, mallaasay means “heroes”; it was used as a designation for the soldiers of Imam Ahmed (Gagn).

Simbille- A soldier in the Awsa Sultanate, organized by Sultan Yayyo, who wears a red symbol on the crown of the head.

Aw’e-Kala – defender who blocks the enemy from escaping. Specially the well-known designation for all soldiers of the Awsa Sultanate.

Akali-camel herders of the Awsa sultanate

Deramo - cattle herders of the Awsa sultanate

Fiema- youth groups

Kaddabura- Big House Group of Awsa sultanate

Ialta – “King of Kings,” a title specially conferred upon Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of the Awsa Sultanate.

Kalo- green and fertile lands

Arho – A camel caravan used for trade and transport.

Amole – Salt traditionally extracted from the Afar Region of Ethiopia, a term that in the Afar language literally refers to a group characterized by long hairstyles

Nakuda - Sea captains

Malak – A title equivalent to that of a modern minister, particularly recognized within the Awsa Sultanate.

Key to the Transliteration System

I. The seven sounds of the Ethiopic alphabet are represented as follows:

1 st	በ	= Ba
2 nd	ቡ	= Bu
3 rd	ቢ	= Bi
4 th	ባ	= Bâ
5 th	ቤ	= Bé
6 th	ብ	= Bi
7 th	ቦ	= Bo

II. Palatalized sounds are represented as follows

ሸ	= Sh
ቸ	= Ch
ኸ	= ña
ዝ	= Zh
ጃ	= J

III. Glottalized sounds are represented as follows

ቀ	= q
ጠ	= ʈ
ጪ	= <u>ch</u>
ጸ	= ʂ

IV. The way to Read the Latin Alphabet of the Afar Language

In the Afar Latin alphabet, some letters are pronounced differently than in English:

Afar Letter	Pronunciation	Arabic Equivalent
X	D	–
Q	A	Corresponds to Arabic ع
C	H	Corresponds to Arabic ح

Examples: Qafar → *Afar*

Canfare → *Hanfare*
Xaagu → *Daagu*

All other letters are pronounced as in standard English.

For well-known names, both personal and geographical, I have used conventional European spellings—for example: *Sultan Alimirah*, *Afar*, *Haile Selassie*, *Addis Ababa*, etc. However, for special cases where the meaning of a word could change if written in standard Afar Latin script, I have used the Afar Latin spelling. In other instances, I have retained well-known names and geographic terms in their commonly recognized English forms when this does not alter the original meaning. Personal names are presented according to the spelling preferred by the individuals themselves, such as *Yassin* or *Shami*.

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Preface

This dissertation represents both a scholarly investigation and a personal journey into the history of the Afar people. Inhabiting territories across present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, the Afar have long held strategic, economic, and political significance in the Horn of Africa. Yet, their historical experiences, particularly under colonial rule, have often been overlooked or interpreted through external narratives, leaving gaps in understanding their social, economic, and political intermediacy in responding to external pressures.

The research traces the multifaceted impact of colonialism on the Afar, including the disruption of traditional governance, the fragmentation of social networks, and the reorientation of economic systems to serve European imperial interests.

Conducting this research involved a combination of archival study, oral histories, and ethnographic engagement. Accessing archival documents in Ethiopia, Djibouti, and international repositories provided foundational evidence, while interviews with elders, sultans, and knowledgeable community members offered perspectives that could not be captured in written sources. Travel to Eritrea was not possible due to political restrictions, and in response, I collected data from the Afar diaspora abroad and supplemented it with interviews with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. These logistical challenges, though demanding, became an opportunity to engage deeply with living traditions and firsthand memories, enriching the historical reconstruction and providing a transnational understanding of the Afar people.

I am profoundly grateful to the elders, community leaders, and institutions across the Afar population who generously shared their knowledge. I also owe special thanks to Dr. Tasfaye in the United States and the American Afar diaspora for providing essential literature, and to Dr. Mohammed Hassen Kamil in Djibouti for facilitating my fieldwork in Djibouti and for arranging interviews with the sultans of Tadjoura and Gobaad, their families, and other knowledgeable community members. Their guidance and support were invaluable in bridging gaps between oral traditions, archival evidence, and contemporary understanding.

It is my hope that this dissertation not only contributes to the historiography of the Horn of Africa but also affirms the historical intermediacy and adaptive strategies of the Afar people.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the political, economic, and social impacts of colonialism on the Afar people of the Horn of Africa between 1841 and 1977. Occupying a strategically important region across present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, the Afar historically mediated key Red Sea ports, caravan routes, and inland trade networks. Far from being peripheral pastoralists, they were active intermediaries in regional commerce, maritime exchange, and state formation through Islamic sultanates. Yet, their colonial experience has received limited scholarly attention, and the existing historiography remains fragmented.

*Employing a qualitative historical methodology, this study integrates archival research, oral traditions, ethnographic fieldwork, and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources. Major archival materials were collected from the National Archives and Library Agency of Ethiopia; the Afar National Regional State Peace and Security Bureau (including documents related to the Afar–Issa conflict); the Afar Culture and Tourism Bureau; *Acta Aethiopica* edited by Sven Rubenson; *The Map of Africa by Treaty* by Edward Hertslet; *Almanhal* by Hashim Jemaluddin; and *Emperor Menelik II: Internal Exchange of Letters* by Paulos Ngongo, among others. Evidence from these materials, together with interviews conducted with elders and community leaders, is used to reconstruct precolonial Afar political organization and to trace subsequent transformations under colonial and imperial expansion.*

The findings reveal that colonialism profoundly disrupted Afar territorial integrity, governance, and economic autonomy. Arbitrary boundary-making partitioned Afar lands, severing kinship networks, trade routes, and seasonal mobility patterns. Traditional authorities were co-opted, marginalized, or suppressed, while foreign legal and administrative systems displaced indigenous institutions. Economically, colonial powers appropriated ports, caravan routes, salt resources, and grazing lands, redirecting production toward external markets and dismantling local systems of taxation, thereby generating long-term structural dependency.

The withdrawal of European powers did not restore Afar autonomy; instead, postcolonial state formation entrenched their marginalization within centralized political systems. By situating the Afar experience within broader debates on colonialism, dependency, and postcolonial state formation, this study contributes to a more balanced historiography of the Horn of Africa and underscores the importance of incorporating Afar perspectives to fully understand the legacy of colonial and postcolonial transformation.

Chapter I: Background and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Colonialism may be defined as a structured system of external control in which a foreign power establishes authority over a territory and its people in order to reorganize their political institutions, redirect their economic resources, and reshape their social and cultural life to serve metropolitan interests. It involves not only territorial occupation, but also the institutionalization of dependency through administrative rule, economic extraction, legal imposition, and cultural influence, often resulting in long-term structural inequalities that persist beyond formal independence. Colonial rule was often imposed through a combination of political coercion, administrative manipulation, and ideological propaganda. While the subjugation of indigenous populations and the imposition of foreign authority were central features, economic interests frequently constituted the primary motivation for colonial expansion, underpinning the extraction of resources and the restructuring of local economies to serve metropolitan objectives. In African historiography, colonialism is conceptualized as a historical epoch during which European powers conquered, dominated, and systematically exploited the continent's human and natural resources. This domination was facilitated by advances in military technology, bureaucratic organization, and industrial capacity that enabled European states to subjugate African polities with relative ease. From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, almost the entire African continent was brought under European rule, culminating in a comprehensive imperial reordering of political authority and territorial boundaries. The process reached its formal expression at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where European powers established the principles governing their territorial claims and laid the groundwork for the partition of Africa.¹

The boundaries established during the colonial period were, for the most part, arbitrarily drawn, with little regard for the intricate ethnic, linguistic, and cultural landscapes that had long shaped African societies. Rather than reflecting the social and political realities on the ground, these borders served the geopolitical and economic interests of European powers. As numerous scholars have observed, such boundary-making processes ignored pre-existing communal configurations and, in many cases, deliberately intensified class tensions, tribalism, and ethnic division within the

¹ Victor Nwankwo, *Colonialism in Africa* (Lagos: University Press, 2012), 46–54; Emmanuel Okon, “European Imperial Expansion in Africa,” *African Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2014): 193.

colonial territories.²In the Afar context, colonial intervention contributed to the intensification of divisions such as the Asa-Heymara and Ado-Heymara cleavages, deepening local rivalries and reshaping patterns of authority and allegiance. Moreover, the demarcation of borders and administrative restructuring under colonial rule significantly expanded and institutionalized conflict between the Afar and the Issa Somali communities, transforming localized competition over resources into protracted and politically embedded inter-ethnic confrontation. These policies were not accidental; they constituted calculated mechanisms designed to weaken indigenous cohesion, simplify control, and prolong European domination.

The consequences of these externally imposed boundaries were far-reaching and enduring. They fragmented established political entities, disrupted historical migration pathways, and produced cross-border divisions that continued to generate conflict long after independence. African political and economic structures—both in their organizational form and operational substance—were reconfigured to serve the extractive priorities of European powers rather than the needs of local societies.³ In most regions, this reorientation entrenched asymmetrical power relations, undermined indigenous institutions, and redirected economic flows outward toward metropolitan centers.

Colonial objectives were multifaceted, encompassing economic exploitation, territorial expansion, and the pursuit of cultural and religious agendas. To achieve these aims, colonial administrations introduced foreign bureaucratic structures that often supplanted or marginalized indigenous governance systems. Traditional authorities were either removed or incorporated into the colonial hierarchy as subordinate intermediaries, thereby eroding their legitimacy and weakening their accountability to their own communities.⁴ This transformation fundamentally altered local

² Aydahis Allo, *African Civilization from Afar Perspective* (Addis Ababa, 2023), 18; A. I. Asiwaju, *Partitioned Africans* (London: C. Hurst, 1985), 3–5; Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 21–24.

³ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Abacus, 1991), 254–256; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 73–79; Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 99–102.

⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 37–44; Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition,” ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 247–249.

political cultures and contributed to the long-term instability of post-colonial states, where inherited institutions were often ill-suited to local conditions.

Economically, colonialism fundamentally reoriented African production to serve European commercial and industrial interests. Indigenous craft industries, long embedded in local economies, were systematically undermined or destroyed through restrictive policies, heavy taxation, and the influx of cheap European manufactured goods. Subsistence farming, which had ensured food security and local autonomy, was increasingly displaced by monoculture cash-crop systems such as cotton, coffee, cocoa, sisal, and groundnuts—commodities selected primarily for European markets. Mineral-rich regions were expropriated, often violently, for European-owned extractive industries, where African labor was mobilized through coercive methods, including forced labor, taxation, and labor migration policies.⁵ Infrastructure such as railways, ports, and roads was constructed not to stimulate balanced regional development but rather to facilitate the rapid movement of raw materials from the interior to European-controlled coastal ports.

These colonial economic processes produced long-lasting patterns of dependency and structural underdevelopment across the African continent. By prioritizing resource extraction and suppressing indigenous industrialization, colonial administrations entrenched economic structures that tied African economies to the fluctuating demands of European markets. This not only limited local productive capacity but also reinforced Africa's subordinate position within the international economic system.⁶ Moreover, the colonial economic order institutionalized conditions—such as unequal land distribution, limited internal infrastructure, dependence on single-crop exports, and weak industrial bases—that continue to constrain sustainable growth in many post-colonial states.⁷

The cumulative effect of these policies was the creation of what Walter Rodney famously described as a “development of underdevelopment,” wherein colonial interventions generated structural economic distortions that outlived the end of formal colonial rule.⁸ The legacy of this

⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972), 205–214.

⁶ Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 104–112;

⁷ Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 9–15;

⁸ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 14.

extractive system—characterized by low-value exports, vulnerability to global price shocks, and underinvestment in diversified local economies—remains visible across much of Africa today.

Colonialism also precipitated profound cultural and social transformations across Africa. Missionary education systems were central to this process, promoting European languages, religions, and cultural values while systematically marginalizing indigenous languages, knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and social norms.⁹ Beyond the educational and religious sphere, colonial administrations deliberately exploited existing ethnic, linguistic, and social cleavages as part of divide-and-rule strategies. These interventions disrupted established patterns of inter-ethnic cooperation, created new social hierarchies, and generated tensions that have continued to influence political instability and conflict in many post-independence African states.¹⁰

Pastoralist communities, such as the Afar, were particularly vulnerable to these transformations due to the decentralized and clan-based nature of their governance structures, their reliance on mobility across vast territories, and their dependence on social cohesion for access to grazing and water resources. Colonial boundaries, administrative controls, and new legal frameworks constrained these traditional systems, undermining customary authority and disrupting seasonal migration routes.¹¹

The impact of colonialism, however, was neither uniform nor evenly distributed. Regions of high geopolitical value, particularly the Horn of Africa, experienced more intensive and sustained colonial intervention due to their strategic location. Situated at the crossroads of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the maritime route to the Suez Canal, the Horn assumed immense economic and military significance. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the region emerged as a critical passageway connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, heightening European rivalry and precipitating a wave of colonial competition for territorial control.¹²

⁹ Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 254–256.

¹⁰ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 37–44.

¹¹ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Oxford: James Currey, 2011), 30–31.

¹² Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–5; Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997), 112–115.

Moreover, these strategic imperatives often intensified cultural interventions, with colonial powers leveraging educational, religious, and legal tools to secure local cooperation, stabilize their rule, and suppress resistance. The intersection of geopolitical competition and socio-cultural transformation in the Horn thus provides a salient example of how colonialism reshaped African societies both materially and ideologically.

Colonialism had profound and multifaceted impacts on African societies, reshaping political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Among the peoples most directly affected by colonial competition in the Horn of Africa were the Afar. The Afar are Cushitic-speaking pastoralists inhabiting an extensive territory spanning present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. Historically, their domain encompassed the northeastern lowlands of Ethiopia and extended across the Red Sea littoral into Eritrea—including strategic coastal settlements such as Assab, Massawa, Baylul, Ti'o, Miidir, and the Dahlak Islands—and further into the present-day Republic of Djibouti. Within this region existed historically significant sultanates, including Tadjoura, Goba'ad, Dekel, Arta, and Obock, as well as the area that became Djibouti city.¹³

The partitioning of Afar lands by competing colonial regimes fragmented a historically cohesive people. Arbitrarily imposed borders divided the Afar across three emerging states—Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti—without regard for their cultural, political, or economic unity. This disruption severed established kinship networks, disrupted traditional governance systems, and interfered with long-standing trade and migration routes central to the pastoralist economy and social organization of the Afar. Colonial demarcations often ignored the mobility patterns of pastoralist societies, undermining mechanisms that historically allowed the Afar to manage scarce resources across arid and semi-arid landscapes.¹⁴

Politically, colonial administrations imposed new administrative boundaries and governance structures that eroded traditional authority. Local rulers and clan elders, who had historically mediated disputes and coordinated resource management, were either co-opted as intermediaries

¹³ Allo, *African Civilization from Afar Perspective*, 18; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 112–115.

¹⁴ Yasin Mohammed, *Political History of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea* (MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2008), 41, 58; Abdela Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial* (Sweden, 1993), 11. Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–31.

of the colonial state or marginalized entirely, weakening their legitimacy and social authority.¹⁵ These transformations reinforced asymmetrical power relations, undermining indigenous governance and leaving lasting effects on postcolonial political stability. In addition, the arbitrary imposition of boundaries disrupted cross-border social and political networks, contributing to the marginalization of the Afar in multiple emerging nation-.¹⁶ The Afar, whose social and political life historically transcended rigid territorial borders, incorporation into several newly formed nation-states after colonialism fragmented their territorial continuity and reshaped their political representation and autonomy.

Economically, colonialism reoriented African production to serve European commercial and industrial interests. Indigenous industries and subsistence farming were systematically undermined, replaced by monoculture cash-crop systems and extractive industries designed to feed European markets. Mineral-rich regions were expropriated, and pastoralist grazing lands were restricted by colonial administrative boundaries, taxation, and forced labor policies.¹⁷ Infrastructure such as railways, ports, and roads was developed primarily to facilitate the extraction and export of raw materials, rather than to promote balanced regional development.¹⁸ These interventions entrenched long-term economic dependency and structural underdevelopment, with unequal land distribution, limited local industrial capacity, and vulnerability to global commodity markets persisting well into the post-colonial period.¹⁹

Culturally and socially, colonialism brought far-reaching transformations. Missionary education systems promoted European languages, religions, and cultural values while systematically marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and social norms.²⁰ Colonial

¹⁵ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 37–44; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 76–78.

¹⁶ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 171–176; Allo, *African Civilization from Afar Perspective*, 20.

¹⁷ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 205–214.

¹⁸ Amin, *Unequal Development*, 104–112; Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, 9–15.

¹⁹ Thandika Mkandawire, “African Development Paths,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 48 (2010): 168–170.

²⁰ Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 254–256.

powers exploited ethnic, linguistic, and social divisions to implement divide-and-rule strategies, generating tensions that persisted long after independence.²¹ Pastoralist communities like the Afar were particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on mobility, clan-based governance, and access to transboundary grazing lands, which were disrupted by colonial administrative controls and new territorial divisions.²²

The coastal and maritime zones occupied by the Afar, including Adulis, Massawa, Assab, Dahlak, Baylul, Tadjoura, Djibouti, Zeila, and Obock, were of strategic and commercial significance, linking the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 intensified European imperial competition for control over these ports, as colonial powers sought to secure naval bases and commercial footholds along the Red Sea coast. Despite resistance from the Afar, European forces, equipped with superior weaponry and organizational capacity, gradually occupied coastal territories, eroding Afar self-rule and political sovereignty.²³

Overall, the experience of the Afar illustrates the broader consequences of colonialism in the Horn of Africa. Arbitrary borders, the imposition of foreign administrative systems, and economic exploitation fractured traditional social orders, undermined political authority, and generated enduring economic and cultural dependencies. Their geographic positioning at the nexus of African and Middle Eastern trade routes rendered them particularly vulnerable to imperial rivalry, making their territories a focal point of European strategic ambitions.²⁴ By examining the historical experiences of partition, displacement, and resistance among the Afar, this study highlights how colonial interventions reshaped territorial boundaries, disrupted indigenous governance, and transformed the economic and cultural foundations of societies in the Horn of Africa.

²¹ Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*, 76–78; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 37–44.

²² Fabienne Le Houérou, “Pastoralism and Colonial Boundaries,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 36 (1996): 15–18; Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–31.

²³ Yassin, *Political History of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 41, 58; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 11; Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 34–36.

²⁴ Allo, *African Civilization from Afar Perspective*, 18; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 112–115.

1.2 Review literature and Theoretical Framework of Colonial Expansion in Africa

1.2.1 Definition of Colonialism

Colonialism is widely recognized as one of the most transformative processes in global history, fundamentally reshaping political authority, economic systems, social hierarchies, and cultural identities. It is not merely the occupation of foreign territory or the imposition of military control; rather, it is a multidimensional and complex system of domination that operates through political, economic, and cultural mechanisms, often simultaneously. Colonialism is both a historical phenomenon and a conceptual framework for understanding the enduring structures of inequality, power, and social organization that emerged under European imperialism.²⁵ As a historical process, colonialism involves the imposition of authority over indigenous societies, the appropriation of land and resources, the restructuring of governance, and the production of knowledge that legitimizes domination. As a structure, colonialism persists beyond the formal presence of imperial powers, shaping political, economic, and social relationships for generations after independence.²⁶

At its core, colonialism is multidimensional, encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Politically, it entails the imposition of external authority through administrative structures, legal systems, and territorial reorganization, often co-opting, displacing, or dismantling existing local institutions.²⁷ Economically, it functions as a system of extraction, redirecting wealth, labor, and resources from colonized territories to metropolitan centers. This is achieved through taxation, commercial monopolies, labor control, and the restructuring of production systems to serve imperial priorities, frequently undermining pre-existing economic arrangements and social hierarchies.²⁸ Culturally, colonialism operates through the production of knowledge, discourse, and ideology that construct the colonized as inferior or incapable of self-governance,

²⁵ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 104–107.

²⁶ Stephen Ocheni and Basil C. Nwankwo, “Analysis of Colonialism and Its Impact in Africa,” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 8, no. 3 (2012): 46–54; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 24–25.

²⁷ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 24–25.

²⁸ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 205–214; Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, 9–15; Amin, *Unequal Development*, 104–112.

thereby legitimizing intervention and control.²⁹ These dimensions are not discrete but interdependent: political authority enforces economic extraction, which is justified and reinforced through cultural and epistemic domination.

The theoretical understanding of colonialism has been enriched by several intellectual debates, each emphasizing different aspects of the phenomenon. From a political economy perspective, colonialism is understood as a mechanism for wealth extraction and structural transformation, in which imperial powers reorganized local economies and political institutions to serve global capitalist interests. Scholars such as Rodney (1972) argue that the economic underdevelopment of colonized regions, particularly in Africa, is rooted in the integration of these areas into global trade networks under unequal conditions, where resources and labor were extracted to enrich the metropolitan centers.³⁰ Amin (1976) emphasizes that colonial economies were deliberately structured to benefit imperial accumulation rather than local development, creating long-term patterns of dependency and economic inequality.³¹ Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) further illustrate how colonial institutions—whether extractive or inclusive—have long-term consequences for economic development, highlighting the persistence of institutional effects long after colonial withdrawal.³² Political economy approaches therefore illuminate the material and structural mechanisms of colonial power, showing how governance, labor control, and economic integration functioned together to consolidate imperial dominance.

Post-colonial theory complements the political economy approach by examining the cultural and epistemic dimensions of colonialism. Said (1993) introduced the concept of “Orientalism,” demonstrating that colonial domination relied not only on coercion but also on the production of knowledge that positioned colonized peoples as inherently inferior, exotic, or uncivilized.³³ Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988) further develop this perspective, highlighting how colonial discourse constructs identities and social hierarchies while also acknowledging spaces of

²⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 63–67.

³⁰ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 205–214;

³¹ Amin, *Unequal Development*, 104–112.

³² Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Business, 2012), 317–343.

³³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 8–10, 32–33.

resistance, hybridity, and subaltern agency.³⁴ Post-colonial theorists argue that colonialism is as much about shaping perception, belief, and knowledge as it is about controlling territory or extracting resources. Through education systems, missionary activity, and bureaucratic documentation, colonizers disseminated norms and representations that served to legitimize their authority while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. This lens allows scholars to understand colonialism as a deeply relational and contested process, in which power operates both materially and ideologically.

Dependency theory provides another analytical framework for understanding colonialism, particularly its long-term economic consequences. Dependency theorists such as Frank (1967) and Cardoso and Faletto (1979) argue that colonialism established enduring structures of economic dependency, integrating colonized regions into the global capitalist system in ways that prioritized metropolitan needs over local development.³⁵ Colonies were positioned as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of finished goods, limiting opportunities for self-sustaining industrialization and economic autonomy. This perspective underscores the structural nature of colonialism and its continuing influence on postcolonial economic hierarchies, showing that the legacies of colonial trade and resource extraction often persist decades after formal independence.

Scholars have also debated the forms and strategies of colonialism. One key distinction is between settler colonialism and extractive colonialism. Settler colonialism involves the large-scale displacement of indigenous populations and the establishment of permanent European settlements, often accompanied by extensive land appropriation and the restructuring of local societies to accommodate settler communities.³⁶ Extractive colonialism, by contrast, focuses primarily on resource extraction, commercial exploitation, and labor control, often maintaining local populations in subordinate roles without extensive settlement. Another important distinction is

³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66–69, 112–113; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–272, 287–288.

³⁵ Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 61–64; Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, 18–21.

³⁶ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 239–41.

between direct rule and indirect rule. Direct rule centralizes administrative authority and imposes colonial officials over local populations, whereas indirect rule leverages existing local leaders as intermediaries while retaining ultimate colonial control. These distinctions are crucial for understanding the diversity of colonial experiences and their varying long-term effects on governance, economic structures, and social organization.³⁷

Comparative and historical perspectives further enrich the analysis of colonialism. Across regions, colonial powers adapted their strategies to local contexts, environmental conditions, pre-existing political structures, and strategic interests. In some cases, colonialism involved elaborate bureaucratic systems and infrastructural investment designed to integrate colonies into imperial networks, while in others, it relied on coercion, military force, and extractive commercial policies with minimal administrative presence. Theoretical debates highlight that the effects of colonialism are mediated by these variations, producing different trajectories of political, economic, and social transformation across the globe.³⁸

In synthesis, colonialism is a complex and multidimensional system that operates through political authority, economic extraction, and cultural domination. Its study benefits from the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives. Political economy elucidates the structural and material mechanisms of colonial power, showing how institutions, extraction, and governance sustained imperial interests. Post-colonial theory highlights the role of knowledge, representation, and identity in legitimizing domination and shaping social hierarchies. Dependency theory underscores the enduring economic inequalities and structural dependencies produced by colonial integration into global markets. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of colonialism as both a historical process and an analytical concept, enabling scholars to examine the interplay of power, economy, and culture in shaping the world under European imperialism. They also set the stage for applying these insights to specific contexts, including the varied political, economic, and social impacts experienced by colonized societies.

³⁷ Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), 84–91; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 37–39.

³⁸ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 313–16; Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 317–343.

1.2.2 Precolonial Africa: Societies, Economies, and Landscapes

Africa, the second-largest continent, spans approximately 30.2 million square kilometers and exhibits extraordinary diversity in landscapes, climates, and ecosystems, ranging from the arid Sahara Desert in the north to the humid tropical rainforests of Central Africa, from the savannas of East Africa to the semi-arid Kalahari in the south. This environmental diversity shaped settlement patterns, livelihoods, and sociopolitical organization, fostering distinct cultural and economic systems while enabling interregional interaction and mobility. Beyond its geographic and ecological variety, Africa is the most genetically and linguistically diverse region in the world, with over 2,000 distinct languages grouped into four major families: Afroasiatic, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan.³⁹ These linguistic patterns reflect centuries of migration, trade, intermarriage, and the diffusion of technological and intellectual knowledge, illustrating the continent's historical role as a site of both deep local differentiation and extensive interregional connectivity.

Africa is widely recognized as the cradle of humankind. Archaeological and paleoanthropological evidence from sites in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania indicates that anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) first emerged over 200,000 years ago.⁴⁰ Early populations developed diverse subsistence strategies, including hunting, gathering, pastoralism, and early agricultural production, adapting creatively to ecological conditions and resource availability. Over millennia, these populations organized into increasingly complex social and political structures, establishing settlements, trade networks, and proto-states. The development of social hierarchies, kinship systems, ritual institutions, and mechanisms of political authority demonstrates sophisticated understandings of governance and social cohesion. Such continuity and adaptability underline Africa's central role in human history, highlighting the continent not merely as the geographic origin of humanity but as a dynamic center of cultural, technological, and political innovation.

African societies prior to European contact exhibited diverse and sophisticated political systems that ranged from highly centralized empires to decentralized communities. West African states

³⁹ Ali Al' Amin Mazrui and Christophe Wondji, eds., *Africa Since 1935*, vol. VIII of *General History of Africa* (Paris: UNESCO; London: Heinemann; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 10–12.

⁴⁰ John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–30;

such as the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires exemplified hierarchical structures with administrative bureaucracies, taxation systems, military organization, and diplomatic networks extending across vast territories.⁴¹ In East Africa, Swahili city-states such as Kilwa, Mombasa, and Sofala combined mercantile governance with Islamic law and social institutions to regulate commerce, urban life, and regional diplomacy, producing cosmopolitan cities that were hubs of economic, cultural, and intellectual exchange. Central and Southern African kingdoms, including Kongo, Lunda, and Mutapa, relied on kinship-based hierarchies, ritual authority, and military power to assert legitimacy and maintain political control. At the same time, decentralized governance systems prevailed among pastoralist and hunter-gatherer societies, such as the San of Southern Africa and the Nuer of East Africa, where decision-making was organized through consensus, age sets, and customary law.⁴² This wide array of political systems illustrates the adaptability of African governance structures to environmental conditions, economic imperatives, and social organization, emphasizing that political complexity was not limited to centralized empires.

Economically, precolonial Africa was highly sophisticated and deeply integrated into regional and intercontinental trade networks. Trans-Saharan trade connected West African empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai with North Africa and the Mediterranean, facilitating the exchange of gold, salt, textiles, and intellectual and religious knowledge.⁴³ Control over these trade routes was often central to political authority, with rulers taxing caravans, regulating markets, and negotiating with foreign merchants. In East Africa, the Indian Ocean trade network linked Swahili city-states to Arabia, Persia, India, and China, fostering the exchange of commodities such as gold, ivory, spices, and enslaved people. These networks encouraged urbanization, craft specialization, and cultural syncretism, resulting in societies that were simultaneously economically sophisticated and culturally cosmopolitan.⁴⁴ Inland trade networks facilitated the circulation of agricultural produce,

⁴¹ John O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'dī's Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 45–50.

⁴² Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 112–118.

⁴³ Levtzion, Nehemia. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. Reprint of the 1973 ed. published by Methuen, London, 45-52

⁴⁴ Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 123–127;

livestock, and artisanal goods, demonstrating that African economic systems were deeply interconnected regionally and internationally. Moreover, technological innovations in metallurgy, irrigation, and transport allowed societies to exploit their environments effectively and maintain complex economic infrastructures.

Religion and intellectual life were central to the organization and cohesion of precolonial African societies. Islam, introduced via trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trade, shaped legal frameworks, educational institutions, architectural styles, and commercial practices, with centers of scholarship such as Timbuktu serving as repositories of philosophical, scientific, and literary knowledge that circulated widely across the continent.⁴⁵ Christianity, particularly in Nubia and Ethiopia, emerged as early as the fourth century CE, developing distinctive theological traditions, liturgical practices, and monastic institutions that blended local cultural elements with broader Christian thought.⁴⁶ Indigenous African religions persisted alongside these global faiths, providing ethical, cosmological, and ecological frameworks that informed governance, social cohesion, and daily life. Cultural expression through oral histories, music, art, and material production preserved collective memory, reinforced social hierarchies, and facilitated intergenerational knowledge transfer. Together, these religious and cultural systems illustrate Africa's pluralism, adaptability, and resilience, highlighting the complex interplay between indigenous traditions and external influences over centuries.

Through this historical lens, precolonial Africa emerges as a continent marked by innovation, adaptability, and complexity. Its societies actively shaped environments, economies, political systems, and cultural landscapes long before European intervention, engaging in dynamic interregional and global networks. Understanding Africa's precolonial history in this integrated manner is essential for a nuanced analysis of its social, political, economic, and intellectual development, as it provides the foundation for comprehending the continent's enduring dynamism and the legacies of its indigenous civilizations.

⁴⁵ Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 112–118.

⁴⁶ Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 25–30.

Amhara and Tigray developed centralized political institutions and sophisticated systems of social organization that facilitated agricultural production, territorial defense, and governance over extended regions. In contrast, the Oromo maintained decentralized social and political structures, organized through the gadaa system, which regulated leadership, conflict resolution, and communal decision-making across clans and territories. These societies maintained enduring cultural traditions, including codified legal practices, ritual institutions, and mechanisms for social cohesion. Other ethnic groups, such as the Sidama, Wolayta, Gurage, Hadiya, and Agaw, adapted to diverse ecological zones, establishing localized governance systems and trade networks suited to their social and economic contexts. Nilotic-speaking populations, such as the Nuer and Anuak along riverine lowlands, practiced pastoralism and agro-pastoralism, demonstrating the intricate interaction between environment, economy, and social organization.⁴⁸ Across the Horn, similar patterns of social and cultural complexity are evident. The Somali population, for instance, is a transboundary community spanning Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and northern Kenya, with a long history of pastoral mobility, trade, and inter-clan alliances. The Afar, inhabiting a corridor linking Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, exemplify the integration of nomadic pastoralism with long-distance caravan trade. Other Cushitic- and Semitic-speaking populations, including the Beja and Saho, maintained fluid social networks, intermarriage, and religious exchange, creating a multilayered social mosaic shaped by centuries of economic and cultural interaction.⁴⁹

Precolonial political organization in the Horn of Africa was highly varied, ranging from centralized kingdoms and sultanates to decentralized pastoral and clan-based systems. Ethiopian highland polities developed sophisticated administrative hierarchies, combining monarchical authority with regional governors, judicial officials, and military leaders to maintain territorial cohesion. Similarly, in the lowlands, pastoralist societies such as the Afar and Somali organized around clan and sub-clan lineages, with customary law regulating resource access, conflict resolution, and social obligations. These systems were adaptive, allowing for seasonal mobility, integration of migrant populations, and negotiation of access to scarce resources, thereby supporting social

⁴⁸I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, 4th ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 5–7.

⁴⁹Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–31.

resilience in challenging environments.⁵⁰ Trade networks were central to political authority, with local leaders controlling key caravan routes, markets, and taxation points. Coastal city-states along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden engaged in maritime commerce with Arabia, India, and the wider Indian Ocean world, exchanging livestock, frankincense, myrrh, textiles, and other goods, while simultaneously fostering the circulation of Islamic scholarship, literacy, and cultural practices.⁵¹

The Horn's economy was shaped by the complementarity of highland agriculture, pastoralism, and long-distance trade. Highland communities cultivated grains, pulses, and coffee, while lowland pastoralists relied on camels, cattle, and goats to support subsistence and trade. The mobility of pastoralist groups facilitated access to multiple ecological zones, allowing the integration of agricultural surpluses and livestock products into regional markets. Caravan trade linked inland production centers to coastal ports, enabling the Horn to participate in transregional exchange networks that connected East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and beyond. These networks were not merely economic; they reinforced political alliances, social obligations, and cultural exchange, underscoring the Horn's role as a dynamic precolonial crossroads of interaction.⁵²

Religion and intellectual life were integral to social and political cohesion in the Horn. Islam spread along trade routes and coastal cities, establishing centers of scholarship in towns such as Zeila and Harar, where religious education, jurisprudence, and literacy flourished. Christian highland polities, notably the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, developed monastic institutions, codified law, and written traditions in Ge'ez, contributing to state formation, cultural continuity, and regional identity. Indigenous belief systems complemented these major religions, providing ethical and cosmological frameworks that guided resource management, social norms, and conflict resolution. Oral histories, poetry, and ritual practice served as mechanisms for preserving collective memory and transmitting social knowledge, ensuring intergenerational continuity and reinforcing group identity.

⁵⁰ Donald Donham and Wendy James, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45–47.

⁵¹ Clapham, *The Horn of Africa*, 7–9; Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 5–7.

⁵² Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–31; Clapham, *The Horn of Africa*, 7–9.

The Horn of Africa's geography, ecological diversity, and social complexity enabled societies to develop adaptive strategies to environmental challenges while maintaining extensive networks of trade, culture, and political influence. These precolonial dynamics underscore the Horn's long-standing role as a center of innovation, economic integration, and sociopolitical sophistication. The interdependence of pastoralist mobility, highland agriculture, coastal trade, and intellectual exchange illustrates the region's enduring resilience and capacity for sustaining complex social systems long before the advent of European colonialism.⁵³ Understanding these historical and geographical foundations is essential for analyzing the Horn of Africa's contemporary social, political, and economic structures, as they reflect centuries of indigenous adaptation, regional connectivity, and cultural synthesis.

1.2.4 Colonial Expansion in Africa: Patterns, Strategies, and Regional Impacts

Colonial expansion in Africa, which accelerated during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, represents one of the most transformative periods in the continent's history, fundamentally reshaping political structures, economic systems, social relations, and territorial boundaries. Although European powers had maintained coastal trading posts and limited influence since the fifteenth century, it was the "Scramble for Africa" of the late 1800s that produced widespread formal colonization. Driven by intertwined economic, strategic, and ideological motives, colonial expansion was a response to Europe's industrial growth, the desire for new markets and raw materials, and strategic concerns regarding global maritime and military dominance. The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 institutionalized this partition, enabling European powers to claim vast swaths of African territory without African representation or consent. As a result, African societies were forcibly integrated into global capitalist systems, often with little regard for pre-existing political, social, or economic structures.⁵⁴

Economically, colonial expansion was justified and facilitated by the demand for raw materials—such as rubber, ivory, gold, palm oil, and agricultural commodities—to fuel industrial production in Europe. Colonies were designed to serve as sources of primary goods and as captive markets for European manufactured products, creating a dependency relationship that would endure long

⁵³ Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–31; Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 1–17.

⁵⁴ Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 254–256.

after independence. Infrastructure projects, including railways, ports, and roads, were constructed primarily to extract resources and consolidate administrative control rather than to support local development or interregional integration. This extractive economic logic frequently disrupted pre-existing trade networks and agricultural systems, while taxation systems and forced labor policies imposed new burdens on local populations.⁵⁵

Strategically, Africa's geographic position rendered it a site of imperial rivalry. Control over coastlines, river systems, and navigable passages allowed European powers to secure naval dominance, safeguard trade routes, and project power regionally and globally. Colonization also served as a geopolitical instrument, with European states competing to prevent rivals from gaining territorial or economic advantage. Ideologically, colonial expansion was justified under the guise of a "civilizing mission," which claimed to bring Christianity, literacy, and Western governance to African societies. In practice, these ideologies masked economic exploitation and reinforced racial hierarchies that subordinated African populations and devalued indigenous knowledge systems.⁵⁶

Colonial rule across Africa took diverse forms. In West Africa, the French pursued direct administration, creating centralized bureaucracies that imposed taxation, legal codes, and education systems. Britain frequently employed indirect rule, governing through local rulers and integrating pre-existing structures into colonial administration, while Germany, Belgium, Portugal, and Italy combined direct control with settler colonial practices or forced labor regimes depending on local conditions and imperial objectives.⁵⁷ Resistance to colonial rule was widespread, ranging from armed conflicts—such as Samori Toure's campaigns in West Africa and the Maji Maji Rebellion in East Africa—to more subtle forms of negotiation, evasion, and adaptation. These resistance movements demonstrated both the resilience and agency of African communities in the face of overwhelming military and technological superiority.

⁵⁵ Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, 10–20; Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, 20–240.

⁵⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 63–67; Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 45–48.

⁵⁷ Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, 75–76.

The Horn of Africa, because of its strategic location at the entrance to the Red Sea and its proximity to the Suez Canal, was a particular focus of European imperial ambitions. The region's significance derived not only from maritime routes but also from its long-established trade networks, pastoralist corridors, and the economic potential of highland and lowland territories. France established control over Djibouti in the 1880s, designating it French Somaliland to secure the Bab el-Mandeb strait and maintain access to maritime trade. Italy colonized Eritrea in 1890, using the port of Massawa as a base for further territorial expansion, and eventually advanced into southern Somalia to form Italian Somaliland. Britain, meanwhile, administered northern Somali territories and exercised indirect influence over other parts of the region, focusing on strategic control of ports and trade routes.⁵⁸

Ethiopia, in contrast, largely resisted formal colonization, achieving a historic victory against Italian forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, which symbolized African sovereignty and provided a rare example of successful resistance to European imperialism. Despite this, Ethiopia faced temporary occupation by Fascist Italy from 1936 to 1941, demonstrating the continued strategic vulnerability of even politically consolidated African states. The imposition of colonial boundaries in the Horn disrupted traditional trade routes, pastoralist mobility, and local governance, fragmenting communities such as the Afar and Somali, whose territories spanned multiple emerging colonial administrations.⁵⁹

Colonial strategies in the Horn varied according to the objectives of each power. France pursued assimilationist policies in Djibouti, integrating local administration into a centralized framework. Italy employed settler colonialism and later Fascist governance in Eritrea and occupied Ethiopia, while Britain largely relied on indirect rule through local authorities in Somali territories. Across all colonial administrations, the primary goals remained consistent: securing strategic territories, controlling trade, exploiting natural resources, and consolidating military and political dominance. Infrastructure projects, including ports, railways, and roads, were constructed with these objectives

⁵⁸ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 40–50; Clapham, *The Horn of Africa*, 100–10.

⁵⁹ Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 91–95; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 35–40.

in mind rather than to promote equitable local development, further entrenching economic dependency and altering pre-existing social and trade networks.⁶⁰

In sum, colonial expansion in Africa represented a transformative era characterized by European economic, strategic, and ideological intervention. The continent was systematically integrated into global capitalist circuits, its societies subjected to diverse forms of governance, and its political and economic systems restructured to serve external interests. Within this broader African context, the Horn of Africa's strategic location and its complex social and economic networks made it a focal point of imperial competition. The legacy of colonial intrusion, including territorial fragmentation, disruption of indigenous governance, and control over trade and resources, laid the groundwork for political, social, and economic challenges that would persist into the post-colonial era.



Map 2.Sources of colonial Africa Map;commons.wikimedia.org.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 45–50; Clapham, *The Horn of Africa*, 105–10.

1.2.5 Political and Economic Transformations under Colonial Rule

Colonial rule in Africa brought profound political and economic transformations that restructured indigenous governance, reshaped social hierarchies, and integrated local economies into global capitalist systems. European powers, motivated by economic exploitation, strategic control, and ideological dominance, imposed administrative and institutional frameworks that fundamentally altered precolonial political and economic structures. Across the continent, traditional authorities were often subordinated, co-opted, or eliminated, replaced by centralized bureaucracies designed to ensure effective resource extraction, tax collection, and political control. The consolidation of authority in the hands of colonial administrators disrupted long-established forms of local governance, including clan-based, council, and monarchical systems, altering mechanisms of conflict resolution, leadership legitimacy, and social cohesion.⁶¹

Economically, colonial regimes reoriented African production to serve European industrial interests. Cash-crop agriculture, mining, and resource extraction became central to colonial economies, often undermining local subsistence practices. Colonies were integrated into global trade networks as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of European manufactured goods, creating patterns of dependency that persisted well beyond independence. Infrastructure projects, including railways, ports, and roads, were constructed primarily to facilitate export-oriented production rather than to promote equitable regional development or internal economic diversification. Forced labor systems, taxation policies, and land alienation further restricted traditional economic autonomy, producing widespread social and economic dislocation while consolidating colonial power.⁶²

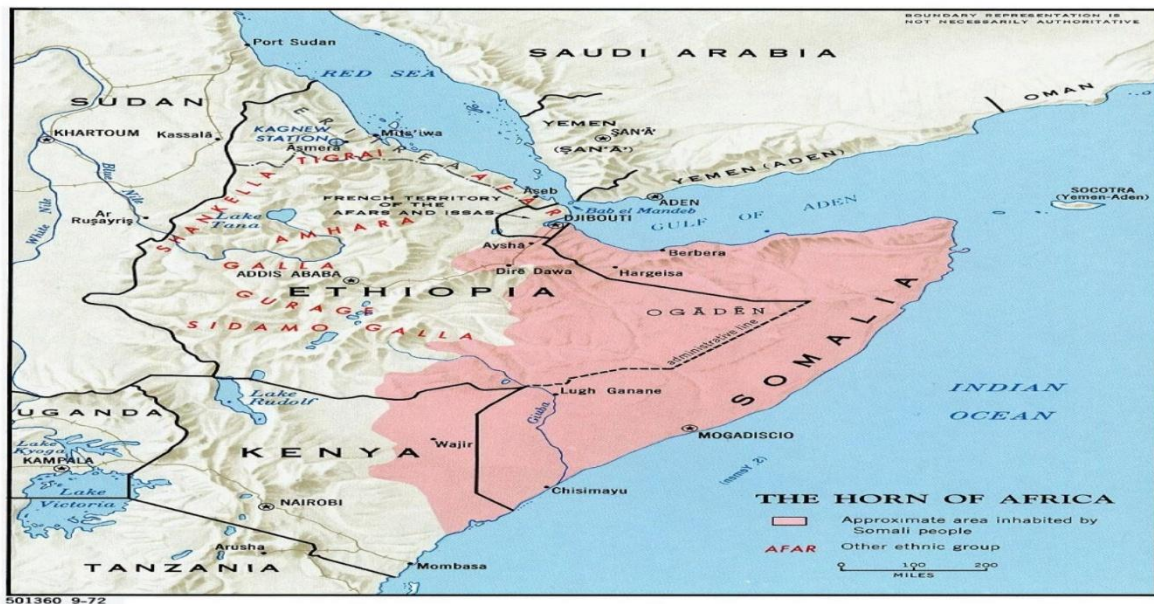
The political transformations under colonial rule were often justified by ideologies of racial hierarchy and the so-called “civilizing mission,” which framed European authority as beneficial for African societies. In practice, these interventions imposed centralized legal systems, hierarchical administrative structures, and codified policies of governance that privileged European settlers or favored certain ethnic groups over others. Indirect rule, practiced extensively by Britain, relied on co-opting local rulers to enforce colonial policies, while direct rule, as

⁶¹ Young, *The African Colonial State*, 9–10, 72–76; Iliffe, *Africans*, 260–63.

⁶² Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 155–80; Young, *The African Colonial State*, 72–76; Iliffe, *Africans*, 260–63.

implemented by France, Belgium, and Italy, imposed European bureaucratic systems often alien to local cultural norms. These strategies reshaped political identities, reinforced social stratification, and in many cases, eroded indigenous mechanisms for collective decision-making.⁶³

In the Horn of Africa, these political and economic transformations manifested in region-specific ways, reflecting the strategic significance of the area and the particular approaches of colonial powers. France, controlling Djibouti, implemented centralized administrative structures designed to manage trade and secure the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, integrating local governance into a colonial framework that prioritized French strategic and commercial interests. Italy, in Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, combined settler colonialism with direct administration, using coercive labor systems and land appropriation to establish agricultural and infrastructural enterprises. Britain, administering northern Somali territories, relied on indirect rule, working through local clan structures while controlling trade and taxation. These strategies fragmented traditional political authority, disrupted pastoralist networks, and limited local participation in decision-making, producing lasting political hierarchies that privileged colonial objectives over indigenous interests.⁶⁴



Map 3. Sources of map of horn of africa;mapsland.com

⁶³ Iliffe, *Africans*, 260–63; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 45–50.

⁶⁴ Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 30–35; Clapham, *The Horn of Africa*, 105–10.

Economically, the Horn of Africa under colonial rule experienced similar reorientation toward global markets. Coastal ports such as Djibouti and Massawa were developed as nodes for export trade, while inland regions were linked to these ports via roads and limited rail networks constructed primarily to facilitate the movement of goods for colonial benefit. Pastoralist societies, particularly the Afar and Somali, were constrained by territorial demarcation and restrictions on mobility, undermining traditional livestock management and trade systems. Agricultural production in highland Ethiopia and Eritrea was increasingly geared toward export crops, while local industries and artisanal production were marginalized. These economic transformations created structural inequalities, limited access to resources for indigenous populations, and fostered dependency on colonial infrastructure and markets.⁶⁵

The imposition of colonial taxation systems and labor requirements further reinforced economic control and social stratification. Forced conscription, corvée labor, and land tenure reforms were common, compelling indigenous populations to participate in colonial economic activities under coercion. Wealth accumulation and investment opportunities were concentrated in European hands or in sectors directly linked to colonial trade objectives, often resulting in the marginalization of local economies. Social hierarchies were codified along ethnic or racial lines, with administrative and commercial privileges disproportionately allocated to groups deemed cooperative by colonial authorities, exacerbating interethnic tensions and long-standing inequalities.⁶⁶

Despite these coercive transformations, African societies in the Horn and across the continent demonstrated resilience and adaptive strategies. Local leaders negotiated with colonial administrators, communities maintained cultural and religious practices, and indigenous economic systems persisted alongside colonial structures, providing continuity and laying the groundwork for eventual nationalist movements. The political and economic reconfiguration under colonial rule, while highly disruptive, also inadvertently stimulated organizational innovations, literacy, and infrastructural development that would later inform independence-era state-building and social mobilization.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 45–50, 120–25; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 20–25, 180–85.

⁶⁶ *Citizen and Subject*, 20–25, 180–85.

⁶⁷ Young, *The African Colonial State*, 76–80, 120–23; Iliffe, *Africans*, 265–70, 280–85.

In conclusion, colonial rule in Africa, and particularly in the Horn, produced deep and lasting political and economic transformations. Traditional governance structures were subordinated or reshaped, economic production was oriented toward external markets, and social hierarchies were institutionalized to serve imperial interests. These changes redefined African societies, created structural dependencies, and laid the foundation for the complex political and economic challenges that post-colonial states would inherit. At the same time, indigenous agency, cultural resilience, and adaptive strategies persisted, demonstrating that colonial domination, while extensive, was neither totalizing nor uncontested.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Colonialism in the Horn of Africa cannot be adequately understood as a purely political or economic enterprise; rather, it functioned as a comprehensive epistemological project that sought to dominate, classify, and ultimately transform indigenous societies. As Sajed (2013) conceptualizes, colonial encounters were grounded in *heterology*—a “science of the other”—through which colonial powers claimed the authority to define, interpret, and represent colonized peoples.⁶⁸ This epistemic framework positioned indigenous communities not as subjects of their own histories, but as objects of external knowledge production, thereby legitimizing intervention and control.

Building on this perspective, James Tully (1995) argues that the colonial “self” operates through processes of subjection and assimilation, masking its dominance under the guise of neutrality and universal historical progress.⁶⁹ Such a framework constructs colonial expansion as inevitable and beneficial, while simultaneously delegitimizing alternative ways of life. At its core, this logic aims to dissolve difference and impose sameness—what may be described as an “empire of uniformity.” Within this paradigm, indigenous institutions, knowledge systems, and cultural practices are rendered inferior or obsolete, thereby justifying their transformation or erasure.

⁶⁸ Sajed, Alina. “Epistemologies of Domination: Colonial Encounters, Heterology, and Postcolonial Pedagogy.” *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 2 (2013): 115–128.

⁶⁹ Tully, James. *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

The psychological dimensions of colonialism further deepen this process of domination. Ashis Nandy (1983) theorizes colonialism as a psycho-affective condition that permeates both the colonizer and the colonized.⁷⁰ It reshapes identities, internalizes hierarchies, and produces forms of consciousness that sustain domination even beyond formal colonial rule. For societies such as the Afar, this multidimensional intrusion threatened not only economic autonomy and political sovereignty but also the integrity of cultural identity and the continuity of indigenous epistemologies.

However, colonial domination was neither absolute nor uncontested. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2011) emphasizes in her critique of the politics of representation, resistance among colonized peoples must be understood within the context of imposed narratives of development and modernization.⁷¹ Indigenous resistance did not necessarily signify opposition to change per se; rather, it reflected a rejection of externally imposed transformations that disregarded local identities, values, and systems of governance. Development, when detached from cultural context and sovereignty, was often perceived as a form of erasure rather than progress.

Despite these important theoretical insights, the historiography on the Afar remains limited in both scope and analytical depth. Much of the existing literature is descriptive rather than analytical, territorially fragmented rather than regionally synthesized, and often externally framed rather than internally grounded in Afar socio-economic and political structures. As a result, it inadequately captures the complexity of Afar society and its historical transformations. There is a noticeable absence of comprehensive scholarship that systematically examines how colonial intervention reshaped Afar governance, altered long-standing patterns of trade and mobility, intensified inter-ethnic tensions, and institutionalized forms of marginalization within the emerging postcolonial states of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti.

Consequently, the central research problem lies in the lack of a systematic and critical examination of the socio-economic and political impacts of colonialism on the Afar people across these

⁷⁰ Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

⁷¹ Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

historically interconnected regions. Historically, Afar people were socially, politically, and economically interconnected through sultanates, clan territories, and customary institutions, kinship, trade, pastoral mobility, and shared cultural practices. Afar clans were distributed across present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, with clan leaders, local chiefs, and sultans exercising authority that extended beyond the colonial boundaries later imposed in the region.

For example, the traditional authority of the Rahayto Sultanate, currently located within Eritrean territory, historically extended as far as Obock in present-day Djibouti. Similarly, the Bidu (Girrifo) Sultanate, presently located within Ethiopian territory, exercised authority reaching the Buri Peninsula. The Awsa Sultanate, also located in present-day Ethiopia, historically extended its influence as far as Beylul and Assab in present-day Eritrea, and Mussali and Yoboki in present-day Djibouti. Likewise, the Goba'ad and Tadjoura Sultanates, currently situated within Djibouti, exercised traditional authority as far as Amibara and Dulassa Wereda in the Gabi Rasu Zone of the Afar Region in Ethiopia.

In the same manner, Afar clan lineages and kinship networks transcended the present colonial boundaries. Therefore, colonial intervention significantly disrupted and transformed these historically interconnected socio-economic and political structures across the Afar territories.

In response, this study seeks to investigate how colonial powers disrupted indigenous systems of authority, fragmented socio-economic and political networks, and restructured territorial organization across Afar-inhabited regions. It further aims to analyze how these processes contributed to enduring patterns of political marginalization, economic dependency, and inter-ethnic conflict. By foregrounding Afar perspectives and lived experiences, the research aspires to move beyond descriptive historiography toward a more critical and regionally integrated analysis.

Ultimately, this study addresses a significant gap in the historiography of the Afar and contributes to a more balanced reconstruction of the history of the Horn of Africa. In doing so, it also reinforces the importance of examining colonialism not only as a system of material domination but as an enduring epistemological and psychological force—one that continues to shape identities, institutions, and historical narratives in the present.

1.4 Research Questions

This study focused on examining the Socio-economic and Political impacts of colonization in the Horn of Africa, with particular reference to the Afar people, and addressed the following questions:

1. What were the political structures, ideologies, and administrative systems of the Afar people prior to colonization?
2. What were the primary economic activities and trade networks of the Afar people before the arrival of colonial powers?
3. How were social and cultural interactions and inter-clan networks organized among the Afar prior to colonial intervention?
4. When and how did European powers establish control over the Horn of Africa, particularly the coastal territories inhabited by the Afar?
5. How did colonialism affect the political authority and governance systems of the Afar people?
6. Which economic resources of the Afar were exploited by colonial powers, and what were the consequences of this exploitation?
7. What were the broader political, economic, and social impacts of colonization on the Horn of Africa, and how did these specifically affect the Afar?
8. What was the post-colonial status and condition of the Afar people following the colonial period?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to examine the Socio-economic and Political impact of colonization on the Afar people in the Horn of Africa. The specific objectives included:

1. To analyze the political structures, governance systems, and administrative organization of the Afar people prior to colonial intervention.
2. To investigate the economic activities, trade networks, and maritime enterprises of the Afar before the arrival of colonial powers.

3. To explore the social and cultural interactions, inter-clan relations, and customary law systems among the Afar prior to colonization.
4. To assess the processes and mechanisms through which European colonial powers established control over Afar territories.
5. To evaluate the political, economic, and social consequences of colonialism on the Afar people.
6. To identify the specific economic resources exploited by colonial powers and the impact of this exploitation on the Afar.
7. To examine the post-colonial status and condition of the Afar people following the period of European colonization.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Historical documents on the Afar people had been difficult to obtain. Most works on the Afar were authored by foreigners and were not directly related to the people's own historical perspectives. Very little had been written by Afar authors, and what existed was mostly in the form of journal articles rather than comprehensive studies.

History provides an understanding of the identity, social interactions, and experiences of a community; without knowledge of the past, the direction for the future becomes unclear. As George Orwell observed,

*“Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past. And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered... it was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory”.*⁷²

This perspective underscores the importance of documenting indigenous histories to preserve collective memory and identity.

⁷² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 32.

The Afar people had historically been Socially, politically and economically influential in the Horn of Africa, owing to their strategic geographical location. However, by the post-colonial period, they had become largely marginalized and under-recognized. This study filled an important information gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the Afar people's political, economic, and social organization prior to colonization, their status at the end of the colonial period, and the consequences they faced during and after colonial rule.

Furthermore, the study served as a valuable reference for future scholars seeking to investigate the history, society, and development of the Afar people, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the region's historical dynamics.

1.7 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study examines the historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural transformations of the Afar people across their traditional territories in the Horn of Africa. The research is geographically, temporally, and thematically delimited in order to maintain analytical clarity and methodological coherence.

Geographically, the study covers Afar-inhabited regions within present-day Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. In Eritrea, the research focuses on historically significant Afar political and economic centers, including the Rahaito Sultanate, Assab, Massawa, the Dahlak Islands, Beylul, and Idi. In Djibouti, the study encompasses the Tadjoura Sultanate, the Gobaad Sultanate, and the areas of Dikhil, Hayyu, and Obock (Yoboki). In Ethiopia, the study includes all six administrative zones of the Afar Regional State.

These regions collectively represent the principal historical settlements, political centers, trade routes, and socio-economic zones of the Afar people. Historically, Afar territories were interconnected through clan lineage, kinship ties, trade networks, and traditional political institutions that transcended present-day national boundaries. Accordingly, these areas provide a comprehensive basis for examining the broader historical experiences of the Afar people across the Horn of Africa.

The temporal scope of the study extends from 1841 to 1977. The year 1841 marks an important historical transition from Ottoman–Egyptian influence along the Red Sea coast to the gradual

expansion of European colonial intervention in the region. The year 1977 represents the formal end of European colonial rule in the Afar territories with the independence of Djibouti from France.

However, the study briefly extends its analysis to the period between 1977 and 1991 in order to examine the enduring consequences of colonial territorial division on the Afar people. Although formal colonial administration ended in 1977, the political and territorial legacies of colonialism continued to shape Afar society. In particular, the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1991 further institutionalized the colonial-era fragmentation of Afar territories among three separate nation-states: Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti.

Historically, the Afar people constituted a socially, politically, and economically interconnected society whose clan networks, sultanates, and customary institutions extended across present-day state boundaries. Colonial boundary-making disrupted this historical unity, and the emergence of Eritrea as an independent state in 1991 reinforced and formalized these divisions. Therefore, the discussion of the period from 1977 to 1991 is included not to expand the principal temporal scope of the study, but rather to demonstrate the continuing effects and long-term legacy of colonial territorial reorganization on the Afar people.

Thematically, the study focuses on the impact of colonialism on Afar political institutions, socio-economic structures, and territorial administration. It examines how colonial interventions transformed indigenous systems of governance, altered trade and mobility networks, reshaped patterns of settlement and resource control, and redefined the spatial organization of Afar-inhabited regions within emerging colonial and postcolonial state frameworks.

The study further investigates the ways in which colonial policies affected traditional authority structures, interregional connections, and the socio-political cohesion of Afar society across the Horn of Africa.

The study is deliberately delimited to the Afar-inhabited regions of Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia because these areas historically constituted the principal political, economic, and socio-cultural centers of the Afar people. While the research acknowledges the broader historical interactions between the Afar and neighboring communities, states, and colonial powers, such interactions are addressed only insofar as they illuminate the central focus of the study.

Accordingly, the primary analytical emphasis remains on the Afar population, their institutions, and their historical experiences within the defined study areas. Therefore, this dissertation argues that colonial territorial partition in the Horn of Africa disrupted historically interconnected Afar political, economic, and socio-cultural systems, producing long-term fragmentation that continued into the post-colonial period

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study faced several limitations. Accessing relevant information was challenging because much of the documentation on the colonial era was archived abroad, particularly in Italy, France, and Cairo, Egypt, and obtaining visas posed significant constraints. Few prior studies had been conducted on the Afar during the colonial period, limiting secondary sources. Within the Afar region, poor infrastructure in many woredas complicated transportation and access to study sites.

Additionally, the study relied heavily on oral histories, as much of the colonial-era history had not been documented in writing. Identifying elders with the knowledge required for the study was time-consuming and required careful verification.

To mitigate these limitations, the study employed several strategies:

1. When international travel was not feasible, data were collected from the Afar diaspora abroad.
2. Information from Eritrea was supplemented by interviewing Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.
3. Data from Djibouti were obtained through interviews with Afar sultans, their families, and knowledgeable community members.
4. Transportation challenges in rural woredas were addressed by coordinating with local government offices for temporary field support.
5. The Institute of The Afar Language, Culture and History study was consulted to identify elders and key informants who could provide reliable oral histories.

Despite these challenges, data triangulation from multiple sources ensured the reliability and validity of the study findings.

1.9 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative historical research methodology aimed at reconstructing and critically analyzing the Socio-economic and Political transformations experienced by the Afar people, particularly during the colonial period. Historical research methods were used to collect, verify, and interpret evidence from diverse sources within the defined temporal and spatial scope of the study. Emphasis was placed on source criticism, contextual analysis, and triangulation in order to ensure reliability, validity, and balanced interpretation of the data. The research drew upon primary, secondary, and oral sources, complemented by ethnographic field engagement.

Primary data were obtained from archival documents, administrative records, legal texts, treaties, minutes of meetings, correspondence, newspapers, and material artifacts such as photographs and drawings. Archival research was conducted in several institutions, including the National Archive and Library Agency of Ethiopia, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, and Addis Ababa University. Regional sources were accessed through the Afar Culture and Tourism Bureau, the Afar Language, Culture and History Study Institute, and the Afar Peace and Security Bureau. In addition, historical materials and oral accounts were gathered from traditional political institutions, including the Rahaita Sultanate Palace in Eritrea, the Tadjoura Sultanate Palace in Djibouti, and families associated with the Awsa and Bidu Sultanates in Ethiopia. These sources provided valuable insight into treaties, colonial agreements, governance structures, and local administrative practices.

Secondary sources consisted of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, encyclopedias, theses, biographies, newspapers, and relevant media materials such as documentary films and recorded interviews. These materials were accessed primarily through university libraries and regional cultural institutions. Secondary literature was critically reviewed to identify historiographical debates, interpretative frameworks, and gaps in existing scholarship. Particular attention was given to works addressing colonial administration, inter-ethnic relations, Sultanate governance, and economic systems in the Horn of Africa.

Oral tradition constituted a central component of the research. Interviews were conducted with elders, clan leaders, religious authorities, and knowledgeable community members across Afar-inhabited territories. Oral narratives provided information on genealogies, customary law (mad'a), political authority, economic practices, conflict dynamics, and memories of colonial intervention

that are insufficiently documented in written records. These accounts were cross-checked with archival and secondary sources to minimize bias and enhance historical accuracy.

An ethnographic approach was incorporated to contextualize historical findings within contemporary social realities. Field observations and direct engagement with communities were carried out across the Afar Triangle, including all six administrative zones of the Afar Region in Ethiopia, as well as selected research sites in Eritrea and Djibouti. Additional archival visits were conducted in Addis Ababa to supplement regional data collection. This multi-sited fieldwork enabled a comparative and transboundary perspective, reflecting the historical continuity of Afar society across present-day nation-state boundaries.

Through the integration of archival research, literature review, oral history, and ethnographic observation, the study sought to construct a comprehensive and critically grounded analysis of the Socio-economic and Political impact of colonialism on the Afar people.

Chapter II: The Afar People and Their Historiography (From Antiquity to 1841)

2.1 Physical Geography of Afar Territories

The Afar people have historically inhabited a clearly demarcated region in the northeastern Horn of Africa, encompassing contiguous territories in present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. This traditional homeland broadly corresponds to the Afar Triangle—an extensive tectonic depression formed by the convergence and rifting of the African, Arabian, and Somali plates. The region stretches along the Red Sea littoral, including the Buri Peninsula and the Dahlak Archipelago in the north, and extends southward toward the city of Djibouti City and the historic port of Zeila. Its southern limits approximate the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway corridor from Erer to the Awash National Park, while its western frontier is defined by the escarpments of the Ethiopian highlands. Such boundaries underscore the Afar’s historical control over both strategic coastal nodes and extensive inland territories, highlighting their integration of diverse ecological zones into a cohesive sociopolitical space.⁷³

Geographically, the Afar Triangle is bounded by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the east, the Ethiopian Highlands to the west, and the Somali Plateau to the south. The landscape is characterized by arid lowlands, volcanic massifs, salt flats, and riverine corridors. Despite its reputation for extreme heat and aridity, the region contains ecologically diverse and economically viable zones, particularly along the Awash River basin, where irrigated agriculture and pastoralism have historically flourished. The Awash valley has supported sedentary cultivation alongside nomadic and semi-nomadic livestock production, forming a complementary economic system that linked highland and lowland markets.⁷⁴

Within Ethiopia, the Afar homeland corresponds administratively to the Afar Regional State, composed of six zones: Awsa (Zone 1), Kilbatti Rasu (Zone 2), Gabbi Rasu (Zone 3), Fanti Rasu (Zone 4), Harri Rasu (Zone 5), and Mahi Rasu (Zone 6). Zones such as Awsa and Gabbi Rasu, situated along the Awash River, have sustained intensive agricultural development and agro-

⁷³ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 21; Shehem Kassim, *The Influence of Islam on the Afar People*, PhD diss., University of Washington, 1982, 16; Medhane Tadese, *The Question for Conflict Settlement in Ethiopia’s Peripheries* (Addis Ababa: Center for Policy Research and Dialogue, 2006), 7–10.

⁷⁴ Hashim Gamaluddin Ibrahim A-shami, *Almanhal*, Amharic translation by Shek Ahmed Mohammed Kibo Al-Harari (Addis Ababa: Addis Quality Printing, 2007), 37.

industrial initiatives, including the Tendaho Sugar Plantation, demonstrating the region's productive potential.⁷⁵ Other zones, particularly Kilbatti Rasu and Harri Rasu, combine highland-fringe ecologies with pastoral livelihoods, while Fanti Rasu represents a transitional agro-pastoral belt linking riverine cultivation with rangeland systems.⁷⁶

Historically, **Charles Johnston** described this broader coastal expanse as extending from Suakin in the north to Mogadishu in the south, and westward to the Abyssinian highlands. This Classical sources identified parts of this region with Avalites, a term that some scholars associate etymologically with the Afar (Affa) people.⁷⁷ The medieval name Adal was widely applied to the Muslim polities of the area, particularly in highland Ethiopian chronicles, and later became linked with coastal centers such as Adulis, the ancient Red Sea port that served as a commercial gateway between the Horn of Africa and the wider Indian Ocean world. Charles referred to the Dankali (Danakil) as inhabitants of a substantial coastal kingdom extending from Adulis to the vicinity of Tadjoura. the populations inhabiting the Afar coast east of the Bab al-Mandeb strait, attesting to the region's integration into trans-Red Sea commercial and cultural networks.⁷⁸

Thus, the geographical configuration of the Afar territory—encompassing maritime outlets, salt plains, caravan corridors, and fertile river valleys—has endowed it with enduring strategic significance. Control over Red Sea ports, inland trade arteries, and ecological transition zones positioned the Afar as intermediaries between Africa, Arabia, and the interior Ethiopian highlands. Far from constituting a peripheral desert, the Afar homeland has historically functioned as a pivotal geopolitical and economic crossroads within the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, Afar's settlement patterns and subsistence strategies reflect sophisticated adaptation to this ecological diversity. Communities in fertile river valleys have historically practiced semi-sedentary agriculture, while those in arid or highland zones rely on transhumant pastoralism, migrating seasonally to exploit pasture and water. This mobility enabled efficient utilization of

⁷⁵ Maknun Gamaledin Ashami, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia: A Dynamic Periphery*, PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1985, 12. Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 18.

⁷⁶ John Markakis, *Nomads and Nationalism in Ethiopia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1972), 55–60.

⁷⁷ Charles Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia through the Country of Adal to the Kingdom of Shoa* (London: J. Madden & Co., 1844), 10–15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

ecological niches and resilience in the face of environmental variability, allowing the Afar to maintain economic and social cohesion across a challenging landscape.⁷⁹ Beyond Ethiopia, Afar populations inhabit Eritrea's Southern Red Sea Region—from the Buri Peninsula to Assab—and northern and central Djibouti, particularly Tadjoura and Dikhil. These transboundary settlements, encompassing coastal plains, wadis, and volcanic escarpments, illustrate the historical fluidity of Afar mobility, economic networks, and social organization.⁸⁰

Historically, the Afar organized themselves into confederated sultanates, including Awsa, Tadjoura, Goba'ad, Bidu, and Rahaita, which exercised autonomous governance through a combination of Islamic law and customary institutions known as Mada. These political systems enabled the Afar to manage pastoral resources, regulate caravan routes, and maintain regional security across vast territories extending from the Red Sea coast to the Danakil Depression. Their strategic geographic position connected inland trade networks with maritime commerce along the Red Sea, making the Afar important economic and political actors in the Horn of Africa.

The Afar territories possessed considerable strategic importance due to their control of major caravan routes, coastal ports, and salt resources. The salt flats of the Danakil Depression served as one of the most important economic centers in northeastern Africa, supplying salt to highland and regional markets through extensive caravan networks managed largely by Afar communities. Control over these trade routes and resources enhanced the political influence of Afar sultanates and strengthened their regional economic position.⁸¹

In addition to controlling inland caravan trade, the Afar occupied strategically significant coastal areas along the Red Sea, including Assab, Beylul, Massawa, Tadjoura, and surrounding ports. These ports linked the Horn of Africa with Arabia, India, and the wider Indian Ocean commercial system. Through these maritime connections, commodities such as salt, ivory, hides, animal skins, gold, and livestock circulated between inland and overseas markets. The integration of pastoral

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁰ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 171–76; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 84–85; Markakis, *Nomads and Nationalism in Ethiopia*, 61.

⁸¹ Till Jakob Frederik Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics: A Visual Ethnography of the 'Afar Caravan Trade in North-Eastern Ethiopia*, PhD diss., University of London, 2021, 80.

production, caravan trade, and maritime commerce enabled Afar societies to maintain extensive economic and political networks before colonial intervention.

The strategic port city of Massawa illustrates the broader importance of Afar territories in regional commerce. Historically, Massawa functioned as one of the principal commercial gateways of northeastern Africa, connecting Ethiopian inland markets with the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade systems. Indian, Arab, and local merchants operated commercial networks linking Massawa with Aden, Bombay, and other regional ports. Similarly, ports such as Tadjoura, Assab, and Beylul facilitated commercial exchange and movement between the African interior and overseas markets.⁸²

The strategic significance of Afar territories also attracted the attention of regional and international powers because of their economic resources and geopolitical location. Control over the salt mines, caravan routes, and Red Sea ports was considered essential for economic and political influence in the Horn of Africa. Mordechai Abir observes that the salt resources of the Afar region held considerable strategic and economic value, making them a major focus of external interests in northeastern Africa. Trojer and Till similarly emphasize that the importance of Afar salt resources extended beyond economic concerns and formed part of broader geopolitical competition in the region. These interpretations demonstrate that the Afar territories occupied a central position in the political economy of the Horn of Africa long before colonial intervention.⁸³

Beyond their economic importance, Afar political institutions played a significant role in maintaining regional order and regulating inter-clan relations. Sultanates and local authorities coordinated access to grazing lands, water resources, caravan security, and trade routes across interconnected territories. Kinship networks and customary institutions enabled the Afar to sustain social cohesion and mobility across a challenging ecological environment. These systems contributed to the resilience and continuity of Afar society and reinforced their influence across both coastal and inland regions of the Horn of Africa.⁸⁴

⁸² Mesfin Araya, "Colonialism and Natural Economy: The Eritrean Case," *Northeast African Studies* 13, no. 2/3 (1991): 165–90; Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1968); Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 145.

⁸³ Mordechai Abir, "Salt, Trade and Politics in Ethiopia in the 'Zāmānā Māsafent'," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1966): 9–10; Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 80.

⁸⁴ Yassin, *Political History of the Afar i*, 41, 58



Map 4. Afar Triangle(Sources;- Hashim Jemaluddin,Almanhal book amharic version,page-31)

2.2 Historical Background

2.2.1 Shared Ancestry of the Afar people

The Afar people are referred to by different names in various historical and cultural contexts. Among Arab communities, they are commonly known as Danakil, a name believed to be derived from Dankali, one of the ancient Afar tribes that held power along the Red Sea coast and were actively engaged in commerce and political leadership. The Dankali tribe was particularly influential during the medieval period and had strong maritime trade networks, which possibly led to their name becoming synonymous with the broader Afar identity among outsiders.⁸⁵

In Ethiopian historical narratives, especially among the Amhara, the Afar are often identified as Adal, a reference to the Adal Sultanate that rose to prominence in the 15th and 16th centuries. This Islamic state, which ruled large parts of the eastern and southeastern Ethiopian highlands, relied heavily on Afar military and political leadership. The ruling class and a significant portion of the

⁸⁵ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 100.

army were composed of Afar leaders and warriors.⁸⁶ As a result, the term “Adal” became a metonym for the Afar people in Ethiopian historiography.⁸⁷

Similarly, the Oromo and Somali communities refer to the Afar as Odali, which also appears to be rooted in historical interactions during the medieval and early modern periods.

Despite these external appellations, the people themselves identify as Afar. Interestingly, the origin and meaning of the name "Afar" remain uncertain. Oral traditions within the community provide no clear etymology, and the people simply assert that they have always been known as Afar. This absence of a definitive linguistic or historical origin raises questions about whether the name "Afar" predates written records or whether it evolved from an ancient indigenous term.

This uncertainty has led scholars to explore the genealogical and ethno-linguistic roots of the Afar people in order to understand their self-identification better.

While the true origin of the name "Afar" remains elusive, it is clear that the identity has deep historical continuity and cultural significance for the people themselves, transcending the externally imposed names of Danakil, Adal, or Odali.

Ancestral lineages and etymological development of the Afar People reveal a deep-rooted indigenous identity based on patrilineal clans, linguistic cohesion, political autonomy, and ancestral memory. Their history, while enriched by oral tradition and Islamic influence, is grounded in a long-standing presence in the Horn of Africa, making them one of the region’s most historically significant communities.

Therefore, Ancestral lineages and etymological origins of the Afar people, as well as the etymology of the term “Africa,” have been subjects of historical, linguistic, and theological inquiry. The African continent, home to diverse civilizations, derives its name from a rich and contested historical legacy. The Latin word *Afer*, used by the Romans to describe the inhabitants of the region surrounding Carthage in present-day Tunisia. Over time, the designation expanded to refer to the entire continent.⁸⁸ Alternative explanations suggest a Greek origin from *aphrike*, meaning “without cold,” reflecting the warmer climate of the continent, a Berber origin from *ifri* or *Ifiran*, meaning “cave” or “cave dwellers,” referencing indigenous North African populations,

⁸⁶ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 44-45.

⁸⁷ R. Markham Clements, F.S.A., *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), 18.

⁸⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary. “Africa.” Accessed May 14, 2026.

or a Phoenician origin, *afar*, meaning “dust,” possibly in reference to the Sahara region. While these etymologies vary, the Latin derivation is the most widely used in international historiography.⁸⁹

But within the broader African context, the Afar people occupy a strategically significant region spanning northeastern Ethiopia, Djibouti, and southern Eritrea. They are considered among the earliest known settlers of the Horn of Africa, with deep-rooted historical and cultural continuity in the region. This long-standing presence has led some scholars to suggest a potential connection between the name “Africa” and the Afar people themselves, positing that the continent may have been named after this ancient population.⁹⁰

Historical sources further attest to the significance of the Afar people in the Horn of Africa and their wider connections across northeastern Africa and Arabia. Bodie Hodge (2012) notes that descendants of the Afar were traditionally believed to have settled in both Arabia and northeastern Africa, with Ephher (also rendered as Aphra or Ophren) occasionally identified as an eponymous ancestor of Africa, giving rise to forms such as Ephrica or Ophrica.⁹¹ In *Jewish Antiquities* (Book 1, Chapter 15), Alexander Polyhistor reports that Abraham’s sons by Keturah included Apher, Surim, and Japhran, with the land of Assyria said to descend from Surim, while Africa allegedly derived its name from Apher and Japhran.⁹² Similarly, Ali Tosh (2025) identifies Afar (Afer) as the second son of Midian, who was himself the fourth son of Abraham and Keturah, reinforcing the presence of Afar in Abrahamic genealogies.⁹³

While these ancestral lineages narratives are primarily theological and should be treated with caution when reconstructing historical population movements, they underscore the long-standing recognition of the Afar people and their perceived significance in the broader region. By

⁸⁹ Dani Venter and Ernst Neuland, *NEPAD and the African Renaissance* (Johannesburg: Richard Havenga & Associates, 2005), 16.

⁹⁰ Bodie Hodge, *Tower of Babel: Cultural History of Our Ancestors* (2012), 148; Ali Tosh, *In the Footsteps of Afar, Son of Midian* (Samara, Afar Region, Ethiopia: Afar Language, Culture and History Studies Institute, 2025), 7.

⁹¹ Hodge, *Tower of Babel*, 148.

⁹² Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 15 (Original publication: 93–94 AD; English translation: 1602; republished 2006), 33.

⁹³ Tosh, *In the Footsteps of Afar*, 7.

combining these historical and linguistic perspectives, the Afar can be situated as a foundational population in the Horn of Africa, with some traditions even linking them etymologically to the continent itself.

Oral traditions among the Afar further emphasize their longstanding presence in the Horn of Africa, highlighting ancestral ties across regions corresponding to present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. Archaeological and historical studies indicate that the Afar occupied strategically significant areas along trade routes and near Red Sea ports, contributing to their socio-political and economic prominence. Raimondo Franchetti (1930) speculated that “the word Afar came from Ophir, a place mentioned in the Bible, which was famous for its gold in ancient times⁹⁴, while James Bruce (1768–73) observed that the tribe of Ophir was among the peoples inhabiting southern Arabia during the time of Moses and later settled along the African coast.⁹⁵ American anthropologist George Murdock (1959) similarly notes that the Afar’s descendants “are among the first Kushites to move from their original home and settle in the Danakil-Afar Depression in East Africa”.⁹⁶

Historical and linguistic traditions provide important insights into the etymology of the term *Afar*. Some scholars trace the name to Phoenician origins, while in Hebrew, *afar* means “dust” or “soil,” the very substance from which Adam, the first human, was formed.⁹⁷ Similarly, Ahaw Ali (2013) notes that *Afar* denotes the soil from which Adam was created. This semantic continuity persists across Sabeian, Ge‘ez, and Amharic, in which the term *afer* also signifies soil.⁹⁸ Collectively, these linguistic sources suggest that the name *Afar* is intimately connected to the primordial material from which humanity is believed to have originated.

Archaeological and paleoanthropological evidence further reinforces this symbolic association. The Afar region of Ethiopia has emerged as a pivotal site in the study of human evolution, most notably as the location where the fossilized remains of *Australopithecus afarensis*—popularly

⁹⁴ Raimondo Franchetti, *Nella Danalia Etiopica* (Italy: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1930), 226.

⁹⁵ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768–73* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1790), 261.

⁹⁶ George P. Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 319.

⁹⁷ James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. “Hebrew 6083 – אָפָר (aphar),” accessed December 9, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6083.htm>.

⁹⁸ Ahaw Ali, *Eritria Anke Fanah* (Addis Ababa: 2013), 6.

known as “Lucy” (specimen AL 288-1)—were discovered. Unearthed in 1974 at Hadar by Donald Johanson and Maurice Taieb, Lucy is dated to approximately 3.2 million years ago.⁹⁹ Her skeletal morphology, particularly the structure of the pelvis and lower limbs, indicates habitual bipedal locomotion, while retaining adaptations for climbing. This combination suggests that upright walking preceded significant brain enlargement in early hominin evolution.¹⁰⁰

Together, the linguistic and archaeological evidence underscores the Afar region’s dual significance: as both a cradle of early human civilization and a cultural locus where the very name of the people is symbolically linked to the material origins of humanity.

Taken together, both theological and linguistic perspectives and paleoanthropological evidence suggest that the Afar region represents not only an ancestral locus for the Afar people but also a geographic and material focal point in the deep history of humankind. Lucy’s discovery in their ancestral land reinforces the argument that the Afar region has been a locus of early human existence, thereby linking the region—and perhaps even the name “Afar”—to the very roots of humanity.

According to oral traditions collected from several Afar elders, the Afar people have historically maintained deep cultural, ancestral lineages, and economic connections to their environment and to broader historical networks. Sultan Abdu Haysama, Sultan of Girifo, explained that the Afar traditionally say: “*nan badat naadeeh, sinam net taade,*” meaning, “we are bordered by the sea, but other people are bordered by us,” reflecting a long-standing relationship with the sea and maritime life.¹⁰¹ Mohammed Awwel (age 70), a retired expert in the Afar language, recounted an ancient book from the time of Prophet Musa(Moses), reportedly discovered in Afambo district, Eritrea. Local elders maintained that the book was opened once a year to invoke rainfall and then closed without being read. Although its existence cannot currently be verified due to political

⁹⁹ The Smithsonian Institution, Human Origins Program, “AL 288-1 (Lucy) Fossil,” accessed December 9, 2025, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Natasha Frost, “How the ‘Lucy’ Fossil Rewrote the Story of Human Evolution,” *Time*, November 24, 2015, 1.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Sultan Abdu Haysama, Sultan of Girifo, logiya, Afar Region, Ethiopia, 14 June/2024.

circumstances, this tradition suggests a genealogical or cultural link between the Afar people and the prophets Musa and Ibrahim.¹⁰²

Additional narratives preserved in the songs of Abayazid Ali of Djibouti assert the Afar as the indigenous root of humanity in the Horn of Africa. His song, “*nan hadak haffaay sinam hadak ramidi*,” translates as, “we are the root of the tree; the others are the leaves,” emphasizing the Afar’s perceived primacy in regional genealogical traditions.¹⁰³ Complementing these cultural claims are accounts from oral informants, Ahmed Abdukaadir, who described the ancient gold market of Saso in Musle Kebele, Kori Wereda.¹⁰⁴ Saso is traditionally associated with the Biblical Ophir and linked to the legendary trade expedition of the Pharaonic queen Hatshepsut to the Land of Punt during Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty. Hatshepsut’s expedition sought luxury goods such as myrrh, frankincense, exotic animals, gold, and ebony for the royal treasury and religious purposes. The exact location of the Saso gold marketplace remains contested among historians. Richard Pankhurst (1977) argues that Saso was situated in the Amhara Regional State, specifically the Agew Zone and the Benishangul region, areas where gold continues to be excavated today. He further notes that the site was located near a salt production area.¹⁰⁵

In contrast, Afar oral traditions, as conveyed by Mohammed Ahmedin, an expert at the Afar Regional Museum, suggest that the ancient marketplace of Saso was located within the Afar region.¹⁰⁶

This interpretation appears plausible when compared with historical evidence. Pankhurst’s description links Saso to a salt-producing locality, and Ethiopia’s principal salt production is concentrated in Afdera Wereda of the Afar Region. Afdera lies in proximity to Kori Wereda, which strengthens the argument for situating Saso in this area.

¹⁰² Mohammed Awwel, interview by author, Samara, Afar Region, Ethiopia, October 10, 2024.

¹⁰³ Song by Abiyazid Ali, Djibouti, 2006

¹⁰⁴ Ahmad Abdukaadir, Samara, Afar Region, Ethiopia, October 11, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Mohammed Ahmadin, interview by author, Afar Region, Ethiopia, July 10, 2021.

Furthermore, while gold is indeed excavated in the Amhara and Benishangul regions, no locality in these areas is historically identified as Saso. By contrast, in the Afar region, gold is also extracted in Konnaba Wereda, though this site does not correspond with the traditional description of Saso.

On this basis, it may be concluded that the ancient gold marketplace known as Saso was most likely located in the Afar Region, specifically in Kori Wereda, near the salt production center of Afdera.



Figure 1. Rock art Egyptians pharaonic picture found in Saso, kori wereda, Afar region (sources ; -Afar Tourism bureau Musuem, samara)

Collectively, historical, linguistic, and paleoanthropological evidence indicates that the Afar people occupy a distinctive position in discussions of human origins, identity, and settlement in the Horn of Africa. The term *Afar*, which some scholars trace to Phoenician origins meaning “soil” or “dust,” reflects both the environmental characteristics of the region and its enduring human presence, suggesting that the Afar people are among the earliest known settlers of the Horn of Africa.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Ali, *Eritria Anke Fanah*, 6.

Paleoanthropological research identifies East Africa—particularly the Lower Awash Valley of the Afar Region in Ethiopia—as a central site for early hominin evolution. Fossilized remains, including *Australopithecus afarensis* (specimen AL 288-1, popularly known as “Lucy”), demonstrate that the region served as a geographic origin for modern humans prior to their dispersal across the globe.¹⁰⁸ Lucy’s discovery in Hadar underscores the Afar region’s significance as a cradle of early humankind, providing concrete evidence for understanding the anatomical, ecological, and behavioral development of early hominins.

In addition to its paleoanthropological importance, the Afar region may have played a symbolic role in the naming of the African continent. Given the long-standing presence of the Afar people in northeastern Africa and the linguistic resonance of their name, some scholars suggest that the term *Africa* could be etymologically linked to the Afar, reinforcing the region’s centrality in both human evolutionary history and the historical geography of the continent.¹⁰⁹

This evidence underscores the Afar region’s significance not only as a cradle of early human populations but also as a foundation for understanding patterns of settlement, adaptation, and cultural development in the Horn of Africa. Which of these perspectives is ultimately correct remains uncertain, however together they illuminate the Afar people’s unique position within narratives of human beginnings. On one hand, their ancestral lineage and historical and biblical traditions—linking Afar/Afer/Aphar/Epher as a descendant of Abraham and Keturah—suggest symbolic ties to the naming of Africa and early migration traditions. On the other hand, paleoanthropological discoveries in the Afar Triangle, including *Australopithecus afarensis* (“Lucy”) and early *Homo* species, establish the region as a cradle of human evolution.¹¹⁰

Based on historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence, the name *Afar* embodies a symbolic significance, linking both human ancestry and the very earth from which humanity is believed to

¹⁰⁸ Donald C. Johanson and Maitland A. Edey, *Lucy: The Beginning of Humankind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 12.

¹⁰⁹ Abu Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), *Kitāb al-Istibṣār fī mā ukhtulifa fīhi min al-akhbār*, ed. Ḥasan al-Mūsawī al-Kharsān (Najaf: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1957), vol. 1; Ahmed Siraj, *L’Afrique et les Africains dans l’Antiquité* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2001); John Pinkerton, “On the Identity of Ophir and Afar,” *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* 26 (1818): 573.

¹¹⁰ Donald Johanson and Maurice Taieb, “AL 288-1 (Lucy) Fossil,” Human Origins Program, Smithsonian Institution, 1976, 45.

have originated. This symbolic resonance is reinforced by the Afar region itself, which represents a pivotal landscape for understanding human evolutionary history. The discovery of *Australopithecus afarensis*, popularly known as “Lucy,” in the Hadar area underscores the region’s critical role as a cradle of early hominins. At the same time, the settlement and identity of the Afar people bridge myth, history, and science, situating them as an indigenous community central to both religious genealogies and scientific accounts of human origins. Collectively, these perspectives highlight the Afar as a population whose identity, history, and environment are deeply intertwined with some of the earliest chapters of human existence, offering valuable insights into the convergence of cultural memory, linguistic heritage, and evolutionary science.

2.2.2 Cushitic–Semitic Lineage of the Afar People

The genealogical origins of the Afar people have long been discussed within theological, historical, anthropological, and linguistic scholarship. Biblical, classical, and Islamic traditions consistently identify the Afar as descendants of Afar (also rendered Afer, Apher, or Ophir), the son of Midian and grandson of Abraham.¹¹¹ Classical historians such as Flavius Josephus and Alexander Polyhistor further report that Africa itself derived its name from Apher/Afar, reinforcing the association between the Afar ancestor and the African landmass.¹¹² These traditions are echoed in later Islamic and classical historiography, including accounts attributed to Cleodemus Malchus, Sallustius Crispus, and At-Tusi.¹¹³

At the same time, historical observers and anthropologists have documented the early settlement of the Afar in northeastern Africa and along Red Sea corridors. James Bruce recorded that peoples associated with Ophir inhabited southern Arabia before settling along the African coast, while Raimondo Franchetti speculated that the term *Afar* originated from Ophir, a region renowned in antiquity for gold.¹¹⁴ George Murdock similarly classified the Afar among the earliest populations to settle in the Danakil–Afar Depression, emphasizing their deep historical presence in the Horn

¹¹¹ Rav Nosson Scherman, *The Torah, the Haftaret, and the Five Megillot*, 2nd ed., rev. 1995 (Brooklyn, NY: ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, 1995), 129.

¹¹² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1:6; Alexander Polyhistor, cited in Richard Bentley, *Collectanea Graeca Majora* (London, 1602), 93–94.

¹¹³ al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Istibṣār*, vol. 1; Sallust, Gaius Crispus, *Bellum Jugurthinum*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921).

¹¹⁴ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, 261; Franchetti, *Nella Dancalia Etiopica*, 226.

of Africa.¹¹⁵ Archaeological and historical evidence further situates the Afar in strategically important zones near trade routes, salt flats, and Red Sea ports, underscoring their long-standing socio-economic and political significance.

A central contemporary question concerns how the Afar's Abrahamic genealogical traditions relate to their present classification as a Cushitic-speaking population. This apparent tension arises largely from the tendency to equate linguistic affiliation with biological descent or ethnic origin. Modern scholarship, however, consistently cautions against such assumptions.

The term *Cushitic*, as currently used in linguistics, does not denote a single tribe, lineage, or biological population. Rather, it is a classificatory label within the Afroasiatic language family, grouping languages that may have emerged through processes of long-term interaction, migration, and language shift rather than shared genetic ancestry.¹¹⁶ Scholars note that the historical identity of "Cush" itself remains contested, having referred variously to ancient Nubian civilizations, the Kingdom of Kush, peoples of Ethiopia, or broadly to African populations in Greco-Roman and biblical literature).¹¹⁷

Linguistic research further demonstrates that Cushitic languages lack a stable and uniform core vocabulary. Comparative studies show extremely low percentages of shared lexical cognates among Cushitic branches, with greater similarity observed only between geographically adjacent groups.¹¹⁸ Bender (1971) argues that there is practically no common lexical core uniting Cushitic languages,¹¹⁹ while Andrzejewski (1964) finds minimal lexical overlap between Oromo and other Cushitic languages, including Afar, Saho, and Sidama.¹²⁰ Even languages traditionally grouped

¹¹⁵ Murdock, *Social Structure*, 319.

¹¹⁶ Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1963), 49.

¹¹⁷ Girma A. Demeke, *Cush and Cushite* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2025), 141; Adam S. and J. Verco utter, "The Importance of Nubia: A Link between Central Africa and the Mediterranean," in *General History of Africa*, vol. 2, *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, ed. G. Mokhtar (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 231; Geoff Emberling, *Nubia: Ancient Kingdom of Africa* (New York: 2011), 7.

¹¹⁸ Mauro Tosco, "Cushitic and Omotic Overview," in *Afrasian: Selected Comparative-Historical Linguistic Studies in Memory of Igor M. Diakonoff*, ed. M. L. Bender, David Appleyard, and Gabor Takács (Munich: Lincom Europa, 2003), 91.

¹¹⁹ Marvin Lionel Bender, "The Language of Ethiopia: A New Lexicostatistic Classification and Some Problems of Diffusion," *Anthropological Linguistics* 13, no. 5 (1971): 165–84.

¹²⁰ Bogumił Witalis Andrzejewski, "The Position of Oromo in the Cushitic Language Group," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9, no. 1 (1964): 135–38.

within Cushitic, such as Beja and Agaw, exhibit ambiguous affiliations, leading scholars to question their classification within Cushitic altogether.¹²¹

Importantly, Beja—despite being classified as Cushitic—has been shown to have no demonstrable genetic affinity with Cushitic proper and may constitute a separate Afroasiatic branch (Hetzron, 1980). At the same time, Beja shows closer linguistic proximity to Afar and Saho than to other Cushitic languages.¹²² Afar itself exhibits both Cushitic and Semitic phonological and morphological features, suggesting a history of prolonged contact and interaction rather than isolated linguistic development.¹²³

These linguistic findings indicate that modern classification of Afar under the Cushitic language family reflects historical language contact and diffusion within the Horn of Africa rather than definitive evidence of genetic or genealogical origin. Consequently, Afar linguistic affiliation cannot be used to disprove genealogical traditions linking the Afar to Abraham through Midian. Language shift, adoption, and hybridization are well-documented phenomena in pastoral and trading societies, particularly in ecologically and politically dynamic regions such as the Red Sea–Danakil corridor.

When genealogical traditions, historical records, linguistic evidence, and archaeology are examined together, the Afar emerge as an ancient population whose identity was shaped through early settlement in northeastern Africa, interaction across the Red Sea, and integration into regional trade and political networks. The Abrahamic genealogy of Afar/Apher should therefore be understood not as a linguistic claim but as a historical–cultural narrative embedded within wider Near Eastern and African traditions of origin.

¹²¹ Robert Hetzron, “The Limits of Cushitic,” *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* (1980): 89–101; Andrzej Zaborski, “A Note on the Classification of Agaw as a Branch of East Cushitic,” in *New Data and New Methods in Afroasiatic Linguistics: Robert Hetzron in Memoriam*, ed. Andrzej Zaborski (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2003), 219–22.

¹²² Klaus Wedekind and Musa Abuzeinab, *Beja Pedagogical Grammar* (Aswan and Asmara, 2004–2005), 10; Demeke, *Cush and Cushite*, 263.

¹²³ Martine Vanhove, “North-Cushitic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*, ed. Rainer Vossen and Gerrit J. Dimmendaal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 300–3007; Loren F. Blies, *A Generative Grammar of Afar* (Dallas, TX: The Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington, 1981), 2.

In conclusion, the Afar people represent a historically deep-rooted population of the Horn of Africa whose identity cannot be reduced to linguistic classification alone. Their grouping within the Cushitic language family does not negate genealogical traditions linking them to Abrahamic ancestry through Midian, nor does it establish a definitive biological origin. Rather, the Afar case illustrates the complexity of identity formation in Africa, where genealogy, language, culture, and territory intersect but do not necessarily coincide. Recognizing this distinction allows for a balanced and rigorous interpretation of Afar origins—one that acknowledges both their Abrahamic genealogical narratives and their long-standing linguistic and cultural integration within the Horn of Africa.

2.3 Socio-Cultural Organization of the Afar People

The Afar people, indigenous to northeastern Ethiopia, Djibouti, and southern Eritrea, have for centuries maintained a distinct social and cultural identity deeply shaped by their historical experiences, geographical location, and economic practices. Their homeland, encompassing the arid and semi-arid lowlands of the Horn of Africa, is strategically located along the Red Sea corridor, a critical juncture linking inland African societies with maritime trade networks. This geographical position enabled the Afar to serve historically as intermediaries between the highland agricultural communities and the Red Sea ports, fostering a culture characterized by resilience, adaptability, and a remarkable capacity for cross-cultural engagement.¹²⁴ Over time, the Afar developed social structures, political institutions, and cultural practices that reflect both indigenous Cushitic traditions and long-standing influences from neighboring Semitic societies, the Nile Valley civilizations, South Arabia, and the broader Red Sea world.¹²⁵

Historically, the Afar have shared close relationships with other Horn of Africa communities, particularly the Somali, through both peaceful alliances and military collaboration. During the sixteenth-century campaigns of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, Afar and Somali warriors fought alongside each other to resist the expansion of Christian Ethiopian forces from the highlands. Oral histories emphasize the integrated nature of these forces: Muslim fighters from Shewa and Ifat, led respectively by the Makhzumy and Walashima dynasties, joined the Adal

¹²⁴ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 304; Kassim, *The Influence of Islam on the Afar People*, 233.

¹²⁵ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 304.

army, which was predominantly composed of Afar warriors. This period demonstrates not only the Afar's military and political significance but also the interwoven genealogical, cultural, and political ties between the Afar and Somali peoples.¹²⁶ With the decline of the Adal Sultanate, the Awsa Sultanate emerged as its direct successor, tracing its political origins to the administrative and military frameworks of the earlier state. Such historical developments illustrate the Afar's central role in shaping the political landscape of the Horn of Africa and their long-term interaction with surrounding ethnic groups.

Genealogical and tribal affiliations further underscore these interconnections. Many clans within Afar and Somali societies trace their ancestry to shared progenitors. For example, Gabla'lah is recognized as a common ancestor for several Somali tribes in Somaliland and simultaneously forms a major Afar lineage. Similarly, Harti and Haralla tribes exemplify overlapping genealogical relationships. These linkages extend beyond Somali affiliations to encompass other Cushitic groups, including the Beja, Saho, Balaw, Oromo, Hadiya, and Harari. The Balaw clan, historically significant within the Afar region, demonstrates cultural and historical continuity as it remains present across Djibouti, northern Afar zones, Aysaita, and Gerani wereda. Beyond Cushitic networks, Afar populations also share ancestral connections with Harari, Argoba, and Raya communities, and maintain close relations with Somali, Oromo, and certain Amhara groups. Collectively, these groups were historically unified under the Ifat Sultanate. The decline of Ifat subsequently gave rise to the Adal Sultanate (1543–1577), with its political center strategically situated within Afar territory. The political, military, and economic importance of the Afar during these periods highlights the group's enduring regional influence.

Historical accounts also reveal interactions between the Afar and Doba'a or Raya populations. Trimingham (1976) notes that the "Doba'a were probably Afar stock who had penetrated the eastern spurs of the plateau where they maintained a precarious existence. After expeditions by the Abyssinians, whose routes they menaced, they were finally displaced by Oromo and disappeared from history."¹²⁷ Such observations underscore the spread of Afar communities across highland

¹²⁶ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 79.

¹²⁷ *Ibi.*, 81.

and lowland zones and the complex inter-ethnic dynamics that influenced the settlement patterns in the Horn of Africa.

Afar social organization is based on complex clan lineages that form the backbone of social identity, political authority, and resource distribution.¹²⁸ Interlinked through marriage alliances and historical obligations, these lineages create extensive networks of protection, cooperation, and social accountability across the Afar region. Social cohesion is reinforced through a variety of communal institutions, including weddings, funerals, festivals, and ritualized gatherings, which serve as mechanisms for conflict mediation, moral education, and historical continuity.¹²⁹ These events are far more than ceremonial occasions; they function as instruments of social regulation, transmitting cultural knowledge and reinforcing ethical norms that structure Afar life.

Cultural continuity is further evident in the Afar's ritual practices, oral traditions, and aesthetic expressions. One such practice is Pharoni Salot, or "Pharaoh's circumcision," which has survived for centuries and demonstrates deep historical connections with ancient Northeast African traditions.¹³⁰ While now contextualized within Islamic practices, the persistence of this ritual suggests interactions with Nile Valley civilizations predating Islam (Flattovich). Afar hairstyles, including Aydi, Fiko, and Asdego, signify age, social status, and ceremonial affiliation, reflecting stylistic parallels with ancient Egyptian art. Similarly, funerary structures resembling pyramidal forms attest to the Afar's engagement with broader regional cultural and ritualistic networks extending from the Red Sea to the Nile Valley and southern Arabia.¹³¹ Hospitality forms a core aspect of Afar identity, codified through Meda'a (customary law), the dāgu system (an information-sharing network), and Islamic ethics, collectively constructing a moral framework that governs social interaction with both humans and animals.¹³²

¹²⁸ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 36.

¹²⁹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 71.

¹³⁰ Ibrahim Said, interview by author, amibera wereda, Afar Region, Ethiopia, 10 october, 2016.

¹³¹ Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, and Travels into the Interior of That Country* (London: Printed for J. White, 1810), 145.

¹³² Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 27.

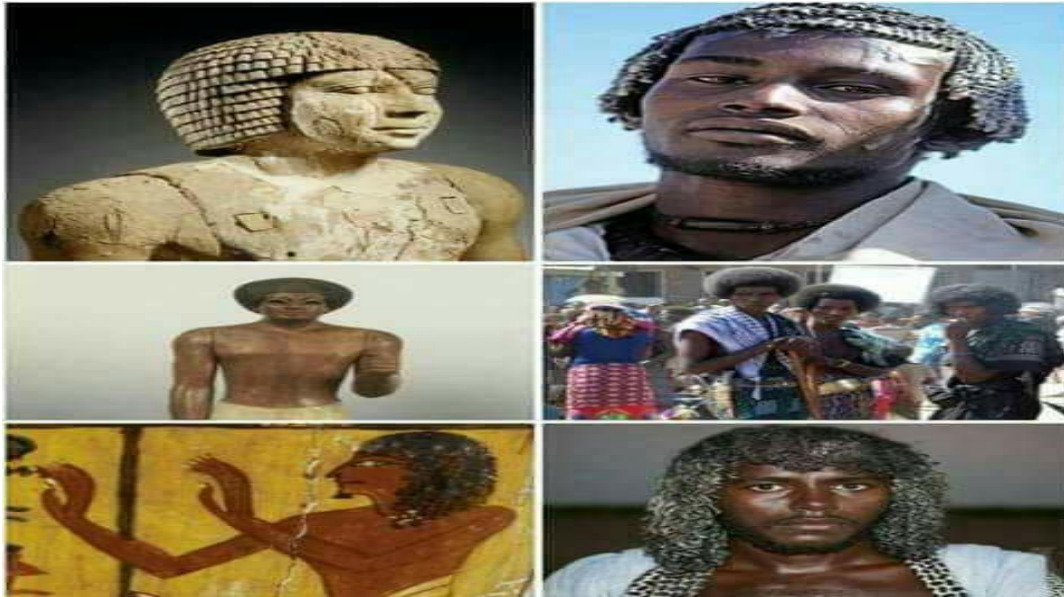


Figure 2. Afar hair style similar with ancient egyptian art.(Sources of picture;- Addisstandard Media/news company)

Political and social structures across the Horn of Africa exhibit notable similarities. Afar clans operate under decentralized authority, with kinship forming the primary determinant of social organization.¹³³ Egalitarian principles are fundamental to Afar society, where hierarchical distinctions are minimal within the clan system. As documented by ACA-UK (2009), the Afar lack a rigid class system, contrasting with the caste structures of India, European feudal hierarchies, or modern industrial societies. Over 150 independent Afar tribes maintain equal status among their leaders, and within each tribe, clans constitute the central unit of political and social cooperation.¹³⁴

The nomadic pastoralism of the Afar, like that of Somali groups, reinforces cultural and linguistic cohesion without necessarily producing a single ethnic unit. Certain Afar clans organize into centralized federations under sultans or clan leaders, exemplified by the sultanates of Tadjoura, Raheita, Aussa, Biru, and Gobad.¹³⁵ Traditional systems of land and resource management remain integral to social organization. Land and camels are regarded as clan wealth (Gadda), with social

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³⁴ Yassin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 50.

¹³⁵ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 42; Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 80.

prestige and political influence measured by livestock holdings, while access and use remain rights shared by all clan members .¹³⁶

Afar customary law and governance mechanisms illustrate the interconnection of social, moral, and political life. The unwritten Afarre functions as a customary constitution, governing marriage, funerary rites, moral conduct, and conflict resolution.¹³⁷ The Meda'a codifies restorative justice practices and communal accountability, for example, in cases of homicide, where the perpetrator's family may be temporarily sheltered by neutral tribes until elders reach a judgment.¹³⁸ The dāgu system complements these legal frameworks by disseminating information on rainfall, pastures, conflicts, deaths, and the movement of outsiders, facilitating accurate communication, social accountability, and cohesion.¹³⁹

Contrary to colonial-era claims, divisions such as Assahemara (red) and Adohemara (white) did not constitute inherent social hierarchies. These labels emerged from the 1875 conflict between the Gobad and Tadjoura Sultanates and the Awsa Sultanate and were later exploited by European colonial powers for divide-and-rule purposes. Social equality remains a defining characteristic, with even sultans subject to the same rules and expectations as ordinary members.¹⁴⁰ Clan leaders maintain full authority over internal affairs without interference from higher authorities.

Cultural continuity is further evident in musical and ritual practices. The dinkara drum, possessed by the Hadu clan since the Ottoman period, remains an important cultural artifact. Historical accounts recall Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes I's attempt to seize the drum from clan leader Ona Ali Ibrahim Ismael, who successfully preserved it by hiding it with a loyal soldier before being killed.¹⁴¹ Religious practices combine traditional Cushitic beliefs with Islamic principles, centering on Waak (the supreme deity) and intermediary spirits called Ayyana, paralleling Oromo and

¹³⁶ Uthman Hassen, *Pastoral Adaptation to Market Opportunities and Changing Gender Roles among the Afar in Ethiopia* (Adama: Adama Science and Technology University, 2016), 80.

¹³⁷ Jemal Abdukadir Redo, *Customary Law of Afar* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1973), 6.

¹³⁸ Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 36.

¹³⁹ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 242.

¹⁴¹ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 83.

Somali cosmologies.¹⁴² Qur’anic education is a central feature of Afar social life, fostering literacy, moral guidance, and cohesion across dispersed clans.¹⁴³

Afar interactions extend to Beja, Saho, and Somali groups. During Imam Ahmed’s campaigns, the Afar Balaw clan was historically linked to the Beja confederation, while Afar and Somali Issa communities share extensive cultural, genealogical, and political ties. Oral histories identify certain Afar clans, such as Daheimela and Welwelu, as tracing origins to Somali Darod/Harti lineages, while the Fidihiti clan maintains strong relations with the Issa.¹⁴⁴ Cultural practices, such as the Afar Koasso game, further illustrate shared traditions.¹⁴⁵ Linguistically, “Afar and Saho are so closely related that we are justified in assuming that they represent just one independent movement, with the split into two languages occurring after they were resident in the northeast Africa. Afar and Saho have evidently been in the area long enough to have diverged into two closely related but distinct languages. Among the Somali, however, the process of differentiation has not had time to go so far”.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Beja language is closely related to Afar and Saho,¹⁴⁷ and Afar contains a Semitic-Cushitic mixture of sounds.¹⁴⁸ For example, Beja languages use approximately 60% prefixation, whereas the second largest prefixing system occurs in Afar, with 30%.¹⁴⁹

Economically, the Afar historically played a central role in regional trade, particularly in salt extraction from the Afdera and Dallol depressions, livestock husbandry, and the facilitation of caravan networks linking the Ethiopian highlands to Red Sea ports. These activities fostered

¹⁴² Ibrahim Said and Hassen Gura, interview by author, Amibera werda, Afar Region, Ethiopia, 10, October 2016

¹⁴³ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 304.

¹⁴⁴ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160; Mohammed, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 67.

¹⁴⁵ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 76–78.

¹⁴⁶ Asfaw Berhane, “Aramis,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 311.

¹⁴⁷ Demeke, *Cush and Cushite*, 141; Wedekind and Abuzeinab, *Beja Pedagogical Grammar*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Loren F. Blies, *A Generative Grammar of Afar* (Dallas, TX: The Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington, 1981), 2.

¹⁴⁹ Martine Vanhove, “North-Cushitic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*, ed. Rainer Vossen and Gerrit J. Dimmendaal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 300–307.

interdependence with Tigrayan, Oromo, Somali, and Arabian traders.¹⁵⁰ Pastoralism and agriculture reinforced social influence, while shared economic networks facilitated cultural diffusion, interethnic alliances, and long-term regional integration. Across Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, Afar maintained active relations with Harari, Argoba, Somali, Raya, Doba'a, Oromo, and Walo peoples, strengthened through intermarriage, trade, and communal ceremonies .¹⁵¹

In summary, the social and cultural practices of the Afar reveal a society deeply rooted in indigenous traditions yet dynamically engaged with surrounding communities. Through clan structures, customary law, restorative justice, ritual practices, religious synthesis, interethnic alliances, linguistic and genealogical networks, and economic interdependence, the Afar have preserved a distinct identity and significantly shaped the cultural, social, and political landscape of the Horn of Africa.¹⁵² Their history demonstrates resilience, adaptability, and enduring connections with neighboring peoples, marking the Afar as central actors in the historical development of northeastern Africa.

2.3.1 Religious system of the Afar People

The Afar people currently practice Islam in its entirety, like other ancient societies, they developed distinct religious systems prior to the spread of Islam. Historical evidence indicates that the Afar were influenced by Egyptian pharaonic religious traditions as well as Sabeian practices originating from Yemen.¹⁵³ They worshiped natural elements, particularly the sun and the moon, and engaged in ritual practices reminiscent of those observed in ancient Egyptian culture.

2.3.1.1 Pre-Islamic worship

The Afar religious system demonstrates connections to the spiritual traditions of ancient Pharaonic Egypt and Yemen (Sabeian or Sheba). In this context, Mohammed Hassan(2009), drawing on the scholarly work of Ali Cubba¹⁵⁴ and incorporating insights obtained from interviews with the

¹⁵⁰ ¹⁵⁰ Werner Munzinger, "A Journey through the Afar Country," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* (1870): 71.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160.

¹⁵² Hashim, *Almanhal*, 304;Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 71; Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 36; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160.

¹⁵³ Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*, 10–15.

¹⁵⁴ Ali Coubba, *The Afar: From Prehistory to the End of the Fifteenth Century* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 89.

eminent Afar cultural expert Alwan Burhan, has indicated that the Afar people practiced the following forms of prayer:

Tiso, tiso

Kalmaamisow

Qalaamisow

Qalan Siidow

Siidi Bacaarow

Cangal Golodow

Goloddi Saqalow¹⁵⁵

Beytu Laa Qale¹⁵⁶

The poetry discussed above was recited by the Afar people during pre-Islamic religious rituals. For the contemporary generation, much of its vocabulary is difficult to comprehend, as current Afar worship practices have been fully assimilated into the Islamic tradition, rendering terms related to Islam immediately intelligible. By contrast, the language of this poetry reflects the rituals and concepts of ancient pharaonic religions, which are no longer part of everyday understanding.

Such linguistic and dialectal distinctions are not unique to the Afar. For example, the names of ancient Ethiopian kings bear little connection to the modern Ethiopian language. Similarly, while the dialects spoken by the Afar today remain largely consistent with those of the past, certain archaic forms were reserved for ritual and worship contexts and have not persisted in general usage.

To elucidate some of the terms used in the prayer poetry presented below, Hassen (2009) cites both Alic Cubba(2004) and the renowned Afar cultural expert Alwan Burhan. Their explanations

¹⁵⁵ In afar language Latin scription X= D, Q= A or Arabic ξ and C=H or Arabic چ, so you can read as X=D, Q = A and C= H

¹⁵⁶ Mohammed Hassen, *History of Afar* (Djibouti: Afar Aydaadu, 2009), 29.

provide insight into the meanings of words that have otherwise become obscure over time, and the following translation reflects their interpretations:

Tiso Tiso;- the exact Pronunciation, is *diso diso* not *tiso* in Afar *Diso* means building. So the full meaning of this phrase is an amazingly large building. Because it is known that in ancient Egypt, the pharaohs built very large and amazing palaces, and these palaces are still located near the Great Pyramids.

Kalmamiso;- The term *kalmamiso* derives from the Afar noun *kallaamo*, which refers to the neck of a goat with two pendulous appendages. When the noun is verbalized, it becomes *kalmamiso*, a form used in Afar oral expression. In certain contexts, the term is employed metaphorically to evoke the image of a long, prominent beard—an aesthetic feature historically associated with figures of authority. Although the phrase may be locally glossed as an allusion to a “pharaoh’s beard,” this association should be understood primarily as a culturally meaningful comparison rather than evidence of direct historical continuity.

The usage reflects a broader pattern in Afar oral tradition in which physical features of animals or natural elements are invoked to characterize notable traits in human figures. In this instance, the comparison underscores strength, dignity, or leadership through a vivid, culturally embedded metaphor. Such expressions illustrate how Afar linguistic practices encode social values through metaphorical language, without necessarily implying specific genealogical or historical links to ancient Egyptian civilization.



kallaamo

figure 3. Pharaoh's figure Sources of Pharaonic picture;-iStockphoto.com

Alan siidow;- Ala in Afar means charity, and in those days they used to offer alms in the form of slaughtered animals for prayers. Sid means the largest prayer house. It means an animal offered for alms in a prayer house. When we change it to prayer, we find that Sid means praying in a prayer house and with a slaughtered animal offered for alms. On the other hand, Alen in Afar means a flag or banner, which can represent the largest palace.

Siidi bacaarow ;- In Afar, Bacaar(c=h) means eight, and Siidi Bacaarow means the eight houses of prayer.

Cangal golodow;- in the Afar language Cangal means "head of a falcon" and Golod means "round thing made of silver with a top". It means "round head". In the time of the Pharaohs, they wore a round cap made of gold on their heads, so it is like saying "O Pharaoh with a gold cap of head".

Goloddi saqalow;- in the Afar language Saal means "a chief", but when it is changed to the meaning of prayer, it means "a round-headed chief".¹⁵⁷

On the other hand, Hashim Gamaluddin (2007), explained that the Afars had a god of darkness and the moon in ancient times. He explained that the god of darkness was worshipped in a place called Dirri, located north of the cities of Tajora and Kusra. In fact, the Afars call the diner, Dirari. Therefore, the word "Dirar" may have originated from an ancient practice of dark worship. The Afar people, meanwhile, call the moon Alsa. When the word Alsa is divided, it forms "Al" and "Sa." Historians note that "Al" was considered the supreme god among the Sabaeans.¹⁵⁸ "Dirri" refers to the belief of refraining from giving fire, salt, or any offerings during the night or after sunset. For example, Gumhed defines Dirri as follows:

“ Dirri is a believe related to taboos such as, not giving fire after the sun set, not selling or separating gifts from their animals,during the raining season or some particular months of the year. Not making milk bowl smell nice through the process of putting milk bowl in smoky fire of unique trees’ dried wood pieces placed on blazing embers inside a small whole on the ground. There are hundreds of such dirri practices, prevent individuals from performing anything without the

¹⁵⁷ Hassen, *History of Afar*, 29; Coubba, *The Afar*, 89.

¹⁵⁸ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 186.

reference of how their traditions accepted or rejected. Therefore, *dirri* is a collection of such norms, believes and tradition.¹⁵⁹

In contemporary Afar religious vocabulary, the term *Yalla* is commonly used in place of *Allah*. This usage is interpreted by some scholars as a linguistic and cultural inheritance from the Sabaean deity *Al*. Additionally, the prefix *Sa* in the Afar term *Alsa* appears to correspond to the moon god *Sin*, venerated by ancient Yemeni groups, particularly the Huma tribes. The Afar designation of the moon as *Alsa* therefore suggests the historical presence of lunar deity worship within their pre-Islamic religious system.

The Sabaeans worshipped the moon god *Almaqah*, and among the Afar, the now-extinct *Mogoh* tribes were similarly associated with lunar cults. The memory of these tribes endures in the toponym *Mogoh Rasu* (also called *Mogorros*), located approximately 110 kilometers from Saba, between Assab and Baylul, as indicated by Hashim Gamaluddin (2007), citing Strabo's map. In South Arabia, the Meen and Awsan tribes referred to the moon as *Wada*. Remarkably, in the Afar language, cognate forms—*wada*, *wade*, and *wadeh*—denote “savior,” “to save,” or “he saved him.” The Qur'an similarly records that the people of Noah worshipped a deity named *Wada*. Early South Arabian ritual terminology further attests to this tradition through the phrase *Kab-e-Wadat*, which in Afar can be interpreted as *kab* (“close”) and *Wadat* (the moon god), together meaning “close to the moon god”.¹⁶⁰

The linguistic and religious correspondences between Afar and South Arabian contexts suggest a significant degree of cultural continuity across the Red Sea. The semantic parallels of *Wada* and the preservation of ritual terminology in Afar toponyms indicate that pre-Islamic South Arabian religious concepts were transmitted into the Horn of Africa, shaping early Afar cosmology. These observations highlight the enduring influence of South Arabian lunar worship on the Afar and underscore the region's role as a conduit of religious and linguistic exchange in antiquity.

Gumhed (2024) notes that the Afar people feared the moon when committing a crime. When someone intended to kill or seriously harm another person, they would ask a friend to “cover” them from the moon, so that the moon would not witness the act. The phrase, “Shadow me from

¹⁵⁹ Mohammed N. Gumhed, *Nagaale: A Brief Acquaintance with Afar Society* (Addis Ababa, 2024), 98.

¹⁶⁰ Hashim *Almanhal*, 186.

the moon, then I will kill him,” was commonly used. In Afar, it was expressed as “*alsa yoh reebisey ka kalu waah*”.¹⁶¹

Another example indicating the Afar people’s special regard for the moon is when they swear by it, saying, 'Alsa yoo mudday,' meaning 'may the moon harm me.' When the Afar people wish to offer alms to the moon, they perform the following prayer:

Alsay abbin alsay

Abbin foorin alsay

Cummadak halangi beyte

Qaabidak guri inti beyte

Yi ukubbe raddeh inte

Yi ulqi wedeedeh inte

Meaning

O the moon almighty, the head of everything

The head and leader of others

You took a power from hummad

You dismantle a left eye of Aabida

Then she screamed by saying, my intestines have fallen

And she added that my stomach is removed.¹⁶²

According to Ali Coubba (2004), the Afar once venerated celestial bodies, including the sun, the moon (alsá), and the heavens in general. The new moon (biló) in particular held a central place in their religious practices. At the appearance of the first quarter moon, special songs and prayers were performed in Tadjourah. One such example is recorded as follows:

¹⁶¹ Gumhed, *Nagaale*, 95.

¹⁶² Gumhed, *Nagaale*, 96.

Biloo, biloo
Bilok tayse bilo koo abay
Qaafiyat le alsa koo abay
Lacah meqe alsa koo abay
Nugusow
Koo mali koo gee way
Kooli koo wee way
Buxâ baxal raaqte waytay
Baxi baxal raqtay

Translated, the chant conveys:

O new moon! O new moon!
May you be the finest of new moons.
May you be the month that bestows good health.
May you be the month that brings prosperity to the cattle.
O my kings,
May he whom you do not illumine be deprived of your blessings,
And may he whom you illumine never be bereft of them.
May the lineage not be that of daughters,
But rather that of sons.

This lunar prayer highlights the centrality of fertility, health, prosperity, and lineage in the Afars pre-Islamic cosmological worldview.¹⁶³

Another example of Afar sun worship is observed in the preparation of a newly married couple's house, known as Qad-Qari (Ad-Ari). Constructed from palm leaves, the house has two entrances—one for males, facing east, and one for females, facing west—reflecting the worship of the sun or moon at their rising and setting. Such practices were rooted in the religion of the Sabaeen (Sheba) tribe in Yemen and were later continued by pharaonic Egyptians and the Afar people, who maintained cultural and religious connections across the Red Sea.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Coubba, *The Afar*, 145.

¹⁶⁴ Gumhed, *Nagaale*, 95.

According to local oral tradition, the Afar people once recognized two deities: *Ayyan (or Ayyana)*, regarded as the “lesser god,” and *Waak (or Waako)*, considered the “greater god.” *Ayyana* was invoked for everyday concerns and minor duties, whereas *Waako* was revered in moments of grave crisis, particularly during droughts, famines, or other existential threats. Communal prayers and sacrificial rituals dedicated to *Waako* were traditionally performed on mountain tops, symbolizing proximity to the divine. This belief system shows striking parallels with other Cushitic religious traditions. Among the Oromo, *Waako (or Waaq)* is worshipped as the supreme deity within the Gada system, associated with fertility, rain, justice, and the moral order of the universe. Somali traditions also preserve the memory of *Waak*, revered as the god of the sky and rain. In each of these contexts, intermediary spirits or forces—often described as *ayyana*—serve as mediators between the supreme god and human beings..¹⁶⁵

The Afar recognition of *Ayyana* and *Waako*, therefore, not only reflects their indigenous cosmology but also situates them within this wider Cushitic spiritual heritage, highlighting continuities of belief and ritual practice that have endured despite centuries of religious transformation.

These examples illustrate that the Afar people adhered to pagan religious practices until their complete conversion to Islam.

2.3.1.2 The Spread of Islam among the Afar People

The Afar are now a fully Muslim people, but their adoption of Islam dates back to the very origins of the faith. Oral traditions such as *Afar Aytih Obbal Yemene Mara* state that they believed in Islam immediately upon hearing of it.

Historical evidence suggests that Islam reached the Afar region during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. In 615 CE, the first Muslim refugees (Sahaba) sought asylum through key Red Sea ports such as Dahlak and Massawa and were granted refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Aksum. Both Afar oral traditions and historical records indicate that the local population played a significant role in receiving the Prophet’s companions, providing guidance and safe passage

¹⁶⁵ Said and Gura, interview by author, Amibera werda, Afar region, Ethiopia, 10, October 2016.

through Afar territory until they reached the Negus (King) of Aksum.¹⁶⁶ Several burial sites of the Sahaba are still preserved in the Kuneba district of northern Afar, attesting to their historical presence.

Islam further spread in the region through Afar merchants who engaged in long-distance trade across the Red Sea. Returning from commercial journeys to Arabia, these merchants introduced Islamic practices into local communities. The arrival of Arab traders at ports such as Zeila, Baylul, Assab, and Tajura reinforced this religious diffusion.

By the 8th century, the migration of Quraysh and Hashemite tribes into Afar territory contributed to the institutionalization of Islamic education.¹⁶⁷ These groups established Islamic schools and actively participated in the formation of Muslim sultanates within Ethiopia, thereby consolidating Islam's socio-political and cultural presence in the region.



Map 5. Source of the map: W. Munzinger, *Narrative of a Journey through the Afar Country* (1869), p. 188.

¹⁶⁶ Kassim, *The Influence of Islam on the Afar People*, 27; Hashim, *Almanhal*, 186.

¹⁶⁷ Kassim, *The Influence of Islam on the Afar People*, 48.

Following their large-scale conversion to Islam, the Afar people and their homeland became one of the most important centers of Islamic civilization and religious movements in the Horn of Africa. The process of Islamization profoundly transformed the Afar region, integrating it into the broader network of Islamic movementS, trade, and governance that linked the Red Sea coast with the Ethiopian hinterlands. As Islam spread through commercial contact, migration, and intermarriage, the Afar gradually established themselves as both political and religious leaders within the region.

The Afar were instrumental in founding several powerful Islamic sultanates that played decisive roles in the medieval history of Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa. Among these were the Sultanates of Ankala, Ifat, Adal, Awsa, Tadjoura, Rahayto, Bidu and Gobad.¹⁶⁸ These states not only served as political institutions but also as centers of Islamic learning, cultural exchange, and diplomacy. Through these sultanates, the Afar contributed significantly to the establishment of Islamic governance systems, the spread of Arabic literacy, and the promotion of Islamic law (Sharia) in the region.

Among the aforementioned sultanates, the Ifat and Adal Sultanates were particularly influential in shaping the political and religious landscape of the medieval Horn. The Afar people played a major role in the political administration of both Sultanates, sharing power with neighboring Muslim communities such as the Harari, Somali, Argobba, Silte, and Hadiya etc. Their cooperation with their neighbouring groups fostered a dynamic and multi-ethnic Islamic states that extended its influence far beyond the Afar homeland. Historical records reveal that the primary administrative and political centers of both the Ifat and Adal Sultanates were located within Afar territory.¹⁶⁹

Therefore the Afar region was not a peripheral frontier, but rather a core area in the development of Islamic civilization in the Horn of Africa. The Afar rulers and religious elites actively participated in regional politics, established Islamic institutions, and served as intermediaries between inland Ethiopia and the wider Islamic world of Arabia and the Red Sea basin. Consequently, after their conversion to Islam, the Afar people emerged as one of the most active agents in the dissemination of Islamic faith and culture across the Horn of Africa—particularly in

¹⁶⁸ Ali, *Eritria Anke Fanah*, 20; Hashim, *Almanhal*, 438-526.

¹⁶⁹ Enrico Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, trans. Emran M. Waber (Addis Ababa: 2009), originally published 1931, 345–46.

what are today Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. Their sultanates not only advanced political and economic integration but also facilitated the continuity of Islamic identity in the region, linking the Horn of Africa to the broader historical trajectory of Islamic expansion and scholarship.

2.3.2 Islamic influence among the Afar cultural practices

Following their Islamization, the Afar became deeply integrated into the broader Islamic cultural and religious world, adopting many aspects of Islamic belief, ritual, and law that continue to define their social identity today. Islam not only influenced their spiritual life but also became embedded in their political institutions, kinship systems, and daily customs. Among the most significant cultural transformations were those related to their reckoning of time and their genealogical consciousness. The Afar began to count months according to the lunar Islamic calendar, organizing their religious festivals, social gatherings, and economic activities such as trade and pastoral migration around Islamic months like Ramadan, Shawwal, and Dhul-Hijjah. Similarly, Islamic influence profoundly shaped their genealogical traditions: Afar clans and lineages often trace their ancestry to early Muslim figures, including the Prophet Muhammad’s family or Arab migrants who introduced Islam to the region. These genealogies serve not only as markers of religious prestige but also as foundations of political legitimacy and social cohesion among different Afar groups. Thus, Islamization did not merely alter the Afar’s religious orientation—it became a central framework through which they understood their history, identity, and place in the wider Muslim world. Traditionally, the Afar people had their own calendar system, in which months were named as follows:

Table-1. Pre-Islamic and current Months in Chronological Order:

No.	Pre-Islamic Afar	Pre-Islamic Arab	Islamic Afar	Islamic Arab	Gregorian
1	Inannaba	mu’tamir or al-mu’tamir	Daka/Ashura/	Al-muḥarram	January
2	Inkibarta	nājir	Safar	Safar	February
3	Garablu	khawwān or khuwwān	Naharsri mawludu	Rabil Awal	March
4	Yengelen	wabṣān	Namay hayto mawludu	Rabī‘ al-’ākhīr or Rabī‘ ath-thānī	April

5	Abdoma	ḥanīn	Sidoc hayto mawludu	Jumādā al-ʿulā	May
6	Qado dirri	rubbā	Ferey hayto mawludu	Jumādā al-ʿākhiraḥ or jumādā ath-thāniyah	June
7	Qasa dirri	al-ʿaṣamm or muṣṣil al-ʿasinnah or al-muḥarram	Ragab/Rajab	Rajab	July
8	Laqeen	ʿādīl	Soom baahe /walanaba/	Shaʿbān	August
9	Waysu	nātiq	Soomu	Ramaḍān	September
10	Yangulta	waʿl or waʿil	Soom fatri	Shawwāl	October
11	Diteli	warnah	Qerfa baahe	Dū al-qaʿdah	November
12	Ximoli	burak or maymūn	Qerfa	Dū al-ḥijjah	December ¹⁷⁰

In 2001, following extensive debate and discussion, the Afar Regional State officially restructured the names and chronological order of the months to correspond with those of the Ethiopian calendar, thereby replacing the traditional sequence. This reform was proposed by the former Afar Language Research and Enrichment Center—currently known as the Institute of Afar Language, Culture, and History Studies—and subsequently approved by the regional government.

Table-2. Current name of months

No.	the names of the currently arranged months in Afar	Ethiopian months	Gregorian version
1	Qunxa garablu	መስከረም	September
2	Kaxxa garablu	ጥቅምት	October
3	Naharsi kudo	ህዳር	November
4	Ciggilta kudo	ታህሳስ	December
5	Agda baxisso	ጥር	January
6	Caxah alsa	የካቲት	February

¹⁷⁰ 1. Documentary and Oral Sources for Pre-Islamic and Afar Months; -Morin, D., *Dictionnaire historique afar, 1288–1982* (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 56; Sheikh Mohammed Awwal Hayaat, Head of the Afar Islamic Council (Majlis al-Sharia); Kemal Hajji Kamaru, Administrator of Afambo Wereda, Afar Region; Mohammed Hassen Kamil, Author and Head of Djibouti language Institute.

2. Sources for Islamic and Sacred Months;- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_months).

7	Qado dirri	መጋቢት	March
8	Qasa dirri	ግዳሴ	April
9	laqeeni	ግንቦት	May
10	Waysu	ሰኔ	June
11	Diteli	ሀምሌ	July
12	Ximoli	ነሃሴ	August

Table-3, Pre-Islamic and Current-day names

No.	Pre-Islamic Afar	Pre Islamic Arab	Islamic Afar	Islamic Arab	English
1	Sabootana	al-’awwal	Acaada	al-’aḥad	Sunday
2	Kabootana	al-’ahwan or al-’ahuwan or al-’awhad	Itleeni	al-’ithnayn	Monday
3	Beerana	al-jubār	Talaata	ath-thulāthā’	Tuesday
4	Darmaana	al-dubār or al-dībār	Arbaqa	al-’arbi’ā’	Wednesday
5	Tubuulusu	al-mu’nis	kamiisi	al-khamīs	Thursday
6	Kamuunusu	al-’arūbah	Gumqata	al-jum’ah	Friday
7	Tububuulusu	ash-shiyār	Sabti	as-sabt	Saturday ¹⁷¹

Islamic influence also played a formative role in shaping Afar genealogical identities. Many Afar clans traditionally assert descent from the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, and more specifically from the Hashimite lineage. Although these claims cannot be historically verified, they function as an important pillar of Afar collective identity, reinforcing religious authority and social prestige within the community. Moreover, certain lineages—particularly the Sheka clans—occupy an especially revered position in Afar society. The respect accorded to these clans can be so profound that, in some contexts, deference to their authority is perceived to surpass even the fear of divine reprimand. This dynamic highlights the deep interconnection between religious genealogy, social hierarchy, and cultural values among the Afar people.

¹⁷¹1. Sources for pre-Islamic and current Afar days: Kamil, M. (2005), *Gad kee Urru* (p. 60). UDC-ILD, Janvier 2005; Oral informants, Saalih Mohammed interviewed by Author, Djibouti, February 5, 2025.

2. sources for pre-Islamic and Islamic days;- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_months)

Despite the profound influence of Islam on Afar society, certain pre-Islamic religious words and practices have continued to survive. For example, the Afar frequently use *Yalla* in reference to God rather than the Arabic term *Allah*. Likewise, the term *Alsa*—deriving from the Sabaeen deity *Al* and the prefix *Sa*—appears to correspond to the moon god *Sin*, once venerated by ancient South Arabian groups, particularly the Huma tribes. Within Afar tradition, the moon is designated as *Alsa*, and the related expression *Alsiteh* has its origin in this pre-Islamic moon-god belief. Historically, the moon was thought to inflict harm when individuals committed sins. Even today, stomach illnesses or cases of food poisoning are sometimes described as *Alsiteh*, meaning “the moon disease has struck me.” Similarly, in oath-taking, many Afar continue to invoke the moon with the phrase “*Alsa yoo mudday*” (“by the moon”) rather than the Islamic oath “*Wallaahi*.” In addition, the Afar maintain the practice known as “*Fir Awni Salot*”—the pharaonic form of female circumcision—reflecting a deeper continuity of pre-Islamic cultural and religious traditions.

Another pre-Islamic tradition that has continued among the Afar is the marriage ceremony. Prior to the spread of Islam, Afar custom required the groom’s family to present gifts to the bride’s father and his clan. This practice, known as *erer*, formally sealed the marital bond between the two families. Once *erer* was paid, the couple was recognized as husband and wife. The overall ceremony, called *makaaban ginnaa-o*, was traditionally officiated by clan leaders, who oversaw the union.

With the introduction of Islam, this custom was restructured under the framework of Islamic law. Today, marriage is officiated by religious leaders through the *nikah* ceremony. Nevertheless, the gift of *erer* remains an indispensable element of Afar marriage customs. No marriage or *nikah* can be performed unless *erer* has been paid. For instance, if *erer* has been fulfilled, a child conceived by the woman—even if fathered by someone other than the husband—legally and socially belongs to the man who paid *erer*. This parallels Islamic *sharia* law, in which a child born to a married woman is attributed to her husband rather than to the biological father, demonstrating the persistence of a pre-Islamic element within the Islamic framework of Afar society.¹⁷²

Another practice with pre-Islamic roots is the veneration of Waak (also called Waako), a deity historically worshiped by Cushitic peoples. Traditionally, ceremonies dedicated to Waak were

¹⁷² Seko Mohammed, Awash-7 Wereda, Afar Region, Ethiopia, October 10, 2024; Ibrahim Said, Amibera Wereda, Afar Region, Ethiopia, October 10, 2016, interview by author.

conducted atop mountains, where communities gathered to offer prayers and supplications. Among the Afar, this tradition was later integrated into Islamic practice, with Muslim preachers (awliya) establishing residences on mountain sites and leading prayer ceremonies. For instance, Shek Ali Boorawli resided on Borawli, the highest mountain in Aysaita, while Shek Mandaytu led ceremonies atop Ayyali Mountain in Gawwani. This indicates a continuity between earlier Waak rituals and Islamic devotional practices, even though the original Waak ceremonies were largely transformed or replaced by Islamic rituals. Today, the Waak tradition is most directly preserved among the Oromo population of Ethiopia, who continue to recognize Waak as a supreme deity, reflecting its historical role as a central god in the ancient Cushitic religious system.

Therefore, today Islam remains inseparable from Afar cultural identity, yet remnants of pre-Islamic practices highlight a remarkable continuity of tradition. This dual legacy illustrates the Afar's role as both preservers of ancient Cushitic heritage and active participants in the spread of Islam across the Horn of Africa.

2.4 Political Institutions of the Afar People

Following the Afar people's conversion to Islam, two major sultanates emerged in their region by the 12th century: the Sultanate of Ankala and the Sultanate of Ifat. The territorial domain of the Ankala Sultanate extended from the Dahlak Islands to Beilul, Adulis, and Bidu, reaching as far as Hayu(Obock). The Ifat Sultanate, on the other hand, encompassed a vast area stretching from Berbera and Zeilato Awsa, and from Awsa to the Middle Awash region and the highlands of Shewa.¹⁷³ Prior to the emergence of these centralized Islamic states, the Afar appear to have been organized under local chieftains who exercised authority over their respective clans and territories.

According to Hashim (2007), as early as 640 CE during the reign of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (R.A.), the Caliph dispatched troops to the Dahlak Islands to suppress piracy in the Red Sea. However, the campaign failed because the pirates, who were identified as Afar seafarers, possessed superior maritime skills and managed to evade capture.¹⁷⁴ This account indicates that the Afar,

¹⁷³ Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, 345–46;Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 67.

¹⁷⁴ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 240.

under their local chiefs, had already established a degree of autonomy and maritime capability long before the rise of formal sultanates.

By the 12th century, the Afar had begun to organize into localized Islamic states, one of which became known as the *Danakil Dynasty*. Although the exact period of the dynasty's formation is not clearly documented, it is believed to have been established by the Dankali tribe, a subgroup of the Afar people. As Yassin (2010) explains, due to longstanding commercial contact between Arabian sailors and the Dankali community along the Red Sea coast, Arabs began using the term "Danakil" to refer collectively to all Afar groups across the coastal region.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Abdalla (1993) notes that the term "Danakil" was widely adopted by both northern neighbours and Arab traders and may have originated from the ancient Afar states of Dankali.¹⁷⁶

Munzinger (1869) further observed that errors in geographical and historical nomenclature have long persisted regarding the Afar. He noted that while there was indeed a tribe known as the Danakil, they constituted only a minor portion of a larger confederation:

"It is true that there are Danakils in the tribe, but they form a third and the feeblest portion of this confederation; formerly they used to be powerful and numerous, but for upwards of a hundred years there has been no reason why the whole should be called by the name of the lesser number."¹⁷⁷

This distinction clarifies that the historical references to "Danakil" were often conflated with different Afar groups and dynasties, including the Ankala. While the Danakil (Dankali) and Ankaala dynasties both existed within Afar history, they were distinct in tribal identity and the period of existence. The Dankali dynasty is believed to have preceded the Ankala. The term *Ankala* is etymologically derived from the *Ankha*, a symbol associated with the pharaonic rulers of ancient Egypt. In the Afar language, *Ankala* or *Ankali* denotes an individual or entity bearing the *Ankha* symbol, reflecting both cultural and linguistic connections to ancient Egyptian civilization.

According to Charles Johnston, In the time of Ludolf, "Dankali" was the designation of a large coastal kingdom or province situated along the Red Sea littoral, extending from the port of Adulis

¹⁷⁵ Yassin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 41.

¹⁷⁶ Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Munzinger, "A Journey through the Afar Country," 209.

southward to the northern vicinity of Tadjoura.¹⁷⁸ In Ludolf’s account, the term referred not merely to an ethnic community but to a territorially defined political entity occupying a strategic maritime corridor.

Seventeenth-century documentary evidence further indicates that in 1647 a ruler identified as “Shahim al-Dankali” received Ethiopian clerics at the port of Beilul. Although the documents describe him as a Danakil sultan, closer examination suggests that he was in fact the Sultan of Ankala (Ankaala). At the time, political authority in Awsa—within the broader Adal sphere—was exercised by Imam Adruhu, while the imperial throne in Gondar was held by Fasilides.¹⁷⁹

This evidence demonstrates that external observers occasionally employed the names “Danakil” and “Ankala” interchangeably. Nevertheless, the two designations appear to have referred to distinct dynastic or political traditions within the Afar region. The precise chronology by which the Ankala dynasty succeeded—or supplanted—the earlier Dankali polity remains uncertain and requires further archival and comparative historical investigation.

The most known historical record and oral traditions indicate that the last ruler of the Ankaala dynasty was overthrown in the 15th century at Rahayto by Gibdi Hamad, the descendant of Hadal Mahis. Following this event, several Afar sultanates emerged and consolidated in different regions, including the Sultanates of Awsa, Rahayto, Tadjoura, Bidu, and Gobad, marking the evolution of Afar political organization into multiple Islamic principalities.

2.4.1 Ifat Sultanate

The spread of Islam across the Horn of Africa during the medieval period not only transformed religious practices but also reshaped political authority, leading to the emergence of a series of Islamic states that integrated local populations into broader networks of governance and scholarship. Among these early states, the Ifat Sultanate, established in the 13th century by ‘Umar Walasma, served as a foundational Islamic state in the region.¹⁸⁰ Its population was ethnically diverse, comprising descendants of Quraysh Arab Islamic preachers, as well as local groups including the Afar, Argobba, Somali, and other communities.¹⁸¹ Following ‘Umar Walasma’s

¹⁷⁸ Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*, 10–15.

¹⁷⁹ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 310–326.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 40.

¹⁸¹ Ali, *Eritriya Anke Fanah*, 20.

death in 1285, leadership passed to his four or five sons in succession, each assuming authority in turn (.¹⁸²

The medieval Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi (1364–1442 CE) records that the territorial domain of the Ifat Sultanate encompassed vast areas of the eastern Horn of Africa. According to his account, Ifat’s authority extended over the Afar lowlands, including the eastern banks of the Awash River, and stretched into Somali-inhabited territories. Its sphere of influence traversed the regions of Harar and the Ogaden and reached the strategically significant Red Sea ports of Zeila and Berbera, underscoring its commercial and geopolitical importance.¹⁸³

Similarly, the nineteenth-century scholar Clements R. Markham observed that the Muslim forces inhabiting the lowland region of Adal—also referred to in some sources as Danakil—occupied the territory between the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea coast. From this strategic corridor, their armies repeatedly advanced into Abyssinia. Markham further suggested that the designation “Adal” may have derived from the principal tribe of the Danakil (Afar), referred to as the Ad-‘Ali. This interpretation reflects the complex interrelationship between tribal identities and the political nomenclature of the medieval Islamic polities of the Horn of Africa.¹⁸⁴

Similarly, Cerulli (1931), outlined the territorial extent of Ifat, emphasizing its strategic integration of highland, lowland, and coastal regions.¹⁸⁵

Cerulli, further suggested that, the Sultanate comprised three principal zones. The first included parts of the Shewan highlands and the slopes descending toward the Awash Valley, providing agricultural wealth and natural defensive advantages. The second was the internal lowlands, particularly the lower Awash Valley—known as Aussa—which later became the political center of the Muslim state. Its inclusion within Ifat’s territory demonstrated the Sultanate’s early control over key inland regions. The third zone was the coastal area along the Gulf of Aden, particularly Zeila, which served as Ifat’s principal port. This maritime access facilitated extensive trade

¹⁸²al-Maqrizi (Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Ali al-Maqrizi), *The Book of the True Knowledge of the History of the Muslim Kings in Abyssinia*, trans. G. W. B. Huntingford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 12.

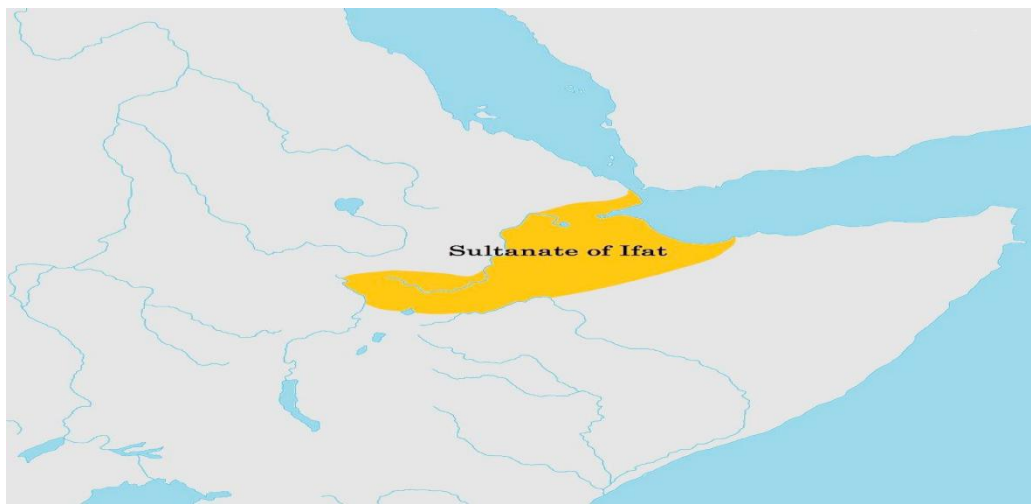
¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Clements R. Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), 18.

¹⁸⁵ Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, 345–46.

networks and interaction with the broader Islamic world, reinforcing the Sultanate's economic and political significance in the Horn of Africa.¹⁸⁶

Trimingham (1952) also described the territorial extent of Ifat, noting that its core region lay in the plateau of eastern Shewa, including the slopes descending to the Awash Valley. However, its sphere of influence extended much farther—to the regions surrounding Zeila on the Gulf of Aden—while the nomadic Afar tribes inhabiting the Aussa plains acknowledged the Sultanate's authority and paid tribute to its rulers.¹⁸⁷



Map 6. Sources of map, en.wikipedia.org.

The Afar lowlands—spanning from the middle Awash Valley, with Aussa at its core, and extending eastward to the port of Zeila—served as the political, economic, and cultural heartland of the early Muslim sultanates in the Horn of Africa. This geographical and strategic positioning underscores the centrality of the Afar people in the formation and consolidation of these states. From their inception, these sultanates relied on the Afar territories not only as administrative and commercial hubs but also as centers of religious authority, facilitating the dissemination of Islamic practices throughout the region.¹⁸⁸ The prominence of the Afar lowlands in trade, governance, and religious life highlights their integral role in shaping the socio-political and cultural landscape of the Horn of Africa during the medieval period. The decline of Ifat came after the death of its last

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 67.

¹⁸⁸ Trimingham, 97; Cerulli, 30-44.

ruler, Sultan Sa‘ad ad-Dīn, who was killed by Emperor Dawit of Ethiopia in Zeila around 1402–1403. Following this event, Sa‘ad ad-Dīn’s ten sons fled to Yemen, marking the end of the Ifat Sultanate.¹⁸⁹

Archaeological remains associated with the political and Islamic movement of the Ifat period are still found komaami kekebe, in Samurobi Wereda of the Afar Region. The standing ruins and underground structures discovered there provide material evidence that the Afar region once served as a central locus of Islamic state-building and religious activity during the Ifat era.



Figure 4. Asbari Mosque, Remnants of the Ifat Sultanate’s architecture located in komaami kebele, Afar Region. Sources;- Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork.

2.4.2 The Origins and Development of the Adal Sultanate

The history of the Adal Sultanate represented one of the most significant phases in the political and cultural evolution of the Horn of Africa, particularly within the Afar region. Historians have advanced differing interpretations regarding its origins and subsequent development. Some maintain that the Adal Sultanate was founded immediately after the return of the sons of Sultan Sa‘d ad-Dīn from exile in Yemen, while others assert that Adal initially existed as a tributary or semi-autonomous polity under the wider authority of the Sultanate of Ifat. Cerulli (1931), drawing upon the *Chronicles of Emperor Amda Šeyon*, describes Adal as a “small Emirate which is most probably politically included within Ifat,” implying that its emergence was originally as a

¹⁸⁹ Ali, Eritriya anke fanah, 2013, 21.

subordinate entity.¹⁹⁰ Trimingham (1971) similarly explains that following the defeat of Sultan Sa‘d ad-Dīn by Abyssinian forces, his ten sons fled to Yemen, where they found refuge with Ahmad b. al-Ashraf Ismā‘īl, the king of Yemen.¹⁹¹ Upon their return to Africa, they re-established power under the Walasma‘ dynasty, assumed the title “Kings of Adal,” and founded their new capital at Dakar, a site chosen for its greater security in the lowlands further removed from Abyssinian military threat.

This transformation from Ifat to Adal thus marked a critical dynastic and geographical reorganization within the Islamic polities of the region. Pankhurst (1997) regards the defeat of Sultan Sa‘d ad-Dīn in 1402/3 as a decisive turning point, leading to the decline of Ifat and the relocation of its ruling elite to the eastern lowlands, where they reorganized Adal and abandoned their former capital, which had fallen under imperial rule.¹⁹² The foundation of Dakar as the new capital symbolized both a political renewal and an adaptation to the shifting power balance between the Muslim lowlands and the Christian highlands.

The exact location of Dakar has long been a subject of scholarly debate. According to al-Maqrīzī, the city was situated southeast of Harar, while Ahmedin Jebel (2003) locates it in the same general area near Fiambiro.¹⁹³ Rajab Mohammed (2001) contends that Dakar remained the capital of the Afar Sultanate until 1521, when Sultan Abū Bakr Mohammed transferred the seat of government to Harar. In addition to Dakar and Harar, the Adal sultanates included several important centers such as Zeyid, Kadad, Hubat, and Zeka, reflecting a network of towns that connected the interior highlands to the Red Sea trade routes.¹⁹⁴

While most historical studies locate Dakar in the vicinity of Harar, oral traditions from the Afar region suggest an alternative possibility centered around Daka, a site in Afambo Wereda.

Daka, which has been largely neglected by historians, is remembered in local oral tradition as a vibrant marketplace, encapsulated in the proverb “Niyat nem Makkay, elellem Daka” (“We

¹⁹⁰ Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, 358.

¹⁹¹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 74.

¹⁹² Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 55-56.

¹⁹³ Ahmedin Jebel, *History of Oppression and Struggle of Ethiopian Muslims* (Addis Ababa, 2003), 155.

¹⁹⁴ Rajab Mohammed Abdulhalim, *History of the Medieval Kingdoms of the Abyssinians and the Muslims of Zayla*, trans. Abdullah Mohammed (2001), 12.

intended to go to Mecca, but reached only Daka”). This saying, attributed to the reign of Imam Salman of Adal, originates from an account in which a sheikh sent to Mecca to obtain the Imam’s preferred garment encountered a caravan at Daka, purchased the item there, and returned to the Imam, remarking that though the journey was intended for Mecca, it ended at Daka.¹⁹⁵

The early Adal emirates, which emerged under the influence of the Ifat Sultanate, are believed to have been located around Daka, near present-day Lake Abbe in the Afar region. Geographically situated between Zeila, Harar, and Dire Dawa, this area occupied a strategic position within the commercial and political networks of the Horn of Africa. Its proximity to major trade routes linking Yemen, Zeila, and the Ethiopian interior, coupled with its relative distance from the Christian highlands, made Daka an ideal site for early Muslim settlement and state formation.

Following the decline of the Ifat Sultanate in the late fourteenth century, the descendants of Sultan Sa’d ad-Dīn were reported to have taken refuge in Yemen. Upon their return, oral traditions indicate that they first landed in Siyyaru near Mount Musali and subsequently moved to Daka.¹⁹⁶ It was here that they reorganized the former Adal emirates into a more centralized political structure, marking the transformation of Adal from a loose confederation of emirates into a unified sultanate, with Daka serving as its initial capital and administrative center.

The *Chronicles of Amda Seyon* further differentiate between the territories of Adal and Mora, the latter identified with the Afar area surrounding Awsa.¹⁹⁷ The Mora, or Mara, were ethnically Afar—*Mara* meaning “people” in the Afar language—and their territory extended from southern Awsa to the western shores of Lake Abbe.¹⁹⁸ Merid’s identification of Adal and Mora suggests that the early Adal emirate under Ifat was located at Daka, which corresponds with the present-day site near Lake Abbe. This correlation supported the argument that Daka once functioned as both a major commercial hub and a central seat of political authority within the early Adal polity.

¹⁹⁵ Shek Mohammed Abdalla, interview by the author, Afambo Wereda, Afar Region, Ethiopia, December 28, 2016.

¹⁹⁶ Ali, *Eritria anke fanah*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Welde Aregay Merid, *Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508–1708, with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and Their Consequences* (PhD diss., University of London, 1971), 267.

¹⁹⁸ Kassim, *the influence of Islam on the Afar people*, 75.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*,¹⁹⁹ Daka lay approximately sixty-five kilometers from Harar, which geographically places Daka within a comparable distance of seventy to ninety kilometers—further reinforcing the hypothesis that the early Adal capital was situated within the Afar region. Following the death of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi in 1543, the capital was relocated once more to Awsa, reaffirming the Afar region's continued political prominence in the post-Adal period. Later, with the decline of Harar as a regional center of power, political authority shifted to Baranda Kebele in Aysaita Wereda, approximately fifteen kilometers from Daka, thereby maintaining the historical continuity of the Afar region as a long-standing seat of Muslim governance and culture.

Therefore, following their return from Yemen, the sons of Sa'd ad-Din reorganized the former Adal emirates at Daka into what became the Adal Sultanate, consolidating territories that had previously been under their influence. From this foundational center, the political capital was later transferred from Daka to Harar around 1521, marking the expansion of Adal's power into the Ethiopian interior.

Consequently, the territorial extent of Adal, as described by Pankhurst (1997), included much of the Awash Basin, stretching north to Lake Abbe and eastward toward Zeila. This description situates the heartland of Adal firmly within the Afar region, encompassing the middle Awash Valley, Afambo district, and the area bordering modern Djibouti. The Afar people, known in medieval Arabic sources as "Dankal" formed the backbone of this state. They provided not only the agricultural and pastoral resources essential to Adal's economy but also constituted a major part of its military forces. Their participation in the campaigns of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi illustrates their decisive contribution to Adal's political and military strength.²⁰⁰

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Afar played a leading role in the religious and military confrontations between the Muslim lowlands and the Christian highlands. Trimingham (1971) emphasizes that the continuous conflicts between Christian Ethiopia and the Muslim states were driven largely by expansionist movements initiated by the Afar (Danakil) and Somali peoples, originating in the Awsa oasis and extending through the valleys descending from

¹⁹⁹ Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 72.

²⁰⁰ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 171.

eastern Shewa.²⁰¹ Thompson and Adloff (1968) similarly note that following Adal's decline, the political center shifted permanently to Awsa, from where the southern Afar reorganized into the sultanates of Tajoura, Rahayto, and Gobaad.²⁰²

European travelers and historians have likewise identified Adal with the Afar. Francisco Alvarez(1520-1527)²⁰³, cited by Trimingham (1971)²⁰⁴, describes the Doba Muslim districts—including Ada, Dankal, and Adal—as inhabited by peoples likely of Afar origin. Cerulli (1931) explicitly identified the inhabitants of Adal as Afar²⁰⁵, a view supported by the *Chronicles of Kings Zera Yacob and Baeda Maryam*, which refer to Adal as the land of the Afar (Dankal) between Assab and Awsa.²⁰⁶ The population of Adal engaged in diverse livelihoods: those in the fertile Awash Valley and around Lake Abbe practiced limited agriculture, while those in the arid eastern plains sustained themselves through pastoralism.²⁰⁷

Johnston (1844) associated the ancient region of Dankal with Avalites on the Red Sea coast, identifying its people—the Afar or Danakil—as the descendants of the Adal sultanate.²⁰⁸ The *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* further links the term Adal etymologically to the Afar tribe *Ad-Ali* (or *Ado-Ali*), known in Somali as *Odal*, implying that the very name of the Sultanate derived from Afar tribal nomenclature.²⁰⁹ Enid Parker(1976) identified the term *Adal* with the *Ado-Ali* clan of the Afar, suggesting that the Sultanate's identity itself was derived from this group.²¹⁰ Warner Munzinger (1869) further substantiates this by noting that a large portion of Imam Ahmad Gragn's army consisted of Afar warriors and that the Imam himself belonged to the Ad-Ali clan. Similarly, According to Clements R. Markham , the designation “Adal” may have derived from the principal

²⁰¹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*,79

²⁰² Virginia Thompson Adloff and Richard Adloff, *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 4.

²⁰³ Francisco Alvarez, *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the Years 1520–1527*, trans. and ed. Lord Stanley of Alderley (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1881), 110.

²⁰⁴ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*,81.

²⁰⁵ Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*,358.

²⁰⁶ Alemu Hayle, *The Chronicles of Kings Zera Yacob and Baeda Maryam* (Addis Ababa, 2001), 31.

²⁰⁷ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*,61.

²⁰⁸ Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*,12.

²⁰⁹ Uhlig, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 72.

²¹⁰ Enid Parker, “Afar Stories, Riddles and Proverbs,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2 (1976): 219.

tribe of the Afar , called Ad-‘Ali (A’do A’li). This interpretation reflects the complex interrelationship between tribal identities and the political nomenclature of the medieval Islamic polities of the Horn of Africa.²¹¹

Historical accounts confirm that the Afar were not only the demographic majority of Adal but also its primary military force. Abir (1980) records that in 1473, the Afar and Somali peoples fought together against the Christian highlands,²¹² while Shehem (1982) explains that supplies for Imam Ahmad Gragn from Yemen reached his forces through the Afar port of Baylul, and Turkish reinforcements entered Ethiopia through Afar territories.²¹³ Kibrom Asaffa (2005)²¹⁴ adds that Turkish military contingents passed through Afar lands and settled at Zobil. Abdella Adou (1993) likewise affirms that Adal was a state dominated by the Afar, whose geographical position, ethnic composition, and military organization confirm their political primacy.²¹⁵

In this context, Enrico Cerulli (1931) observes that the term “Adal” was commonly employed to designate the lowland region of Dankalia. More precisely, he identifies it with the portion of Abyssinian Dankalia situated between the Awash Valley—particularly in the vicinity of the railway corridor—and the former French colonial border, south of Aussa (Awsa). In Amharic usage, the term *Adaloch* specifically refers to this segment of Dankalia. Owing to historical inconsistencies and variations in documentary and cartographic traditions, however, some maps applied the name “Adal” more broadly to denote Dankalia as a whole.²¹⁶

Likewise, Clements R. Markham notes that the Muslim forces inhabiting the lowland country of Adal—also referred to in certain sources as Danakil—occupied the territory between the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea coast. From this strategically positioned corridor, their armies repeatedly launched incursions into Abyssinia. Although these campaigns were often repelled, the military balance shifted significantly between 1528 and 1540, when the forces led by Ahmad ibn

²¹¹ Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition*, 18.

²¹² Abir, “Salt, Trade and Politics in Ethiopia,” 35.

²¹³ Kassim, *The Influence of Islam on the Afar People*, 75.

²¹⁴ Kibrom Asaffa, *Culture and History of Rayya People* (Addis Ababa, 2005), 46.

²¹⁵ Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 44–45.

²¹⁶ Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, 358.

Ibrahim al-Ghazi succeeded in overrunning much of the Abyssinian plateau during the sixteenth-century conflict.²¹⁷

These observations underscore the centrality of the Afar lowlands, including Aussa and surrounding regions, as the core of Muslim political and economic networks, linking inland territories with coastal trade hubs and integrating the Afar people into the broader Islamic cultural sphere.²¹⁸

Therefore, the later relocation of Adal's headquarters to Awsa in 1576 consolidated Afar dominance, although the state gradually lost its independence. In Ethiopia, the name Adal historically referred to the Ethiopian portion of Awsa, and its inhabitants were called *Adaloch* in Amharic.²¹⁹ Awsa became one of the three principal Islamic centers of the Adal Sultanate, along with Harar and Zeila. In 1576, Imam Muhammad Gaasa transferred the capital from Harar to Awsa, establishing it as the principal seat of Muslim authority in eastern Ethiopia. The later Afar ruler Sultan Alimirah Hanfare traced his lineage to this historic sultanate, demonstrating the continuity of Afar political tradition from medieval Adal to the modern Afar Sultanate.



Map 7. Sources of Map;- commons.wikipedia.org.

²¹⁷ Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition*, 18.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 345-446.

²¹⁹ Uhlig, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, 72.

In sum, the cumulative historical, linguistic, and ethnographic evidence clearly demonstrates that the Afar people formed the ethnic and political nucleus of the Adal Sultanate. The Sultanate's geographic heartland, extending from the Awash Basin through Afambo to Zeila, coincided with the core territories of the Afar. The continuity of Afar leadership, their decisive role in the Sultanate's military campaigns, and their sustained control of strategic trade routes between the Red Sea and the Ethiopian interior underscore their fundamental importance. Consequently, the history of the Adal Sultanate cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the central role of the Afar people and their region, whose political and cultural legacy shaped the broader dynamics of state formation and religious conflict in the medieval Horn of Africa.

2.4.3 The Historical Development of the Awsa Sultanate

Historically, **Awsa** has functioned as one of the principal Islamic and political centers of the Horn of Africa, serving as a nucleus of governance, religious scholarship, and cultural life among the Afar people since at least the period of the Ifat and Adal Sultanates. By the late sixteenth century, Awsa's regional prominence increased significantly. In 1577, Imam Muhammad Gaasa (Jasa)—identified by tradition as a descendant of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (Ahmed Gragn)—established the Imamate of Awsa, marking the consolidation of Muslim political authority in eastern Ethiopia.

Muhammad Gaasa's transfer of the political seat from Harar to Awsa was a strategic response to intensifying Oromo expansions into the eastern highlands. Surrounded by desert plains and benefiting from a defensible landscape, Awsa provided a secure environment for reconstituting Muslim leadership after the decline of the Adal Sultanate. This shift also reflects broader patterns of political reorganization among Muslim communities in the region during the seventeenth century, wherein Awsa re-emerged as a stable center of Afar power and Islamic leadership.²²⁰

Following the death of Imam Ahmad in 1543, internal power struggles erupted among Muslim Amirs. Trimingham (1976) describes this period as highly unstable, noting that eight Imams

²²⁰ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 50; Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 96-97; Ulrich Braukämper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 117–120; Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 230–232.

succeeded one another within the first five years of Awsa's Imamate.²²¹ These succession disputes persisted until the mid-seventeenth century, yet the contributions of Awsa's inhabitants to the broader Islamic political sphere were significant. The Afar people from the Awsa region actively participated in religious and military campaigns, laying the foundation for the eventual Afar Sultanate (Trimingham 1976).²²² Names of early rulers, such as Imam Muhammad Gaasa and Imam Omar Aldin Al Modayti, suggest Afar ancestry, with "Al Modayti" likely indicating a connection to the Modayto tribe, which later assumed direct political control over Awsa.²²³

Between 1576 and 1733, the Harla Dardora dynasty ruled Awsa as the final ruling family of the Adal Sultanate until Imam Salman was overthrown by Datta Kadafo of the Moodayto tribe. Datta Kadafo assumed the title of Sultan and transformed the Imamate into a civil Sultanate.²²⁴ Following the decline of the Ifat Sultanate, the ten sons of Sultan Sa'd ad-Dīn had sought refuge in Yemen after their father's assassination by King Dawit of Ethiopia at Zeila in 1402. After thirteen years in exile, they returned to the Horn of Africa, initially settling in Siyyaru near Mount Musali and later relocating to Daka, where they reorganized the former Adal emirates into a centralized political structure. In 1521, the political center of the Adal Sultanate was moved from Daka to Harar, marking its expansion into the Ethiopian interior. However, according to local informants Arramis hummed (2025), not all of Sa'd ad-Dīn's sons relocated to Harar; one remained in the Afar region and established the Hadalmahis lineage in Adaylu near Daka and Zeila.

Within this historical framework, the Hadalmahis, direct descendants of Sa'd ad-Dīn, gave rise to the Moodayto lineage, from which Datta Kadafo emerged to assume political authority in Awsa by overthrowing Imam Salman Mohammed Garad, the ruler of the Dardora tribe and the last Imama of the Adal Sultanate following the transfer of the capital from Harar to Awsa. The new ruling Moodayto lineage was genealogically traced to the descendants of Sa'd ad-Dīn through the Hadalmahis line. Furthermore, the Hadalmahis lineage constituted the ancestral foundation of five

²²¹Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 96–97; Cerulli, *Islam: Yesterday and Today*, 30–34.

²²² Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 79.

²²³ Hashim, Almanhal, 309. Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 50.

²²⁴ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar region of Ethiopia*, 52

major Afar sultanates—Awsa, Tadjoura, Rahayto, Bidu, and Gobad—whose royal houses all claim descent from this common progenitor.²²⁵

This genealogical continuity illustrates the historical evolution of political authority from the Ifat Sultanate to Adal and subsequently to the later Afar sultanates, thereby preserving the ruling tradition established by Sa'd ad-Dīn's descendants. Following the death of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, the political center of Adal was relocated from Harar to Awsa in 1577 for security reasons, marking a return to the dynasty's original homeland. Despite these dynastic transformations, Islamic governance and religious institutions remained central to the political system, as influential *ulama* families continued to exert authority within the Awsa court. Intermarriages between these religious elites and the ruling class further reinforced both political legitimacy and religious authority.²²⁶

The Sultanate of Awsa developed a notably sophisticated administrative, military, and economic system—one that was, in many respects, unmatched in the surrounding regions of the Horn of Africa. Its governance relied on a clearly defined hierarchical structure headed by the *Malak*, appointed officials whose roles were functionally analogous to modern ministers. Each *Malak* supervised a specific domain of state activity, including agriculture, pastoral affairs, taxation, local governance, inter-clan arbitration, security, and external relations. This institutional arrangement reflects a level of bureaucratic organization unusual for contemporaneous polities in the lowland Horn of Africa.²²⁷

A central pillar of Awsa's political stability was its elite security apparatus, the *Mallaasay*. Originating during the late Adal period, the term *Mallaasay* in Afar denotes “the strong,” capturing both their military prowess and their symbolic status as guardians of order. These forces were essential in enforcing the Sultanate's authority, protecting trade routes, and mediating inter-clan disputes. Their reputation for discipline and strength became embedded in Afar oral tradition, proverbs, and collective memory.²²⁸

²²⁵ Aramis Hummed Sulle, interview by the author, Djibouti, 7, January/2025.

²²⁶ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 50.

²²⁷ L. M. Nesbitt, *The Desert and Forest: The Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil* (London, 1934), 204–217; Adou, *The Afar a nation on trial* 38–39.

²²⁸ Lewis, *People of the Horn of Africa*, 162; Allo, *African civilization from Afar Perspective*, 35.

Successive rulers—most notably Sultan Yayo (Simbille) in the nineteenth century and Sultan Alimirah Hanfare (Awe-Kala) in the twentieth—strengthened and institutionalized these governance structures. Sultan Yayo consolidated authority over pastoral territories along the Awash Valley, expanding the Sultanate’s influence and revenue base. Sultan Alimirah modernized administrative functions, enhanced security networks, and maintained relative internal stability despite major external pressures from imperial, revolutionary, and regional actors..²²⁹ Together, these developments demonstrate that Awsa’s political institutions were neither static nor purely customary, but adaptive, historically embedded mechanisms of statecraft that blended Islamic governance, Afar customary law (*mada’a*), and strategic military organization.

Economically, Awsa was a hub of wealth and innovation. The Sultanate organized camel herders (*Akali*) and cattle herders (*Deramo*), while youth-led groups such as *Fiema* and *Kaddabura* (“Big House Group”) played critical roles in social organization and local governance.²³⁰ Caravan trade taxes, agricultural production along the Awash River, and extensive livestock holdings contributed to Awsa’s wealth, supporting both civil administration and military strength.²³¹ Observers such as Nesbit (1934)²³² and Thesiger (1996,)²³³ emphasized the Sultanate’s strategic autonomy, noting its robust military capacity, fertile lands, and self-sufficient economy. Abdalla (1993) further highlights Awsa’s advantages: its central location within Afar territory, natural fortifications of desert and mountains, and the integration of spiritual and political authority in leadership.²³⁴

Under Sultan Muhammad Hanfare (mid-nineteenth century), Awsa achieved political consolidation and international recognition. He received the title of *Ilalta*, or “King of Kings,” acknowledging his authority over the entire Afar region. Europeans, including the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, corresponded directly with him regarding governance, trade, and territorial affairs. Muhammad Hanfare’s administration exemplified centralized power, economic

²²⁹ Ousman Saleh Sabbe, *The History of Eritrea* (Beirut, 1974), 50–70; Habib Mohammed, *History of Afar (Adal) People* (Addis Ababa, 2011), 169–231.

²³⁰ Adou, *The Afar a nation on trial*, 32. Allo, *African civilization from Afar Perspective*, 35.

²³¹ G. C. Savard, “Pastoralists: The Afar,” in *The People of Ethiopia*, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, 1970, 217.

²³² Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 204–217.

²³³ Thesiger, *The Danakil Diary*, 65.

²³⁴ Adou, *The Afar a nation on trial*, 38.

modernization, and military organization, enabling Awsa to resist external intervention, including colonial incursions led by Munzinger.²³⁵

In 1896, Emperor Menelik II attempted to extend his control over Awsa, dispatching trusted chiefs including Ras Walde Giyorgis, Ras Tesemma Nadew, and Waldastadiq, the head of prisons. Their forces engaged Sultan Mohammed Hanfare's army at the Battle of Arraddo in present-day Dubti Wereda. The conflict ended without the Sultan's surrender, and Mohammed Hanfare successfully defended his territory, ruling Awsa for forty years and gaining widespread renown among the Afar.²³⁶ This significant event, however, is largely absent from mainstream Ethiopian historical accounts.

During Sultan Yayyo's reign, Emperor Lij Iyasu sought refuge in Awsa after his overthrow in 1916. Sultan Yayyo granted him protection, and when Ras Kabbede was dispatched by Emperor Haile Selassie to capture Lij Iyasu, the mission was thwarted by Afar forces.²³⁷ In the twentieth century, Sultan Muhammad Yayo (1927–1944) pursued policies to unite the Afar people, weakened by colonial pressures, establishing administrative centers, constructing palaces in Asab and Missowaah, and reinforcing the Sultanate's authority across the Afar Triangle. His successor, Sultan Alimirah Hanfare, expanded agricultural production, modernized the economy, and promoted education, sponsoring Afar youth to study in Aysaita and Addis Ababa.²³⁸

During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign, Sultan Alimirah maintained Awsa's autonomy while navigating tensions with the central government. Perceiving imperial interventions as threats, he retreated to Boha to organize resistance. The Emperor personally flew to Aysaita to negotiate, but his deputy, Fitawrari Yayo Hamadu, received the delegation, reflecting the Sultanate's political stature and strategic independence.²³⁹ Sultan Alimirah also played a central role in the Afar armed struggle against the Derg regime (1974–1983), organizing the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) and

²³⁵ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 301-302; Thsiger, the Danakil diary, 65; Hashim, Almanhal, 461.

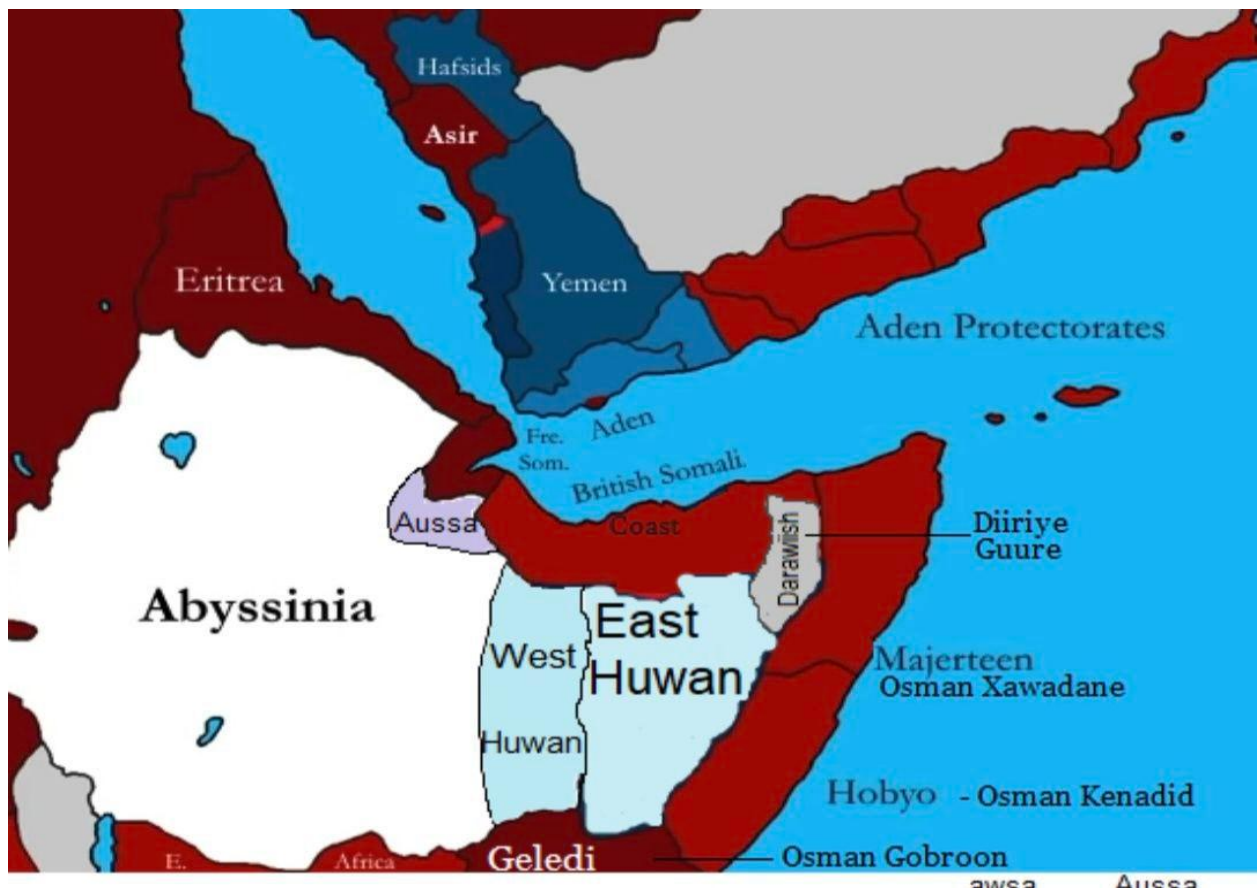
²³⁶ Berihun Kebede, *History of Haile Selassie* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa Artistic Printing Press, 1993), 1279; Tsahafe Tizaz Gebrselassie, *Chronicles of King Menelik II, Ethiopia* (2008), 182; Hashim, Almanhal, 462-463.

²³⁷ Adou, *The Afar a nation on trial*, 50. Habib, *history of Afar (Adal) people*, 79-81.

²³⁸ Allo, *African civilization from Afar Perspective*, 56-57.

²³⁹ Ambassador Kadafo Hanfare, *Life History of Sultan Almirah (1921–2011)* (Published by AuthorHouse, 2013), 97–108.

coordinating resistance from Saudi Arabia. The ALF laid the foundation for the modern Afar regional administration. After the Derg's fall, he returned to Ethiopia and convened a comprehensive Afar assembly in Aysaita in 1993, reaffirming Awsa's historical role as the political center of the Afar people. His legacy was continued by Sultan Ahmed Alimirah, who participated in frontline struggles and advocated for Afar rights during the post-Derg era.²⁴⁰



Map 8. Map showing location of Awsa Sultanate. Sources of Map;- commons.wikipedia.org.

Under successive rulers, the Awsa Sultanate consistently demonstrated a combination of military strength, administrative sophistication, economic prosperity, and religious legitimacy. It served not only as the political and cultural center of the Afar people but also as a resilient state capable of defending its autonomy against regional and foreign threats, shaping Afar identity and leadership for centuries.

²⁴⁰ Adou, The Afar a nation on trial, 84-85.

2.4.4 The Historical Development of the Tadjoura sultanate

The Tadjoura Sultanate, one of the earliest Afar Muslim sultanates in the Horn of Africa, was founded in 1450 by Asa Kamil, a descendant of the Hadalmahis lineage. Hadalmahis, the ancestral progenitor of Asa Kamil, traced his descent to one of the ten sons of Sa‘d ad-Dīn. Following the assassination of their father by King Dawit of Ethiopia in 1402 at Zeila, the ten sons of Sa‘d ad-Dīn sought refuge in Yemen, where they remained in exile for thirteen years. Upon their return to the Horn of Africa, they initially arrived in Siyyaru near Mount Musali and subsequently moved to Daka, where they reorganized the Adal Sultanate. In 1521, the political center of Adal was relocated from Daka to Harar, reflecting the state’s expansion into the Ethiopian interior and its increasing engagement in regional politics.²⁴¹

Not all descendants of Sa‘d ad-Dīn relocated to Harar; one son remained in the Afar region, establishing the Hadalmahis lineage in Adaylu, where his descendants resided for several generations. It was from this line that Asa Kamil emerged, consolidating political authority and founding the Tadjoura Sultanate in 1450. Strategically located along the northern shores of the Gulf of Tadjoura, the sultanate controlled vital trade routes linking the Red Sea and the interior of the Horn of Africa, enabling it to become a key center for commerce, Islamic learning, and political administration. The establishment of the Tadjoura Sultanate thus represents both the continuity of the Sa‘d ad-Dīn lineage in Afar political history and the broader expansion of Muslim polities in the region, highlighting the enduring influence of the Afar in shaping the political and economic landscapes of the Horn of Africa.

Geographically, the domain of the Sultanate — as described by Hashim (2007) — extended from Tagorri Boha to the Abusasawer waterhole in the north; its western boundary lay along the coast, and its northwestern frontier adjoined the Sultanate of Gobad. Its administrative center was at Tadjoura (Tagórrri), a coastal settlement situated on the Gulf of Tadjoura, which forms the western extremity of the Gulf of Aden. The Gulf of Tadjoura²⁴², a basin of the Indian Ocean in the Horn

²⁴¹ Habib, history of Afar(Adal) people,235-240.

²⁴² Note: - the Gulf of Tadjoura is sometimes described in older sources as “part of the Gulf of Aden,” geographically it is a distinct inlet of the Indian Ocean that lies at the western end of the Gulf of Aden. Its waters connect to the main gulf and, indirectly, to the Red Sea via the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait

of Africa, lies south of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait — the entrance to the Red Sea — at approximately 11.7° N latitude and 43.0° E longitude.²⁴³



Map 9. Map showing the location of Tadjoura sultane. Sources of the map;-

<https://www.mapsof.net>

Owing to this strategic location, the Sultanate established Tadjoura as a political and commercial hub, serving as a maritime gateway that linked the Afar hinterland and the Ethiopian highlands to the wider Indian Ocean trade network, thereby connecting the Horn of Africa with Arabia and beyond.

By the mid-19th century, Tadjoura had become an important center for trade, particularly for goods from Shewa and Aussa, in contrast to neighboring ports that primarily served Harar or the Ogaden.

²⁴³ Hashim, Almanhal, 526-533.

The port sustained a vibrant economy centered on the trade of ivory, enslaved persons, frankincense, and other commodities, and hosted annual caravan bazaars.²⁴⁴

Historically, the Tadjoura Sultanate is regarded as one of the earliest organized Afar Islamic states. Shehem kassim (1982) explains that the term *Adal*, later associated with the powerful medieval Adal Sultanate, derived from the *Adali* tribe of Tadjoura.²⁴⁵ This connection suggests that Tadjoura was not only an early political center but also a genealogical and cultural source for later Afar Adal sultanates. Consequently, the Tadjoura Sultanate predates both the Awsa and Bidu Sultanates, and according to Habib (2010) and Hashim (2007), it inherited its legitimacy and leadership from Hadalmahis, the ancestral forefather of the modern ruling families of Five Afar sultanates.²⁴⁶ The longevity of the Tadjoura ruling lineage illustrates a strong continuity of traditional governance among the Afar, reflecting both hereditary leadership and adaptive political organization.

In terms of its political structure, the Tadjoura Sultanate developed a distinctive and balanced system of governance rooted in clan-based power-sharing. The state was ruled by two sub-clans of the Ado-Ali (Adali) tribe—the Burhanto and the Dinitte—each with its own leader. Political authority alternated between these two families following the death of the reigning Sultan. When the Burhanto chief served as *Dardar* (Sultan), the Dinitte leader assumed the position of *Banoyta* (vice-sultan or crown prince), and upon the Sultan's death, the Dinitte clan took the throne while the Burhanto leader became *Banoyta*. The heir apparent from either clan often served as *Wazir* or chief advisor.²⁴⁷ This system of alternating rulership ensured equilibrium and mutual respect between the two dominant families and prevented political monopolization of power. It promoted a stable transition of leadership and collective governance, which in many ways anticipated the principle of political rotation found in later democratic systems.

Culturally, the Tadjoura Sultanate was characterized by the influence of Arab-Islamic traditions combined with indigenous Afar customs. Its coastal connections facilitated religious, linguistic,

²⁴⁴Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1980), 20; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 429.

²⁴⁵ Kassim, the influence of Islam on the Afar people, 15.

²⁴⁶ Hashim, Almanhal, 533; Habib, history of Afar (Adal) people, 148.

²⁴⁷ Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*, 47.

and cultural exchanges with Arabia, India, and other parts of the Islamic world. Charles Johnston (1844) provides valuable ethnographic insight into the lifestyle and attire of the Sultan and his subjects during the mid-nineteenth century. He described the Sultan as wearing “a white Muslim turban, beneath which was a very light Arab skull cap of open wicker-work, made of the midrib of the palm leaf. Naked to his waist, over the right shoulder and across his chest was slung a broad belt of amulets. A common checked cotton *fota* or cloth, reaching to the knees, was fastened around his middle by a leather belt, in which was secured a very handsome sword of silver, completing his dress. In his hand he held a light spear, that served to support his long, spare figure as he walked”.²⁴⁸ Johnston further described the dress of ordinary men in the Sultanate as “the *fota*, or waist-cloth, and the *sarre*, an Indian term for part of a woman’s dress, exactly corresponding to it in use and shape. It is a long robe, worn around the body, generally of white calico, with a red or blue border at the two extremities”.²⁴⁹ These detailed observations reveal the blend of local and foreign elements that defined Tadjoura’s cultural identity and its participation in the broader Islamic and maritime world.

Economically, the Tadjoura Sultanate’s prosperity was closely linked to its control of trade routes between the Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea coast. According to Hashim (2007), the Adali and Hasoba tribes, who were dominant in the region, actively participated in the trade of slaves, ivory, and weapons between Ethiopia and foreign markets. This trade connected the Sultanate not only to the Arabian Peninsula but also to the wider commercial circuits of the Indian Ocean.²⁵⁰ Kassim (1982) further notes that the Adali tribe maintained constant contact with Ethiopian highlanders due to their dominance of caravan routes that linked Tadjoura to the hinterland. Through this, Tadjoura became a key commercial intermediary, facilitating both economic exchange and cultural interaction between inland Ethiopia and the outside world.²⁵¹

The early phase of Tadjoura political consolidation began under Dardar Asa Kamil—remembered in Afar oral tradition as “Red Kamil”—whose reign from 1450 to 1480 established Tadjoura as a prominent Afar coastal polity engaging with trade routes that linked Zeila, the Red

²⁴⁸ Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*, 8.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵⁰ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 528.

²⁵¹ Kassim, *the influence of Islam on the Afar people*, 15.

Sea, and the Ethiopian hinterlands.²⁵² He was succeeded by his son, Derder Shehem, whose three-decade rule (1480–1510) strengthened Tadjoura’s influence in regional commerce, particularly in the exchange of salt, livestock, and ivory with highland merchants.

Through the sixteenth century, successive rulers—Derder Hindi Wan (1510–1540), Derder Hamed (1540–1570), and Derder Humed (1570–1600)—maintained political continuity during a period marked by broader regional upheavals, including the rise of the Adal Sultanate and the military campaigns of Imam Ahmad Gagn, although Tadjoura remained largely peripheral to the central activities of the Adal Sultanate..²⁵³

A notable transition occurred with the rule of Dardar Muhammad (1600–1620), whose effective administration reflected the Sultanate’s increasing diplomatic role along the Gulf of Tadjoura. Upon his death, his sons Burhan Muhammad and Dini Muhammad succeeded sequentially in 1620. Their descendants later gave their names to the two principal branches of the ruling house—the Burhanto and the Dinitte—whose alternating succession thereafter became the normative structure of governance.²⁵⁴

From the mid-seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, Tadjoura rulers, including Derder Hamed Dini (1655–1680), Derder Dini Hamed (1680–1705), and Derder Muhammad Dini (1705–1740), oversaw a relatively stable political environment. Their long reigns sustained Tadjoura’s links with the coast of Yemen, Zeila, and the interior Afar districts of Gobad and Gobaad.²⁵⁵ During this era, trade in livestock, gum resins, and salt caravans passing toward the Ethiopian highlands played a central role in the Sultanate’s economy.

By the late eighteenth century, leaders such as Derder Hamed Nasar and Derder Humed Muhammad (1770–1800) continued to reinforce coastal authority amid expanding Ottoman and Yemeni commercial interests in the Red Sea. Their successors, notably Derder Mandaytu Hamed (1800–1820) and Derder Muhammad Humed “Ad-Alum” (1821–1859), ruled during a period of

²⁵² Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 79; Lewis, *people of horn of Africa*, 1994,

²⁵³ Pierre Charles Lux-Wum, *Les drapeaux de l’Islam de Mahomet à nos jours* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2001), 345.

²⁵⁴ Didier Morin, “Lucas, Renseignements ethnographiques et linguistiques sur les Danakils de Tadjourah,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 5, no. 2 (1935): 181–184.

²⁵⁵ Thsiger, *the Danakil diary*, 65; Hashim, *Almanhal*, 461.

increasing European involvement in the region. The reign of “Ad-Alum,” remembered for its length and administrative consolidation, was shaped by the Afar custom of *Dinkera*—a period of ritual mourning during which the royal drum was buried and succession delayed for one year.²⁵⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century, Tadjoura had become a pivotal political actor amid rising imperial competition. Derder Humed (Ad-Alum) Muhammad (1863–1879) faced the 1866 attack by the Sultan of Awsa, an event that temporarily displaced him to Zeila until he regained Tadjoura with the support of Weima and Adokom leaders after the Battle of Mairaadi. The late nineteenth century marked the onset of French colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa, profoundly affecting the Afar sultanates. Derder Humed Muhammad Mandaytu (1880–1912) signed a treaty with Léonce Lagarde on 26 October 1889, an agreement that gradually eroded the Sultanate’s independence. Although the Sultanate remained nominally autonomous, it increasingly came under French administrative influence as France consolidated its presence in the region, formally ending the local slave trade and solidifying control over what later became French Somaliland.²⁵⁷

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Sultanate was ruled by Derder Mohammed Arbahim (1912–1927), a period during which the Sultanate was fully integrated into French Somaliland, effectively ending its centuries-old autonomy. Despite this loss of sovereignty, local rulers continued to resist colonial exploitation and defend Afar interests. Derder Humed Mohammed (1928–1962) presided over the Sultanate during a time of colonial consolidation and shifting regional power dynamics, maintaining local authority amid growing French control.

The subsequent reign of Derder Habib Hamed (1964–1983) was notable for his early resistance to French abuses, which led to his arrest and seven-year exile in Madagascar prior to ascending the throne. His tenure, along with that of his successor, Derder Abdukadir Humed (1984–2019), represents the modern phase of Tadjoura leadership. This period was characterized by relative political stability, even as the Afar community faced increasing internal and external pressures, including growing intervention by the Djiboutian state.

²⁵⁶ Morin, “Lucas, Renseignements ethnographiques,” 181–84

²⁵⁷ Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, 103.

Following Abdukadir Humed's death in 2019, the succession departed from the traditional system of alternating dynastic lines and the long-standing custom of appointing a *banoyta*. Instead of the legitimate heir, Ahmed Shehem—who had served in this role for thirty-five years—the throne passed to Ali Habib, son of Derder Habib Hamed, partly reflecting contemporary political influences in Djibouti. Ahmed Shehem subsequently fled to the Afar Region of Ethiopia, where he continues to assert his hereditary claim. This disruption highlights the tension between traditional Afar political institutions and modern state power.

Thus, over nearly six centuries, the Tadjoura Sultanate preserved one of the most enduring dynastic traditions in the Horn of Africa. Its alternating system of succession, deep entanglement with regional trade, and continuous adaptation to shifting geopolitical realities underscore the central role of Afar coastal polities in the broader history of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

2.4.5 The Historical Development of Rahayto sultanate

The first ruling family of Rahayto was Ankala tribe, who traced their lineage to indigenous Afar chiefs who had embraced Islam as early as the seventh century. The last ruler of the Ankala dynasty, King Hamad Shecem Gidaar, was locally remembered as *Inkaahiy Yakami*, meaning “one who misuses public revenue for personal gain.”²⁵⁸ His reign was marked by corruption, declining authority, and growing discontent among the coastal Afar tribes.²⁵⁹ Consequently, the Ankala dynasty lost legitimacy, and King Hamad Gidaar was eventually overthrown by his son-in-law, Gibdi Hamad.

Gibdi Hamad, the son of the king's daughter, inherited his grandfather's name and led a successful coup that ended the Ankala rule.²⁶⁰ He established a new ruling family that traced its descent from the Hadalmahis clan, a lineage connected to the Sa'd ad-Dīn royal family of the Ifat and Adal Sultanates. Oral traditions recount that the Hadalmahis descended from one of Sa'd ad-Dīn's ten sons who remained in Daka after the fall of Adal and later settled in Adaylu. From this lineage

²⁵⁸ Ali Mola Hummo, *Seenanti Arih Aydaadu* (Asmara, Eritrea: 2010), 28–30.

²⁵⁹ Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country,” 209.

²⁶⁰ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 32.

emerged Gibdi Hamad, whose rise to power linked Rahayto genealogically and politically to the legacy of Ifat and Adal.²⁶¹

The identity and genealogy of Gibdi Ḥamad (often associated with the name Hadalmahis) remain subjects of considerable debate within Afar oral tradition. Competing narratives preserve different interpretations of his lineage, political role, and relationship to the Ankala dynasty. Although the details vary, both traditions underscore themes of dynastic conflict, legitimacy, and the reconstitution of authority that are central to Afar historical memory.

One strand of oral tradition maintains that Gibdi Ḥamad and Hadalmahis are the same individual. According to this account, the father of Hadalmahis was ‘Umar Yūsuf, a prominent figure who married the daughter of the Ankala king. As ‘Umar Yūsuf’s influence within the community grew, the Ankala ruler—identified in some versions as King Ḥamad Shehem (also rendered Inkahiy Yakami)—became apprehensive and ultimately ordered the killing of his son-in-law.²⁶²

At the time of ‘Umar Yūsuf’s death, his wife—the king’s daughter—was pregnant. After giving birth to a son, she named him Ḥamad, in memory of his deceased father. When the boy reached maturity, he inquired about the identity of his father’s killer. His mother directed him to ask his grandfather, the king. The king, in a symbolic and evasive response, instructed the young man to “ask the knife hanging on the wall of the house.” This metaphorical statement revealed the truth: the king himself was responsible for the murder.

Realizing that his grandfather had slain his father, the young Ḥamad withdrew from the royal court and retreated to the countryside, where he became a rebel leader. There he forged an alliance with ‘Ali Ablis, described in the tradition as a commander within the royal army. Together they conspired to mobilize the population against the reigning monarch.

In a dramatic episode symbolizing both protest and spiritual resolve, the young Ḥamad climbed a tree located near a river where people and livestock gathered to drink water. When members of the community observed him seated at the top of the tree in the late morning, they referred to him as “Hadalmahis,” interpreted in this narrative as “the man of the morning on the tree.” He refused to

²⁶¹ Mohammed Hassen, *History of Afar* (Afar Aydaadu, Djibouti: 2009), 59.

²⁶² Hummo, Seenanti Arih aydaadu, 28-30.

descend until the community accepted him as their legitimate leader. After negotiations and collective deliberation, the people consented to his condition. The ensuing uprising led to the overthrow of the Ankala king, and Hadalmahis was crowned ruler. In this version, therefore, Gibdi Ḥamad (Hadalmahis) emerges as both avenger and founder—a figure whose authority rests on moral redress and popular recognition.²⁶³

A second genealogical tradition distinguishes between Gibdi Ḥamad and Hadalmahis, presenting the latter as a descendant rather than an alternative name. In this version, Ṣaʿd ad-Dīn—associated in broader regional historiography with the leadership of the medieval Adal polity—is said to have had ten sons, among whom Ṣabr ad-Dīn and Yūsuf are particularly emphasized. While Ṣabr ad-Dīn is remembered as a founder of the Adal Sultanate, Yūsuf is said to have settled in Adaylu. Yūsuf’s lineage continued through his son ʿUmar Yūsuf, whose own son was Hadalmahis. One of Hadalmahis’s sons, Asa-Kamil, reportedly migrated to the Gulf of Tadjoura and established the Tadjoura Sultanate. In subsequent generations, descendants of Hadalmahis expanded their authority further southward, eventually invading Raḥayta and overthrowing the Ankala dynasty there. Through this process, they founded both the Tadjoura and Raḥayta sultanates, consolidating Afar political authority along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden littoral.²⁶⁴

Collectively, the oral traditions suggest that the sons of Ṣaʿd ad-Dīn played pivotal roles in shaping subsequent Afar political formations. Ṣabr ad-Dīn is remembered as connected to the foundation of the Adal Sultanate, while Yūsuf’s descendants—through ʿUmar Yūsuf²⁶⁵ and Hadalmahis—are credited with dismantling the Ankala dynasty and founding new coastal sultanates.

²⁶³ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 32. kamil, *History of Afar*, 59.

²⁶⁴ Dardar Hummed Abdukkaadri, Sultan of Tadjoura, interview by the author, Tadjoura, Djibouti, January 11, 2018; Arramis Hummed Sulle, author of several Afar history books, interview by the author, Djibouti, January 7, 2025; Hummed Berket Siraj, Head of the Tadjoura Sultanate Council, interview by the author, Djibouti, January 19, 2024.

²⁶⁵ Note: -In Afar oral tradition, ʿUmar Yūsuf is also known by the nickname “Kitoobale ʿUmar,” meaning “the man who possesses the religious book.” He is portrayed as a leader associated with the Ifat Sultanate and is remembered by religious scholars as connected to early Islamic polities, whereas the Ankala dynasty is generally characterized as a predominantly secular ruling house. For this reason, ʿUmar Yūsuf is widely remembered in the tradition as a religious figure within society and is described as always carrying Islamic books.

Thus, despite genealogical ambiguities and narrative variations, the core historical memory preserved in Afar oral tradition points to a process of dynastic transformation in which descent from Ṣaʿd ad-Dīn provided the ideological and political foundation for the emergence of the Tadjoura and Raḥayta sultanates.

The establishment of the Raḥayto Sultanate marked a significant continuation of Afar-Islamic governance along the Horn of Africa's coastal corridor. Following the decline of the Adal Sultanate in the sixteenth century, new Afar political entities such as Raḥayto and Awsa inherited and preserved the political, religious, and cultural traditions of Adal. Like Ifat and Adal, the rulers of Raḥayto combined Islamic legitimacy with clan-based leadership, reinforcing both religious authority and kinship-based governance within Afar society.

Geographically, Raḥayto is situated approximately 55 kilometers north of Assab, extending from Gubi Ungaytu to Tagorri Boha, and bordered by the Awsa Sultanate to the northwest. It also encompassed highland territories stretching from Mount Mussali to Siyyaaru. Due to its early establishment and long-standing influence, Raḥayto is considered one of the oldest Afar Islamic sultanates, predating both the Awsa and Bidu Sultanates.²⁶⁶

The ruling class of Raḥayto belonged to the Adali tribe, the same ancestral group that ruled the Tadjoura Sultanate. Both dynasties traced their descent from the Hadalmahis branch of the Saʿd ad-Dīn lineage, demonstrating the continuity of Adal's royal bloodline across multiple Afar states. The Raḥayto ruling family was divided into two sub-clans of the Adali tribe—Dinnite and Burhanto. The sultans held the title Dardar, the same title used by the rulers of Tadjoura. When a member of the Dinnite clan served as Dardar, a member of the Burhanto clan held the position of Banoyta (vice-sultan or crown prince). Upon the death of a Dardar, the Banoyta from the alternate clan succeeded him, creating a balanced system of succession and preserving political stability.²⁶⁷

The coronation of a new sultan was celebrated through a ritual known as the Dinkara ceremony, which emphasized the sacred legitimacy of kingship. The *Dinkara* was a ceremonial drum used to summon the local community to the enthronement ceremony. The Banoyta ordered the beating of the drum, symbolizing public participation and communal unity. Upon the death of a Dardar, the

²⁶⁶ Hashim, Almanhal, 521-525.

²⁶⁷ Habib, History of Afar /Adal/ People, 243-250.

Dinkara drum was buried for one year as a sign of mourning. After a year, when a new Dardar was crowned, the drum was unearthed, re-covered with fresh leather, and beaten again to mark the renewal of leadership.²⁶⁸

The historical continuity linking Rahayto, Ifat, Adal, and later Awsa reflects a long and dynamic tradition of Afar-Islamic political organization. The genealogical connection through the Hadalmahis lineage and the shared administrative, religious, and cultural practices among these sultanates illustrate how the Afar maintained and adapted the political legacy of Adal long after its decline. While Ifat served as the nucleus of Islamic statehood in the thirteenth century and Adal became its military and commercial successor during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Rahayto and Awsa perpetuated this legacy into the modern era by blending Islamic governance with traditional Afar socio-political institutions.

The establishment of the Hadalmahis-Adali ruling line began in the sixteenth century under Dardar Hamed Mismar—known as *Gibdi Hamed*—who consolidated his authority after defeating the Ankala king at the Battle of Rahayto. His leadership marked the firm establishment of the Adal-Mahis lineage in coastal Afar politics. He was followed by Derder Abduli, who ruled from 1630 to 1660, and thereafter by Dardar Kamil (1660–1690). The early eighteenth century was shaped by the reign of Derder Ad-Alum Hamed (1690–1705), remembered for institutionalizing the division of the royal family into the Dinite and Burhanto sub-clans. His son, Derdar Dini Ad-Alum, ruled for fifty years (1705–1755), a period of consolidation followed by a brief interlude under Derdar Hamed Burhan, whose short-lived rule ended with the accession of his cousin, Derdar Burhan Dini (1755–1780).²⁶⁹

Successive rulers—including Dardar Burhan Hamed, known as Dardar Sadiq (1780–1815), and Dardar Muhammad Burhan Dini (1815–1839)—oversaw a period of relative internal stability while navigating expanding commercial ties across the Gulf of Aden. This stability was interrupted by short transitions, such as the brief rule of Derdar Muhammad Burhan (Sadiq) in 1839, followed by the tenure of Dardar Dini Muhammad Burhan (1839–1863). The latter played a pivotal political role during the early era of European imperial encroachment, negotiating with French authorities

²⁶⁸ kaamil, History of Afar, Afar Aydaadu ,59.

²⁶⁹ <http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Djibouti.html>

for settlement rights in Obock and traveling to Paris in 1862 to formalize a treaty with the French government.²⁷⁰

The subsequent reign of Derder Burhan Mohammed—known as *Asa Derder* or *red Derder*—was equally consequential. In 1864 he permitted Italian agents to settle at Assab, a decision that would have lasting geopolitical implications for Afar coastal sovereignty. His death that same year led to the rule of his son, Derder Burhan Dini (1864–1887), who resisted earlier agreements with the French and presided during the period when Rahayto came increasingly under Italian influence. The late nineteenth century brought further instability. Derdar Humed Mohammed Dini (1887–1910) shifted the political center of the sultanate to Hayu (modern Djibouti) in 1899, responding to growing Italian expansion. Arrested in 1900 and released only in 1910, his exile left political gaps that obscure the direct line of succession until the accession of Derdar Muhammad Burhan—known as *Keda Muhammad* or “Muhammad the Great”—who ruled from 1941 to 1945.²⁷¹

In the post-colonial era, succession continued through Dardar Abduh Mohammed (1945–1950) and Derder Dawud Mohammed (1950–1982), whose long rule bridged the transition from colonial rule into the modern Djiboutian state. He was followed by Derder Obakari Abdou (1984–1993), whose accession was delayed by internal disputes, illustrating the increasing influence of contemporary political dynamics on traditional authority. Since 1993, Derder Abdukadir Dawud has served as the reigning sultan of Rahayto, maintaining the continuity of the Hadalmahis–Adali lineage into the present day.

As a result, the Rahayto Sultanate stands as an enduring institution within Afar political history—one that blended Islamic governance, clan-based legitimacy, ritual authority, and hereditary succession. Its rulers, from the fall of the Ankala dynasty to the modern era, contributed to the preservation of Afar autonomy and the broader historical legacy of Islamic coastal polities in the Horn of Africa.

²⁷⁰ Didier Morin, *Afar Historical Dictionary (1288–1982)* (Paris: Karthala, 2004), 303, s.v. “Rahaytó,” 230–34.

²⁷¹ Simon Imbert-Vier, “Invention and Achievements of the Djiboutian-Erythrean Border,” *Africa* (Rome) 64, no. 1–2 (2009): 105–19.

2.4.6 Historical development of Girrifo (Bidu) Sultanate

The Girrifo, also known as the Bidu Sultanate, was one of the prominent Islamic political entities that emerged in the Afar lowlands following the widespread Islamization of the Afar people. Although the exact period of its establishment remains uncertain, historical and oral traditions suggest that it arose around the sixteenth century, during a time when various Afar territories were reorganizing politically after the decline of the early Muslim states of Ifat and Adal. The ruling family of the Bidu Sultanate belonged to the Dammahoyta clan, also referred to as the *Hammadisirat* lineage. Prior to their ascendancy, the region had been governed by the Ankala tribe, which maintained local authority for generations. However, by the sixteenth century, the Dammahoyta successfully assumed power and established a hereditary line of rulers that would endure well into the twentieth century.²⁷²

The Dammahoyta clan, like the Moodayto of Awsa and the Tadjoura and Adali lineages, traced its ancestry to the Hadalmahis family, through which they claimed descent from one of the ten sons of Sultan Sa'd ad-Dīn, the last ruler of the Ifat Sultanate. This genealogical link provided them with both political legitimacy and religious prestige, situating the Bidu Sultanate within the broader continuum of Islamic dynasties in the Horn of Africa. Such claims to descent from Sa'd ad-Dīn served to reinforce their status as successors to the noble Islamic ruling families who had governed the region since the thirteenth century and connected the Dammahoyta to a shared spiritual and political heritage across Afar territories.

According to Werner Munzinger (1869),:-

*“The Danakil live together with the Damhoita, whose subjects they have nearly become; of old they had the same position among the Afars which the Dumhoita now hold, but it appears that a bad use of their power was their ruin. They all remember this so well that the Dumhoita, when they pass one of the Dankil villagers, get off their mules to show their respect for a fallen power. The Dammahoita are said to have emigrated from the Habab country; it is certain they came from the north. They usually inhabit Buri and the coast as far as Ayth, and in the mountains the market of Ala belongs to them; but you find them among all the tribes, and they make themselves feared by their coolness and energy”.*²⁷³

²⁷² Habib, History of Afar /Adal/ People, 250-260.

²⁷³ Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country, 210.

This description provides valuable insight into the early migration and establishment of the Dammahoyta among the Afar, suggesting that they moved southward from the Habab region—present-day Eritrea—toward the Buri Peninsula and Ayth coast, integrating with local Afar clans and asserting dominance through trade, warfare, and intertribal alliances. Their control over key caravan routes linking the Red Sea coast with the interior highlands positioned them as both intermediaries and protectors of regional commerce.

The geographical domain of the Bidu Sultanate extended eastward to Sidiha Eela, southward to Halhal, Dodom, and Ala, and northward and westward to Magoros. This expansive territory encompassed important caravan routes that connected the Afar lowlands to the ports of Ayth and Assab, making the Sultanate an important political and economic actor in the region.

The earliest identifiable ruler of the Dammahoyta line is Sultan Burili, remembered not only as a political leader but also as the architect of one of the foundational Afar customary legal systems, the *Burili Mada*. This legal corpus reflects a sophisticated synthesis between Afar customary norms and Islamic jurisprudence, representing an early localized articulation of Sharia that reinforced administrative cohesion, social regulation, and spiritual legitimacy across the Bidu domain. Sultan Burili—also known as *Burili Hassan Dubi*—was renowned for his juridical insight and fathered three sons: Ahau Gura, Humed, and Asa Abakari. Upon his death, leadership passed to his eldest son, Sultan Ahau Gura.²⁷⁴

Ascending the throne at a young age, Sultan Ahau Gura soon confronted significant external threats, most notably Oromo incursions led by Ahlen Dawud. Although he successfully repelled the invasion and killed the Oromo commander, Sultan Ahau Gura himself fell in the ensuing conflict. His six children—Haisema, Halo, Asa Ali, Ugure, Keda Ali, and Humed—constituted the next generation of the ruling house, and the sultanate passed to his son Sultan Halo Ahaw Gura, who governed until his death at the age of forty. Leadership then transitioned to his son, Sultan Haisema I Halo Ahaw Gura.²⁷⁵

Sultan Haisema I is remembered in Afar oral and written histories as a wise, patient, and conciliatory ruler. Dr. Hashim Sultan describes him as a leader who prioritized negotiated

²⁷⁴ Hashim, Almanhal, 498-500.

²⁷⁵ Habib, History of Afar /Adal/ People, 250-260.

settlements and peaceful resolution of inter-clan disputes. His reign, however, ended early—at the age of forty—and the throne passed to his son Sultan Ahaw Haisema (Asa Ahaw), who returned from the town of Idi to assume power following his father's death.

Sultan Ahaw Haisema's reign was characterized by disciplined governance aimed at stabilizing the domain. He is credited with eliminating cattle raiding in the Mebra region and successfully integrating surrounding clans into a structured tributary system, thereby consolidating regional authority. He ruled until the age of fifty, after which his son Sultan Hummed Asa Ahaw succeeded him.

Sultan Hummed Asa Ahaw governed prudently and firmly, outliving six of his sons-in-law—a detail preserved in oral tradition to illustrate both his longevity and the tumultuous environment of his era. He was succeeded by his son Sultan Haisema Hummed. Upon the latter's death, however, a succession dispute erupted between Haisema Hummed's young son and designated heir—Sultan Haisema Hummed (the younger)—and his uncle Humed Halo. In an attempt to assert authority symbolically, the uncle tied thirty camels by their necks in a traditional gesture of sovereign claim, but the nephew dramatically slaughtered them in defiance. Escalation was prevented only through elder mediation, which affirmed the child's right to ascend the throne. Sultan Haisema Hummed, however, died prematurely at the age of ten, and leadership passed to his son Sultan Ahaw Haisema.²⁷⁶

Sultan Ahaw Haisema ruled until his death at around the age of thirty, after which he was succeeded by his son Sultan Haisema II Ahaw, whose reign—approximately 1860 to 1899—is one of the best documented in Bidu history. Known for his piety, consultative decision-making, and firm defense of territorial sovereignty, Haisema II maintained regular contact with Islamic scholars and adjudicated according to both customary and religious law. His most dramatic confrontation occurred in 1881, when he repelled an Italian colonial detachment advancing from Assab along the Geharena and Gores routes. After killing thirty-two Italian soldiers at Didi, he is said to have released a surviving dog with a warning letter tied to its neck—an episode that some local accounts attribute to Sultan Yasin Haisema but which documentary evidence firmly places during Haisema

²⁷⁶ Hashim, Almanhal, 498-500.

II's reign. He died in 1899 while reciting the Qur'an alongside local religious leaders and was buried at the royal cemetery in Grifo. His son Sultan Mohammed Haisema succeeded him.²⁷⁷

Sultan Mohammed Haisema governed from 1899 to 1903. Energetic and decisive, and known for his skill in the traditional Afar game of chess, he nonetheless faced serious intertribal conflict. His reign ended abruptly when he was killed during fighting between the Hutu and Afar groups in Teru. As he left no heirs, the throne passed to his younger brother, Sultan Yasin Haisema.

Although formally enthroned in 1905, Sultan Yasin had been designated ruler in 1903 at the age of thirteen. During his minority, the regency was exercised by his uncle Osman Aha and his sister, Princess Aisha Haisema. At fifteen, he was escorted to the court of Sultan Yayyo of Awsa to gain administrative experience and consolidate his legitimacy. Sultan Yasin's reign was marked by sophisticated diplomatic engagement. In 1908, when Ras Michael (Mohammed Ali) of Dessie raided Mebra and seized livestock, Yasin negotiated the peaceful return of the animals. He also introduced taxes on transit goods passing through Bidu territory, generating significant revenue reportedly amounting to more than half a million francs.²⁷⁸

Relations with Italy deteriorated after 1928, when Governor Baron Franchetti shifted his headquarters from Assab to Gehare and initiated mining operations without consultation. Sultan Yasin rejected Italian efforts to subordinate the Afar to imperial authority, explicitly declaring that the Bidu were not subjects of Emperor Haile Selassie. Although Sheikh Jamaluddin Ibrahim attempted mediation, conflict became unavoidable. Italian forces launched a surprise night attack, overwhelming the Bidu leadership after two days of resistance. Sultan Yasin and his secretary, Muhammad Ashami, were taken prisoner, while several relatives—including Abdukadir Hanfare—were executed. Sultan Yasin Haisema was killed in captivity in 1930, and the throne passed to his cousin Sultan Muhammad Ahau.²⁷⁹

Sultan Muhammad Ahau immediately relocated the capital from Grifo to Siifani and restored cohesion within the Sultanate. He retaliated against those who had undermined Bidu authority during the Italian confrontation and resisted attempts by highland Ethiopian authorities to exploit

²⁷⁷ Thesiger, the Danakil diary, 65.

²⁷⁸ Hashim, Almanhal, 499-511.

²⁷⁹ Jacques Varet, *Proceedings of the 8th African Rift Geothermal Conference*, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2–8, 2020.

internal divisions. His capacity to unite the Afar is perhaps best illustrated during a campaign led by Ras Araya of Mekonni against Afar areas in Chifra: Sultan Muhammad dispatched fifty-seven warriors, only six of whom survived. The sacrifice compelled both the Afar and the highland forces to acknowledge each other's courage and agree to avoid further hostilities. Sultan Muhammad Ahau ruled until his death in 1997 in the Teru district and was succeeded by his son Sultan Abdu Haisema, the current ruler of the Bidu Sultanate.



Map 10. Map showing the location of Girrifo sultanate (Sources;- Hashim jemaluddin,Almanhal, 2007,p.133)

2.4.7 Historical development of Goba’ad Sultanate

The Goba’ad Sultanate occupies a significant place in Afar history, both as a political entity and as a center of military and social organization. Initially known as the *Goba’ad Emirate*, the region was subordinate to the Tadjoura Sultanate, one of the earliest Islamic states in the Afar region. The transformation from an emirate to a fully recognized sultanate occurred during the reign of Sultan Hummad Laoita, following 1884. This elevation reflected not only the consolidation of local political authority but also the increasing importance of Goba’ad in regional trade and strategic networks. The ruling family, the Laoitatati, derived its name from Sultan Laoita and represented a genealogical branch of the Adali tribe, tracing their descent to Hadalmahis, the common ancestor of several Afar sultanates.²⁸⁰

The tribes under the Goba’ad Sultanate, together with those under the Tadjoura and Rahayto Sultanates, were collectively referred to as Debnek-Weima. This classification extended beyond genealogy to social and legal structures: the Debnek-Weima tribes adhered to a shared customary law, also termed Debnek-Weima law. This system regulated matters ranging from dispute resolution and inheritance to war and diplomacy, highlighting the integrated political culture among Afar sultanates. Because of this shared legal framework, the Gobad Sultanate was also frequently referred to as the Debne Sultanate.²⁸¹

Geographically, the Goba’ad Sultanate was strategically located. It was bordered to the east by the Awsa Sultanate and to the northwest by the Tadjoura Sultanate.²⁸² This positioning placed Gobad along key trade routes connecting the Ethiopian highlands, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, which in turn made it an important center for both commercial and military activity. While Tadjoura and Rahayto maintained ritualized succession practices such as the *Dinkara* coronation ceremony, Gobad’s succession was comparatively direct, with power transferred from father to son without elaborate ceremonial rites.²⁸³

The Gobad Sultanate was renowned for its warrior culture. Its tribes were considered the most formidable in the Afar region, a reputation confirmed by Hashim Gamaladdin (2007), who

²⁸⁰ Kaamil, History of Afar, Afar Aydaadu ,60.

²⁸¹ Ali Coubba, *Le mal djiboutien: Rivalités ethniques et enjeux politiques* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995), 18.

²⁸² Hashim, Almanhal ,535.

²⁸³ Kaamil, History of Afar, Afar Aydaadu,60.

observed that Imam Ahmed's bodyguard, known as the Mallasay military group, primarily recruited soldiers from the Gobad tribes. The emphasis on martial prowess influenced both the political structure of the sultanate and its interactions with neighboring powers.²⁸⁴

Emir Lo'oyta Ibrahim (c. 1830–1866) presided over Gobad during a period of strategic commercial and political consolidation. Controlling caravan routes linking Obock on the Red Sea coast to the Ethiopian highlands, he established the sultanate as a crucial node for trade and diplomacy. His reign strengthened Gobad's martial reputation, as local tribes were organized to defend these routes and maintain regional security.²⁸⁵

Upon his death, Sultan Hummad Lo'oytá (1866–1902) ascended the throne during the height of European encroachment.

The sultanate's political significance was further reinforced through diplomacy and treaties. In 1884, the French colonial administration concluded an agreement with Sultan Hummad Laoita. Under the treaty, the sultan guaranteed the safety of caravans traveling from Obock District to the borders of the Awsa Sultanate. In exchange, he was allowed to levy taxes—specifically, one *Maria Theresa thaler* per camel—which augmented the sultanate's economic and political authority.

However, Sultan Hummad Laoita's ambitions extended beyond formal agreements. He married Asawka Mohammed Hanfare, the sister of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of Awsa, and in 1875 he attempted to overthrow his father-in-law with the assistance of Swiss explorer Werner Munzinger. Hummad's correspondence to Sultan Mohammed included the statement: "*Kalu yot habiiy, kalot falmah kollih gahi*", which can be translated as, "*Hit the lake for me, or I will compete with you to share the Kalo (Awsa) with you.*" This statement refers to *Lake Assal* ("*Kalu*"), which at the time formed part of the Awsa territory, and to the fertile central regions of Awsa ("*Kalo*"). The correspondence reflects both the strategic and economic significance of these areas, highlighting the contested control over water resources and arable lands within the Awsa Sultanate, as well as the competitive dynamics among local rulers over valuable territorial assets. The message

²⁸⁴ Hashim, Almanhal, 287.

²⁸⁵ Aramis Houmed Soulé, *Deux vies dans l'histoire de la Corne de l'Afrique: Mahamad Hanfare (1861–1902) et Ali Mirah Hanfare (1944)*, *Sultans Afars* (Addis Abeba: CFEE, *Etudes éthiopiennes* no. 2, 2005), 137.

indicated his intent to seize these territories and consolidate power. The plot ultimately failed when Munzinger was killed by Awsa forces at the Battle of Mount Gifu.²⁸⁶

The treacherous nature of these political manoeuvres was captured in Afar poetry, which provides valuable insight into contemporary perceptions of loyalty and betrayal. Poet Tolah Hanfare predicted Hummad Laoita's eventual disloyalty, describing his ability to adopt the identities of different peoples and his duplicitous nature:

Afar (original)

Qiisa fan gexek qiisi num kaak iyyan

Turk fan gexeke turk num ceela kaak iyyan

Nek gexek gile samlisak kaah sugaana

Nel gacek gaba lamma adda kaak xagna

Nublek inti wagittu niqba nef hinna

Yaabek afqado kaah wagarta num hinna²⁸⁷

Translation

When he goes to the Issa, he acts like an Issa;

When he goes to the Turks, he behaves like a Turk.

When he leaves us, waited him with anger;

When he returns, we welcome him and kiss his hands twice.

His face appears kind and unthreatening,

But when he speaks, our hearts cannot make peace with him.

Another contemporary female poet, Kolle, criticized the alliance between Hummad Laoita and foreign agents, highlighting widespread awareness of political conspiracies:

²⁸⁶ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 301-302; Thsiger, the Danakil diary, 65.

²⁸⁷ Kaamil, *History of Afar*, Afar Aydaadu, 95.

Afar (original)

Buxa koo fanah beyam table?

Mala bad fanah beyam table

Agabuk lagaaqi kaah xissa

Daro caxxalite kaah hayta

Gaalak qakkali kaah qidda

Tagorraamoh malay koo neexegh

Qasa cummadih malay koo neexegeh

Translation

Do you not see that he moves his house toward you?

He has made secret plans with foreign agents.

You offered him beautiful women as gifts,

You gave him abundant grain and slaughtered your finest camels in his honor.

O Tadjoura's conspirators, we reject your plot.

We have discovered Hummad Laoita's treachery.²⁸⁸

The Gobad Sultanate, therefore, stood out not only for its military capabilities but also for its strategic engagement with both local and colonial powers. The ruling Laoitatati family, like other Afar sultanates, traced its lineage to the Hadalmahis tribe, which provided a shared sense of identity and legitimacy. But Sultan Lo'oytá Hummad Anfare (1902–1932), faced mounting challenges from French colonial expansion. Early in his reign, he attempted to assert authority over internal rivals and maintain Gobad's independence. However, increasing French control over the region, particularly unauthorized mining operations and administrative interference, led to heightened tensions. In 1930, Sultan Lo'oytá Hummad Anfare and his vizier, Hadj Ali Hummad Lo'oyta, were deported to Madagascar, marking the formal abolition of the sultanate under French

²⁸⁸ Kaamil, History of Afar, 95.

rule. Lo'oytá Hummad Anfare died in exile in 1932, signaling the end of direct political sovereignty while leaving the Laoitatati lineage intact.²⁸⁹

During the colonial period, the Laoitatati family continued to assert dynastic identity. Hadj Ali Lo'oyta returned from exile in 1937 and settled in Ethiopia, preserving the continuity of the royal line. This set the stage for the symbolic revival of the sultanate in the twenty-first century, when Habib Mohammed Loita (2015–present) was enthroned as Sultan of Gobad.²⁹⁰ While the modern title carries no formal political power, it reflects the enduring cultural and communal significance of the dynasty, as well as the historical legacy of Gobad's rulers in defending Afar autonomy, negotiating treaties, and maintaining military and economic strength over two centuries.

Throughout its history, the Gobad Sultanate exemplified the integration of hereditary rule, military authority, and commercial strategy. Its sultans navigated the complexities of regional diplomacy, defended territorial claims against neighboring polities, and engaged European powers to protect economic interests. The sultanate's endurance, both in historical memory and in symbolic revival, underscores the resilience of traditional Afar governance even in the context of colonial subjugation.



Map 11. Map showing the location of Goba'ad sultanate (Sources; -wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultanat_de_Goba'ad).

²⁸⁹ Philippe Oberlé and Pierre Hugot, *Histoire de Djibouti: Des origines à la république* (Paris and Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1985; reprint 1996), 346.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Geneological linkage of Afar sultanates

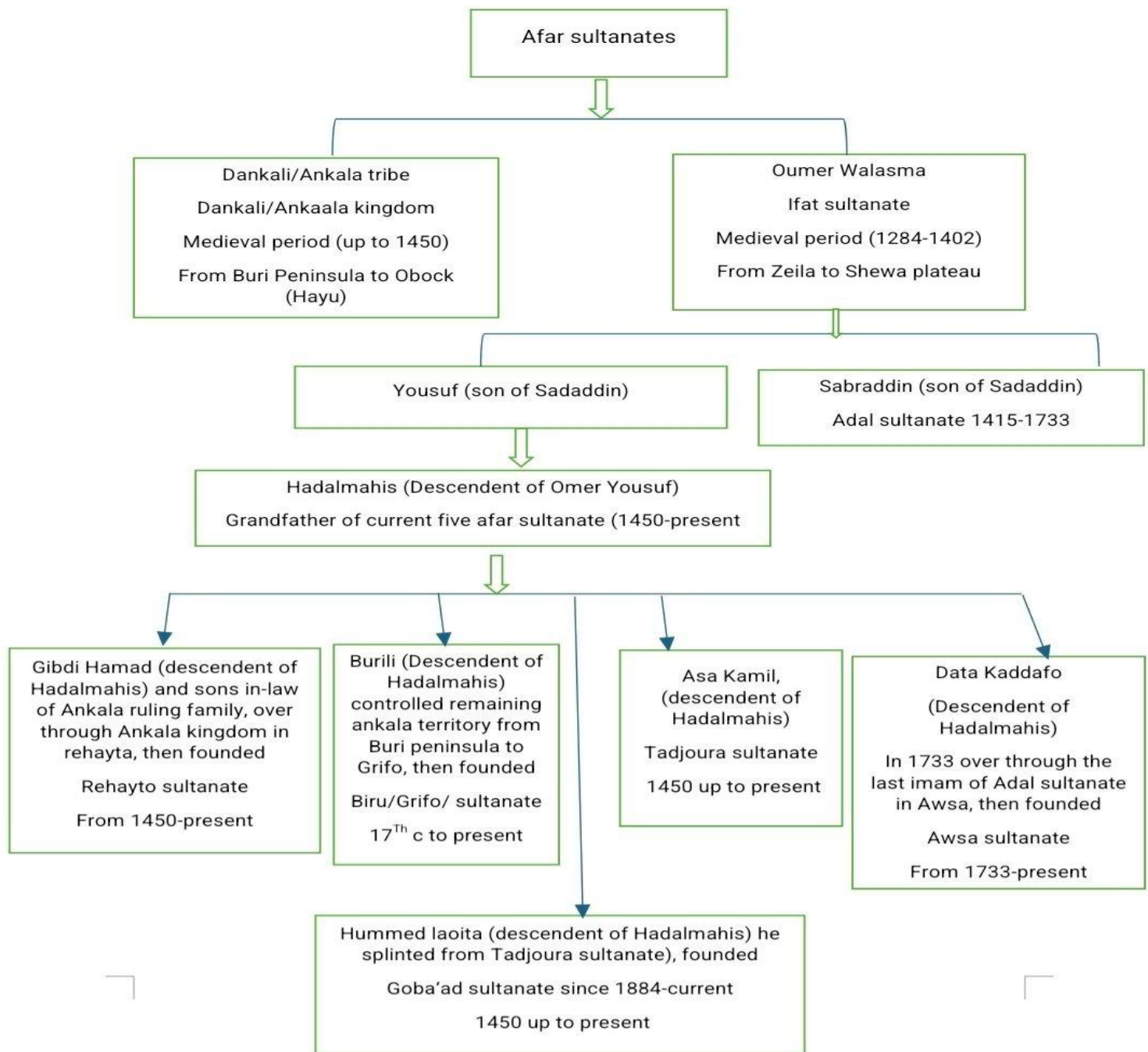


Figure 5. Sources;-This graphic representation was produced by the author on the basis of multiple historical sources referenced in the study.

2.5 Economic Networks of the Afar People

The Afar people of the Horn of Africa developed a highly sophisticated and multidimensional economy that extended far beyond pastoralism, encompassing maritime trade, caravan commerce, livestock management, salt extraction, and irrigated agriculture. Archaeological, historical, and oral sources indicate that the Afar have inhabited the Horn for more than four millennia.²⁹¹ From as early as antiquity, Afar communities actively participated in long-distance trade networks linking the Ethiopian highlands, the Red Sea coast, Arabia, Persia, and India (Hashim 2007), reflecting both their economic sophistication and strategic geographical positioning. This integration into regional and transcontinental networks demonstrates that the Afar were not isolated pastoralists but active agents shaping commerce, cultural exchange, and political alliances in the Horn of Africa.²⁹²

Therefore, the Afar have long occupied one of the most strategically significant ecological and commercial corridors in the Horn of Africa, a region that forms a natural bridge between the Ethiopian highlands, the Red Sea, and the wider Indian Ocean world. Extending from the Afar Depression and the salt plains of Dallol and Afdera to the Dankali coast and the ports of Baylul, Assab, and Raheita, Afar territory has for millennia functioned as a zone of movement rather than isolation. This geography endowed the Afar with a unique historical role as intermediaries who controlled circulation rather than sedentary production, enabling them to shape regional economic systems far beyond their demographic size. Through a combination of pastoral mobility, salt extraction, caravan organization, and maritime trade, the Afar developed a diversified economic system that connected Africa, Arabia, and the broader Red Sea world across antiquity, the medieval Islamic period, and the early modern and colonial eras.

Some historical traditions associate the Afar coast with the biblical land of Ophir, famed for supplying gold, incense, and precious stones to the kingdom of Solomon. While such identifications remain speculative, they reflect long-standing recognition of northeastern Africa as an ancient hub of international trade. Pankhurst (1997) advances a linguistic and geographical hypothesis suggesting an affinity between the terms “Ophir” and “Afar,” situating the Baylul area

²⁹¹ Hashim, Almanhal, 29-30.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 302.

and the broader Dankali coast within early Red Sea commercial circuits. Classical and Near Eastern sources consistently point to the southern Red Sea as a source of aromatics, minerals, and luxury goods, commodities that were transported inland and outward through complex networks of coastal and caravan trade.²⁹³ Archaeological and environmental evidence indicates that by the first millennium BCE, communities inhabiting Afar coastal and inland zones were already integrated into these long-distance systems, exporting incense, livestock, salt, and possibly gold-bearing products, while facilitating maritime connections between Africa, South Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean.

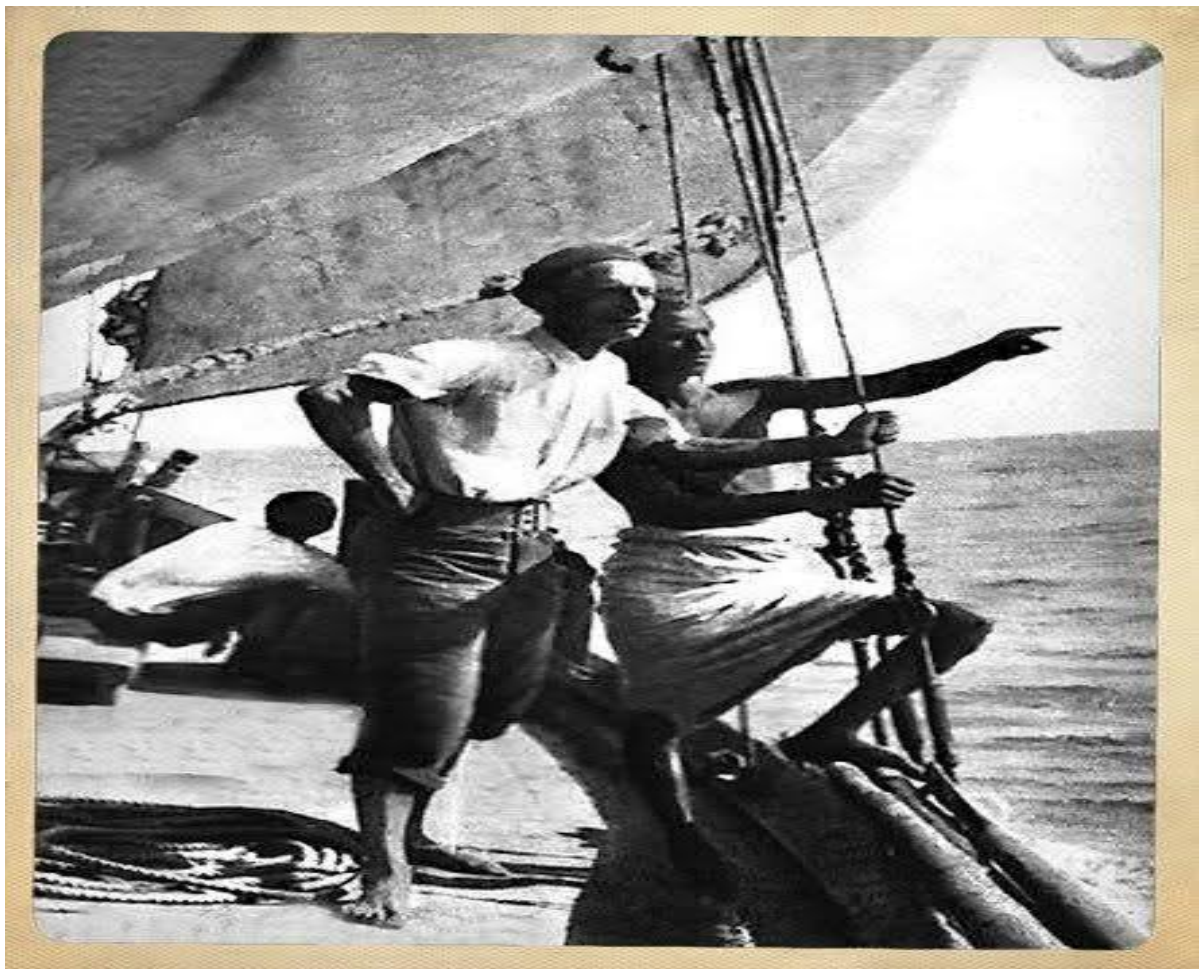


Figure 6. Sources;-Henry Monfreid(1910-1930), *Les secrets de la mer Rouge* (Grasset, 1931)

These early economic engagements predated the emergence of centralized highland states and laid the foundations for the Afar's enduring role as commercial mediators. Rather than forming large

²⁹³ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*,16.

territorial empires, Afar society evolved around flexible political units capable of controlling routes, resources, and seasonal movement. This adaptability allowed Afar communities to survive climatic fluctuations, shifting trade patterns, and political transformations while maintaining economic relevance. Control over movement—of caravans, ships, and herds—became the defining feature of Afar power, distinguishing their political economy from agrarian or urban-centered models found elsewhere in the Horn.

The rise of Islam further deepened Afar integration into transregional economic and cultural networks. The Afar region was not merely a recipient of Islamic influence but an active corridor through which Islam entered the Horn of Africa. Oral traditions among Afar salt traders and pastoral clans emphasize the religious significance of the Negash Mosque, often described as the “second Mecca,” underscoring the early and enduring presence of Islam in northeastern Ethiopia. Trojer (2021) recorded traditions suggesting that followers of the Prophet Muhammad, reportedly including members of his family, passed through areas such as present-day Konnaba during the ninth century. These movements were inseparable from commerce, as merchants, religious scholars, and pastoralists traveled together across the Red Sea and through inland caravan routes.²⁹⁴

Islamic affiliation strengthened trust-based trade networks, facilitating credit, partnership, and dispute resolution across long distances. Afar ports and caravan stations became nodes within a wider Islamic commercial world linking Arabia, the Swahili coast, the Ethiopian interior, and even South Asia. The spread of Islam thus reinforced, rather than replaced, preexisting Afar economic structures, embedding them within a broader religious and cultural framework that enhanced their resilience and reach.

Among all economic activities, salt extraction and trade emerged as the cornerstone of Afar power and prosperity. Salt was both a subsistence necessity and a strategic commodity, functioning for centuries as the principal currency of the Ethiopian highlands. The Afar term *arho*, meaning “caravan,” reflects the deep cultural centrality of long-distance mobility and trade within Afar

²⁹⁴ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 64-65.

society.²⁹⁵ Major salt fields at Berahle, Afdera, Asale, and Dallol were not merely extraction sites but highly organized economic zones governed by customary law, clan authority, and negotiated access rights. Afar clans regulated who could mine salt, when extraction could occur, and how caravans were organized and protected.

The *amole* salt bars produced in the Afar salt plains constituted one of the most important commodities in the economic history of the northern Horn of Africa. Circulating extensively across Tigray, Wollo, Shewa, and adjacent regions, these standardized salt bars underpinned systems of market exchange, taxation, and political authority. Beyond their utilitarian value, *amole* functioned as a unit of account, a medium of exchange, and a store of value, thereby integrating Afar salt production into the broader fiscal and commercial structures of the Ethiopian highland states.

In the nineteenth century, the British officer and traveler William Cornwallis Harris observed that the *amole* salt obtained from the Danakil salt plains supplied not only the markets of Abyssinia but also circulated deep into the African interior. He emphasized that these salt bars effectively “passed as a currency,” underscoring their recognized monetary function within regional trade networks.²⁹⁶

Pankhurst (1963; 1968) demonstrates that revenues derived from salt trade enabled Ethiopian rulers—particularly in Tigray—to acquire firearms and military supplies through Red Sea ports, directly linking Afar-controlled resources to the militarization and state-building processes of the nineteenth century.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Tsegay B. Gebrelibanos, “The Political Economy of Salt Production and Arhotot Trading System in Northeastern Ethiopia (c. 1831–2005),” PhD diss., Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, 2011; Wolbert Smidt, “Die Äthiopischen Salzbarren oder ‘Amolé’ in der Tradition und Sozialen Ordnung des Hochlandes,” in *In Kaiserlichem Auftrag: Die Deutsche Aksum-Expedition 1906 unter Enno Littmann*, ed. Steffen Wenig, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2017), 235–46; Helina S. Woldekiros, “The Route Most Travelled: The Afar Salt Trail, North Ethiopia,” *Chungara Revista de Antropología Chilena* 51, no. 1 (2019): 95–110.

²⁹⁶ W. Cornwallis Harris Major, *The Highland of Ethiopia* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 377.

²⁹⁷ Richard Pankhurst, “The Maria Theresa Dollar in Pre-War Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1963): 8–26 And *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1968).

Afar monopoly over the salt mines remained largely intact until the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1868–1889), whose efforts to open access to Christian highland traders marked a significant rupture in established economic relations. The resulting conflicts between Afar clans and imperial forces were not merely disputes over commerce but struggles over sovereignty, customary rights, and political autonomy. Till (2021) notes that these confrontations destabilized long-standing systems of negotiated access, transforming salt from a shared economic resource into a contested symbol of imperial authority.²⁹⁸

Despite imperial intervention and later reforms under Menelik II, Afar traders retained privileged seasonal access to the salt plains, continuing to dominate extraction and transport. European observers repeatedly commented on the immense productivity of the region. Telles (1710) and Nesbitt (1935) described negotiated arrangements whereby Afar and highland traders divided monthly access to the salt flats according to customary schedules.²⁹⁹ Munzinger's (1869) accounts reveal that weekly markets could involve more than 3,000 traders, each transporting hundreds of *amole* bars.³⁰⁰ When translated into modern economic terms, this trade represented an annual value exceeding one million USD, underscoring the scale and sophistication of Afar economic organization and confirming salt's role as both an economic resource and a political instrument, comparable to other major salt-producing regions in Africa.³⁰¹

Beyond salt, the Afar played a crucial role as caravan organizers and commercial mediators between the Ethiopian interior and the Red Sea coast. Afar-controlled routes connected Tigray, Wollo, and Oromo regions with ports such as Massawa, Tadjoura, Raheita, and Assab, forming a dense network of inland–coastal exchange.³⁰² These routes traversed some of the most inhospitable terrain in the Horn, requiring intimate ecological knowledge, security arrangements, and logistical

²⁹⁸ Trojer, *Landscapes, salt and ethics*, 150.

²⁹⁹ Telles Balthazar F., *The Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (London: J. Knapton, 1710), 34; Nesbitt, *The Desert and Forest*, 377.

³⁰⁰ Munzinger, 'Narrative of a Journey Through the Afar Country', 188–232.

³⁰¹ E. Ann McDougall, 'The Sahara Reconsidered: Pastoralism, Politics and Salt from the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries,' *African Economic History*, no. 12 (1983): 263–86; and 'Salts of the Western Sahara: Myths, Mysteries, and Historical Significance,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 2 (1990): 231–57.

³⁰² Richard Pankhurst, 'The Trade of Northern Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,' *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1964): 49–159.

coordination. Afar caravans transported not only salt but also livestock, hides, coffee, grain, and incense, while returning with textiles, metal goods, firearms, and luxury imports.

Berahle emerged as a major administrative and commercial hub within this system. O'Mahoney (1970) describes it as a bustling center where, during peak seasons, thousands of camels and mules converged, transforming the settlement into a temporary city of traders, pastoralists, and officials.³⁰³ Control over caravan corridors allowed the Afar to levy tribute, guarantee safe passage, and negotiate political relationships with inland rulers and foreign merchants alike.

The strategic importance of Afar-controlled corridors became particularly evident in the late nineteenth century, when European colonial powers intensified their efforts to secure commercial and political access to the Ethiopian interior. The 1883 treaty concluded between the Kingdom of Italy and Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of Awsa illustrates this dynamic with clarity. By guaranteeing the safe passage of Italian caravans to the Red Sea port of Assab, the agreement formally acknowledged Afar sovereignty over the inland trade arteries linking the coast to the central highlands. Rather than bypassing indigenous authority, European agents were compelled to negotiate with Afar rulers, whose territorial control over caravan routes rendered them indispensable intermediaries in regional commerce and diplomacy.³⁰⁴

This pattern of reliance on Afar-controlled routes was not limited to European actors. Earlier nineteenth-century observers had already noted the commanding role of the Afar (often referred to as Danakil in contemporary sources) in regulating trade between the coast and the kingdom of Shoa. Major W. Cornwallis Harris, in his account of travels in the Ethiopian highlands, observed that the entire trade of Aliyu Amba was effectively in the hands of the Danakil. He emphasized that they were treated by the monarch of Shoa with marked deference and respect—an acknowledgment of both their economic leverage and their strategic importance.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Kevin O'Mahoney, "The Salt Trail," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8, no. 2 (1970): 148.

³⁰⁴ Yemane Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism: A Case Study of Eritrea, 1869–1934: Motive, Praxis, and Result* (Lund: University of Lund, 1988), 56; Steven Serels, "The Cost of Living Becomes Unaffordable, 1913–1945," in *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, ed. Steven Serels (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 131–63; Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 145.131–63. Publishing, 2018,

³⁰⁵ Harris, *The Highland of Ethiopia*, 376.

Harris further recorded that caravans from Awsa and Tadjoura arrived regularly—typically on a monthly basis during the fair season—bringing coastal commodities inland and returning with highland products. Despite the manifold obstacles confronting caravan trade, including harsh climatic conditions, logistical challenges, and security risks, the traffic was described as brisk and profitable. The commercial vitality of Aliyu Amba was such that approximately one quarter of its population consisted of Harari and Danakil merchants, reflecting the cosmopolitan and interregional character of the market town.³⁰⁶ These accounts underscore the structural position of the Afar as gatekeepers of movement and commerce between the Red Sea littoral and the Ethiopian interior. Control of corridors stretching from Tadjoura and Assab through Awsa to Shoa was not merely geographical; it was institutional and political. Afar rulers exercised regulatory authority over caravan passage, levied duties, ensured protection, and negotiated treaties with both highland monarchs and foreign powers. Consequently, European expansion in the region—like earlier highland commercial systems—remained contingent upon cooperation with Afar authorities, whose mediation was essential to the functioning of long-distance trade networks in the Horn of Africa.

ROUTE FROM TAJÚRA TO ANKÓBER.

Names of Stations.	Distance.		Supply of Water.	Elevation above the Level of the Sea.	Latitude and Longitude.
	Miles.	Furlongs.			
Tajúra	-	-	Well.	-	{ Lat. 11° 46' 35" N. { Long. 43° 0' 20" E.
Ambábo	3	4	Do.	-	
Dullool	7	-	Do.	-	
Sagáilo	2	4	Do.	-	Lat. 11° 40' 15" N.
Warelissán	14	-	None.	1697	
Báhr Assal	16	-	Do.	Below 570	{ Lat. 11° 37' 30" N. { Long. 42° 33' 6" E.
Goengoonteh	16	-	Stream.		
Allooli	9	-	Pool.	228	
Bedikurroof	16	-	Do.		
Suggadéra	8	-	Do.	-	Lat. 11° 19' 3" N.
Murrah	4	-	Well.	-	Lat. 11° 17' 3" N.
Duddee	15	-	Pool.		
Gobaad	12	-	River.	1057	Lat. 11° 0' 54" N.
Sunkul	4	-	Pool.	-	
Suggagédan	7	-	None.	-	Lat. 10° 53' 0" N.
Dawáylaka	9	4	Pool.	1228	
Oomergooloof	8	4	None.		
Amádeo	7	4	Pool.		
Fiáloo	3	4	Do.	1605	
Barúrudda	15	-	None.		
Killullool	12	-	Pool.	1542	Lat. 10° 34' 33" N.
Waramilli	7	-	Do.	1752	
Nága-koomi	15	-	None.		
Meinha-tolli	15	-	Pool.		
Madéra-dubba	15	4	None.		
Sultelli	17	-	Do.		
Mároo	13	-	Lake.		
Moolu-Zughir	13	-	None.		
Burdúdda	9	-	Pool.		
Háo	15	-	None.	-	Lat. 9° 39' 13" N.
Háwash River	11	-	River.	2223	

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*-384

TABLE—continued.

Names of Stations.	Distance.		Supply of Water.	Elevation above the Level of the Sea.	Latitude and Longitude.
	Miles.	Furlongs.			
Azbóti -	12	4	Pool.	2944	{ Lat. 9° 34' 45'' N. Long. 39° 54' 0'' E.
Dalhára -	12	4	Stream.		
Dinomali -	5	- -	Do.	5271	
Fárri -	1	4	Do.		
Alio Amba -	13	- -	Do.	8200	
Ankóber -	5	- -	Do.		
Total distance	370				

Figure 7. Sources;- Major, W. Cornwallis Harris, *the highland of Ethiopia*, London, Longman, brown, Green and longmans, 1844, p.407-408.

Maritime trade significantly expanded Afar economic and political influence across the Red Sea basin and the Gulf of Aden. Long before the arrival of European powers, Afar coastal communities were recognized as among the most experienced seafarers and navigators of the western Red Sea littoral. Their strategic position along one of the world's most important maritime corridors enabled them to regulate shipping lanes, provide pilotage services, and participate actively in trans-Red Sea commerce linking Arabia, the Horn of Africa, and the wider Indian Ocean world.

Nineteenth-century European observers attempted to contextualize Afar identity within earlier historical traditions. The British traveler Charles Johnston noted that the Afar (whom he rendered as "Affah") were often associated with the name "Adal," a designation used by Abyssinian highlanders for coastal Muslim populations. According to Johnston, this appellation may have arisen from the prominence of specific Afar clans—particularly those inhabiting the vicinity of Massawa—with whom highland authorities most frequently interacted. Such interpretations, while filtered through nineteenth-century ethnographic assumptions, nevertheless underscore the

longstanding commercial and diplomatic contact between Afar coastal groups and inland polities.³⁰⁷

Classical and medieval geographical traditions further illuminate the antiquity of Afar maritime presence. The ancient port of Adulis, located along the Eritrean coast of the Red Sea, served as a major emporium from antiquity through the Aksumite period. Although Egyptian and Greco-Roman sources referenced the port centuries earlier, later traditions associated the surrounding coastal populations with Afar-speaking groups. By the seventeenth century, the German scholar Hiob Ludolf referred to “Dankali” as the name of a large kingdom or province situated along the sea-coast, extending from Adulis southward toward Tadjoura. This description suggests a recognized political and territorial entity controlling a substantial stretch of coastline.³⁰⁸

Medieval Islamic geographers also documented the inhabitants of the Afar coast. The renowned twelfth-century Arabian geographer Al-Idrisi described the populations residing east of the Babel-Mandeb straits, emphasizing their engagement in maritime trade and coastal navigation. His accounts situate the Afar littoral within the broader commercial networks of the Islamic world, linking the Horn of Africa to Yemen, the Hejaz, and beyond.³⁰⁹ These historical references—classical, medieval, and early modern—demonstrate that Afar maritime activity was neither peripheral nor episodic. Rather, it formed a structural component of Red Sea commerce. Control over ports, coastal anchorages, and maritime passages complemented Afar dominance of inland caravan routes. By integrating maritime and overland trade systems, Afar polities exercised economic leverage that extended from the interior markets of the Ethiopian highlands to the shipping lanes of the Red Sea. This dual control of land and sea corridors underscores the enduring geopolitical significance of Afar territories in the history of the Horn of Africa.

Similarly, another Historical accounts James Bruce describe vessels constructed from papyrus, wood, and animal hides, as well as larger sailing craft capable of long-distance voyages. Bruce and later scholars emphasize the prominence of *nakuda* (sea captains), whose social status

³⁰⁷ Johnston, travels in southern Abyssinia, 10-15.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

reflected the centrality of maritime trade in Afar society. Afar ships connected coastal settlements with Arabia, Sudan, and beyond, frequenting ports such as Jeddah, Sawakin, Daba.³¹⁰

Through these maritime routes, Afar traders exported livestock, salt, incense, and hides while importing textiles, spices, metal goods, and luxury items that circulated throughout the Horn of Africa. Maritime commerce complemented caravan trade, allowing the Afar to diversify economic risk and maintain relevance even as political conditions shifted inland.

Underlying all these commercial systems, pastoralism remained the enduring foundation of Afar economic life. Herding supported large populations of camels, cattle, goats, and sheep, shaping wealth distribution, social hierarchy, and political authority.³¹¹ Pastoral mobility allowed Afar communities to exploit seasonal grazing zones while maintaining control over key resources such as wells and riverine pastures. Customary land tenure systems governed access through clan-based rights, negotiation, and conflict mediation. Scholars such as Cossins (1973) and Bondestam (1974) describe the structured leadership of *malak* and *malokti*, whose authority rested on lineage, military capacity, and control over resources.³¹² These institutions provided stability in an arid and volatile environment, yet they were frequently misunderstood or undermined by modern state policies that privileged sedentary agriculture and fixed boundaries.³¹³

In more centralized political contexts, particularly within the Awsa Sultanate, the Afar integrated irrigated agriculture into their economic system. Early irrigation schemes, reportedly introduced by Arab specialists, enabled cereal and fruit cultivation along riverine zones, supplementing pastoral and trade-based livelihoods. By the twentieth century, Awsa had become one of the most agriculturally productive areas in the region. Nesbitt (1935) and Aramis Hummed Sulle (2011)

³¹⁰ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the*, 441.

³¹¹ John Markakis, ed., *Conflict and the Decline of Pastoralism in the Horn of Africa* (London: Macmillan/Palgrave, 1993).

³¹² N. J. Cossins, *No Way to Live: A Study of the Afar Clans of Northeast Rangelands* (Addis Ababa: Imperial Ethiopian Government, Livestock and Meat Board, 1973), 12; L. Bondestam, *Den Moda Dalen: Om Människor och Capitalism i Nordöstra Etiopien* (Lund: Forum, 1974), 436–38.

³¹³ Abebe Mulatu and Solomon Bekure, “The Need to Strengthen Land Laws in Ethiopia to Protect Pastoral Rights,” in *Pastoralism and Development in Africa: Dynamic Change at the Margins*, ed. Andy Catley, Jeremy Lind, and Ian Scoones (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 186–94; Berihun Adugna Gebeye, “Unsustainable the Sustainable: An Evaluation of the Legal and Policy Interventions for Pastoral Development in Ethiopia,” *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 6, no. 2 (2016).

document the introduction of mechanized farming, including tractors, bulldozers, and even small aircraft, developments that increased output while reinforcing state authority and political centralization.³¹⁴

Across millennia, the Afar thus developed one of the most diversified, adaptive, and resilient economic systems in the Horn of Africa. Through their control of salt extraction, caravan corridors, Red Sea maritime routes, pastoral resources, and irrigated agriculture, they accumulated wealth while shaping political and economic relations across Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and the wider Red Sea world. Far from being marginal actors, the Afar were central to the historical economy of the Horn, functioning as indispensable intermediaries, cultural brokers, and holder of political power whose influence extended from antiquity to the modern era.

Collectively, these economic activities reveal a highly integrated and adaptive system. By combining pastoralism, maritime trade, caravan commerce, salt production, and irrigated agriculture, the Afar established an enduring economic framework that not only generated wealth but also reinforced political and social hierarchies. Their control of strategic trade routes, mastery of long-distance commerce, and capacity to negotiate with both inland and coastal powers allowed the Afar to remain a dominant regional actor for centuries, shaping both the material and social landscapes of the Horn of Africa long before European colonial intervention.

2.6 Historiography of the Afar People

The historiography of the Afar people remains fragmented, episodic, and predominantly mediated through external perspectives. Despite the Afar's significant role in the political, economic, social, and religious history of the Horn of Africa, systematic scholarly engagement with their historical experience has been limited. Much of the existing literature consists of exploratory travel narratives, general regional histories in which the Afar appear only peripherally, or thematic studies that fail to interrogate the structural transformations affecting Afar society, particularly during the colonial period.

The earliest written accounts of the Afar originate primarily from European travelers, explorers, and colonial agents, including James Bruce, Henry Salt, Werner Munzinger, Charles Johnston, L. M. Nesbitt, and Wilfred Thesiger. These sources document Afar geography, settlement patterns,

³¹⁴ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 204, 217–218; Aramis, life story of sultan Alimirah, 91.

the salt trade, pastoral livelihoods, resistance to foreign incursions, and the authority of local chiefs and sultans. While valuable as descriptive primary sources, these accounts were shaped by exploratory, diplomatic, or colonial agendas. Consequently, Afar society was often portrayed through environmental determinism or exoticized imagery rather than analyzed as a complex socio-political and economic system with its own institutional logic. Some narratives even reproduced prejudicial depictions, as illustrated by Nesbitt's derogatory characterization of the Afar, reflecting broader epistemological biases inherent in colonial knowledge production.

In broader regional historiography, the Afar are typically situated within general narratives of Ethiopian and Red Sea history. Scholars such as Richard Pankhurst and Bahru Zewde reference Afar trade networks, pastoral systems, and their role in state formation processes. Similarly, Mordechai Abir and Enrico Cerulli discuss the Sultanates of Ifat and Adal, occasionally acknowledging their geographical and political associations with Afar-inhabited lowlands. However, in these works, the Afar are not treated as the central focus; rather, they are positioned within highland-centered or empire-focused frameworks. This reflects a persistent historiographical imbalance, whereby lowland Muslim societies have received comparatively less analytical attention than dominant imperial centers.

A significant body of literature addresses sixteenth-century Muslim–Christian conflicts and the history of the Adal Sultanate. Scholars such as Merid Welde Aregay and Mohammed Hassen recognize the participation of Afar groups and leaders in these conflicts, yet there is limited examination of the internal political organization, administrative structures, and socio-economic foundations of Afar-inhabited polities. Moreover, debates concerning the territorial scope and political identity of the Adal Sultanate underscore the lack of consensus on the historical geography and centrality of Afar communities within these state formations.

Anthropological and cultural studies have offered valuable insights into Afar customary law (*mad'a*), Islamic practices, clan genealogies, oral traditions, and commemorative institutions such as waydal tombstones. Works by I. M. Lewis and George P. Murdock, alongside ethnographic documentation by Enid Parker, illuminate aspects of Afar social organization. However, these studies often treat culture as static and isolated from broader historical processes. Notably, Lewis's hierarchical classification of Afar society has been widely critiqued for misrepresenting the egalitarian and decentralized nature of Afar social structures. More recent research, including that

of Till Jakob Frederik Trojer, explores Afar landscapes, salt economies, and ethical systems, yet integration of these cultural analyses with political-economic transformations remains limited.

Modern political and historical scholarship has increasingly addressed marginalization, inter-ethnic conflict, and governance in Afar regions. Mohammed Yasin examines Afar–Issa conflicts and regional political dynamics, while Medhane Tadesse analyzes conflict resolution in Ethiopia’s peripheries. Hashim Gamaluddin Ibrahim A-shami documents Afar genealogies, sultanates, and territorial boundaries, providing an Afar-centered perspective grounded in oral traditions and local sources. Similarly, works by Maknun Gamaledin Ashami and Yassin Mohammed contribute to understanding the political and economic history of the Afar. Nevertheless, these studies do not offer a systematic comparative analysis of socio-economic and political transformations imposed by Italian, French, and Ethiopian expansion across Afar territories.

Although several scholars acknowledge the disruptive consequences of colonial boundary-making, most analyses remain descriptive. Studies often note fragmentation, marginalization, and conflict without fully interrogating the mechanisms through which colonial treaties, military campaigns, administrative restructuring, and economic reorientation undermined indigenous political institutions and disrupted long-standing systems of mobility and trade. The role of colonialism in transforming Afar governance, weakening sultanates such as Awsa, Tadjoura, and Raheita, and reconfiguring cross-border commercial networks remains insufficiently theorized.

Overall, the literature indicates that while the Afar are frequently referenced in studies of the Horn of Africa, their history has rarely been treated as an integrated and autonomous field of inquiry. The historiography remains largely descriptive rather than analytical, territorially fragmented rather than regionally synthesized, and externally framed rather than grounded in Afar socio-political and economic realities. Despite the Horn of Africa’s strategic significance and the Afar’s central role in regional trade and politics, the historiography of the Afar remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Existing studies are dominated by external perspectives, and there is limited systematic analysis of colonial impacts on their political, economic, and territorial structures. This study therefore offers a comprehensive, Afar-centered interpretation of the region’s historical and colonial dynamics.

Chapter III: Colonial Penetration, Treaties, and Afar–Colonial Conflict (1841-1884)

3.1 Colonial Penetration to Afar land

The genealogical, religious, and cultural origins of the Afar people are deeply intertwined with the ancient Semitic and Cushitic civilizations that shaped the historical landscape of the Horn of Africa.³¹⁵ Several Linguistic and historical studies suggest that the Afar are belong to the early cushitic speaking populations of northeastern Africa, whose presence predates the formation of many later ethnic and political entities in the region.³¹⁶ Historically, they occupied the strategically vital Red Sea corridor, linking the African interior with Arabia and the wider Indian Ocean world. Through control of ports, maritime routes, and inland trade networks, Afar communities exercised considerable economic influence and political autonomy for centuries.³¹⁷

External sources referred to the Afar by various names—such as Danakil or Adal—reflecting sustained intercultural contact rather than internal fragmentation. Despite these exonyms, the people consistently maintained the self-designation “Afar,” underscoring a strong sense of collective identity and continuity.³¹⁸

language, and cultural values. This self-designation underscores the Afar’s enduring sense of historical consciousness and resistance to external redefinition.³¹⁹

³¹⁵ Martine Vanhove, “North-Cushitic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*, ed. Rainer Vossen and Gerrit J. Dimmendaal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 300–3007; Loren F. Blies, *A Generative Grammar of Afar* (Dallas, TX: The Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington, 1981), 2; Hashim i, Almanhal ,304; Kassim, the influence of Islam on the Afar people,233.

³¹⁶ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* ,261; Franchetti, *Nella Dancalia Etiopica*. 226.

³¹⁷ Murdock, *Social Structure*, 319; Hashim, Almanhal, ,304; Kassim, the influence of Islam on the Afar people, 233.

³¹⁸Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 100; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*,165; Franchetti, *Nella Dancalia Etiopica*, 226; Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*,29.

³¹⁹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 100; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*:165; Franchetti, *Nella Dancalia Etiopica*, 226.; Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*,29.



Map 12. Map showing the location of Afar territory in the horn of Africa(Sources;- in america and Ireland wiki/fandom).

From antiquity through the early Islamic period, Afar-controlled coastal centers—including Adulis, Dahlak, Massawa, and Zeila—served as major hubs of commerce and cultural exchange. Early Islam spread gradually through trade contacts with Arabia, becoming deeply embedded in Afar society while preserving pre-Islamic traditions.³²⁰ These long-standing maritime capabilities and decentralized political structures enabled the Afar to maintain substantial autonomy even in the face of powerful regional states.

However ,From the medieval period onward, the Red Sea increasingly became a zone of imperial competition. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates sought to secure maritime routes and ports in order to protect commercial interests and pilgrimage traffic, while later centuries witnessed the expansion of Ottoman power into the Red Sea beginning in the sixteenth century. Massawa emerged as a focal point of this competition. Following the decline of Axum, the port fell under

³²⁰ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 100; Kassim, the influence of Islam on the Afar people,15.

Umayyad control between 702 and 750 CE and later functioned as a modest but strategically important harbor within Islamic trade networks. In the early sixteenth century, Portuguese forces briefly occupied Massawa (1513–1541) as part of their wider intervention in Red Sea and Indian Ocean affairs. The Portuguese occupation of Massawa between 1513 and 1541 cannot be understood in isolation from the indigenous political landscape of the Red Sea coast, particularly the roles of the Afar peoples and the Sultanate of Adal. Prior to European intervention, coastal and hinterland politics were structured around Afar-controlled trade corridors linking Massawa, Zula, and the Dahlak archipelago to the Ethiopian highlands and Muslim polities of the eastern Horn. Afar clans exercised authority over caravan routes, port access, and maritime provisioning, positioning themselves as indispensable intermediaries in Red Sea commerce.³²¹ Portuguese entry into Massawa directly challenged this established order. Following early sixteenth-century Portuguese naval expeditions into the Red Sea, Massawa functioned as a logistical and military outpost rather than a consolidated colonial possession. Portuguese forces depended heavily on local intermediaries and were unable to establish durable control over Afar-governed coastal and commercial networks.³²² Contemporary Portuguese accounts describe the strategic importance of Massawa as a gateway to the Ethiopian interior, while also acknowledging the constraints imposed by Muslim coastal resistance and limited Portuguese manpower.³²³ The Portuguese presence further intensified the militarization of the Horn of Africa during the wars between the Ethiopian kingdom and the Sultanate of Adal. Portuguese firearms, soldiers, and military advisors reached the Ethiopian highlands through Massawa, directly supporting Ethiopian resistance against the forces of Imam Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ghāzī. This intervention transformed Massawa into a contested node within the wider Adal–Portuguese conflict and reinforced Adal’s reliance on Red Sea Muslim alliances.³²⁴ These developments accelerated Ottoman involvement along the western

³²¹ Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 214–19.

³²² Miguel de Castanhoso, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541–1543*, trans. and ed. R. S. Whiteway (London: Hakluyt Society, 1902), 3–7, 21–26, 85–102.

³²³ Francisco Álvares, *The Prester John of the Indies*, trans. C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1961), 1:42–46, 1:78–82.

³²⁴ Castanhoso, *Portuguese Expedition*, 3–7, 21–26, 85–102.

Red Sea coast. Following the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, Istanbul viewed Portuguese activity in Massawa as a direct threat to Islamic trade routes and pilgrimage traffic. Ottoman expansion into Massawa in the mid-sixteenth century was therefore a strategic response to Portuguese disruption of established Afar–Adal coastal systems rather than an isolated imperial initiative.³²⁵ but they were decisively defeated in 1541 by Muslim forces associated with the Afar-dominated Adal Sultanate. From 1541 to 1557, Massawa remained under local Muslim control, reflecting the resilience of indigenous political authority along the coast.³²⁶ However the brief Portuguese episode thus acted as a catalyst that reshaped Red Sea geopolitics, accelerating Ottoman consolidation and permanently transforming Adal–Ottoman coastal relations.³²⁷

In 1557, the Ottoman Empire formally occupied Massawa and incorporated it into the Habesh Eyalet, transforming the port into an imperial outpost administered by a Na'ib. This administrative arrangement marked a significant shift in Red Sea governance but also revealed the limits of Ottoman authority. Although new fiscal and military structures were introduced, Afar populations were systematically marginalized from local administration. Rather than incorporating Afar coastal and hinterland leaders—who had long exercised authority over trade routes, ports, and caravan corridors—the Ottomans appointed a Na'ib drawn from the Beni-‘Āmir clan, a group perceived as more amenable to imperial control and more closely integrated into Islamic–Ottoman administrative culture.

This policy had profound consequences. Ottoman authority remained largely confined to the port of Massawa itself, with effective control rarely extending into Afar-inhabited hinterlands. Excluded from formal governance and subjected to external officials, many Afar communities withdrew from urban centers such as Massawa into rural, pastoral, and mountainous zones.³²⁸ There, mobility, ecological knowledge, and clan-based organization enabled them to evade imperial surveillance and taxation. Afar groups refused to pay tribute, rejected foreign officials,

³²⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993), 67–74.

³²⁶ Timothy Power, “The Red Sea under the Caliphal Dynasties, c. 639–1171,” *History Compass* 16, no. 3; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian borderlands*, 270; Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³²⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama,” in *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 289–95.

³²⁸ Omer Mohammed Khair, *The Dynamics of an Unfinished African Dream: Eritrea, Ancient History to 1968* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2020), 20.

and maintained indigenous systems of governance rooted in customary law (mada‘a). As a result, Ottoman rule along the western Red Sea coast remained shallow and discontinuous.

European observers repeatedly emphasized the failure of Ottoman and later Egyptian authorities to pacify or tax the Afar. Werner Munzinger, writing in 1869 from extensive experience in the region, noted that Egyptian administrators were astonished that the Ottomans—despite centuries of nominal rule—had never succeeded in bringing the Afar under fiscal control. Munzinger argued that this failure was not due to administrative negligence but stemmed from the very nature of Afar society and territory: an arid and inhospitable environment, dispersed settlement patterns, and a fiercely independent social organization that rendered sustained occupation both costly and ineffective.³²⁹

Earlier observations by Henry Salt similarly underscore Afar autonomy and resistance to imperial authority. In his *Voyage to Abyssinia* (1816), Salt explicitly noted that Afar communities in and around Massawa were not subject to Turkish or Egyptian rule, and that local chiefs openly disregarded imperial threats. He records a revealing episode involving an official letter sent by the Ottoman-appointed authorities at Massawa:

“A Letter from Nayib Idris and Omar Aga, chiefs commanding at Massowa to the chieftains of the Bedouin tribes in the neighbourhood of Amphila (directed ‘to the land of the Dumhoeita’)... ‘If any property belonging to the English (Feringi) should again be brought into your districts or towns, seize it and kill the persons in charge of it... To my former letters on this subject you have given me no reply. This grieves me exceedingly...’” Salt then observes that, despite these threats, the Afar chief of the district, ‘Alī Goveta, openly defied the Na’ib, declaring himself indifferent to Ottoman authority: “...being a son of the hills, and having people enough to secure him against any attack.”³³⁰

This episode illustrates the limited effectiveness of Ottoman rule. Even where the empire attempted to exercise authority through letters, appointed officials, and nominal commands, Afar leaders neither acknowledged nor obeyed such directives. The Ottoman reliance on a Beni-‘Āmir Na’ib, combined with the exclusion of Afar from administrative power, deepened Afar disengagement from imperial structures and reinforced their preference for autonomy over accommodation.

³²⁹ Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country,” 26.

³³⁰ Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 116.

In this sense, Ottoman governance in Massawa did not represent the subjugation of the Afar but rather a coastal veneer of imperial authority, beneath which Afar political independence, mobility, and customary law endured well into the nineteenth century.

The limits of imperial authority along the Afar coast are further underscored by the strategic importance of Baylul following the Ottoman seizure of Massawa. From 1557 onward, Ethiopian rulers increasingly relied on Baylul as an alternative maritime outlet. The port and its hinterland were firmly under Afar control, making it a reliable gateway for Ethiopian trade and diplomacy between approximately 1557 and 1645. Ethiopian emperors sought to bypass Ottoman-controlled maritime corridors by cultivating relations with Afar leaders. E. J. van Donzel observes that although most Ethiopian shores were occupied by the Turks, Baylul remained the sole exception, sustained through diplomatic and commercial relations between the Ethiopian court and the Danakil (Afar).

This pattern is corroborated by the account of the Yemeni traveler and diplomat Hassan al-Ḥaymī, who visited Ethiopia in 1647 on a diplomatic mission from Imam al-Mutawakkil Ismāʿīl of Yemen to Emperor Fasilides. Al-Ḥaymī reports that both rulers were deeply concerned about the expansion of Ottoman power in the Red Sea and about Portuguese interference in the Indian Ocean trade system. In response to these geopolitical pressures, Fasilides sought to strengthen the Baylul (Beilul) route as an alternative commercial corridor that would allow Ethiopia to circumvent Ottoman control over regional maritime traffic.

Earlier Portuguese sources present a consistent picture. Pedro Páez, writing in 1625, describes Massawa as a small and insecure port, with inland routes rendered hazardous by hostile tribes, and notes Ethiopian efforts to redirect trade through Afar-controlled ports along the southern Red Sea coast. Similarly, in 1625, Jerónimo Lobo, upon arriving at Baylul en route to Ethiopia, characterized the port as a minor settlement with no more than fifty inhabitants. He emphasized the extreme scarcity of water along the inland route and the dangers posed by hostile groups, while also observing that, following the Ottoman occupation of Massawa, Emperor Fasilides attempted to develop Baylul as a new commercial outlet.³³¹

³³¹ Jerónimo Lobo, *The Itinerario of Jerónimo Lobo*, trans. Donald M. Lockhart (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984), 116.

These observations are further supported by E. J. van Donzel, who, drawing on al-Ḥaymī's mission, notes that Fasilides explicitly sought external assistance to develop the Baylul route in order to evade Ottoman domination of Red Sea shipping.³³² These Yemeni and Portuguese accounts highlight Baylul's strategic significance in seventeenth-century Ethiopian efforts to preserve commercial autonomy amid intensifying imperial competition in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean worlds.

Taken together, these historical, religious, and ethnographic accounts demonstrate that the Afar were not peripheral actors in Red Sea history but central participants in its economic, political, and cultural development. Their early engagement in maritime trade, rapid adoption of Islam, and sustained resistance to external domination reveal a society characterized by adaptability, resilience, and a deep attachment to autonomy. Ottoman and Egyptian powers, despite their naval strength and administrative ambitions, were unable to extend effective control beyond isolated coastal enclaves such as Massawa and the Dahlak Islands. Recognizing Afar historical agency not only corrects long-standing omissions in regional historiography but also contributes to a more balanced understanding of the Horn of Africa as a dynamic arena of indigenous power, transregional exchange, and enduring cultural continuity.³³³

From the sixteenth century onward, the Red Sea coast became a contested zone where local autonomy, imperial ambition, and international trade intersected. Both Ottoman and European powers sought to control strategic ports and maritime corridors, yet the methods, objectives, and outcomes of their interventions differed markedly. Examining Ottoman and European strategies comparatively highlights not only the resilience of Afar political structures but also the evolving mechanisms of colonial and imperial power in the Horn of Africa.³³⁴

The Ottoman Empire, which formally occupied Massawa in 1557, relied primarily on military and administrative means to assert authority. Ottoman control was exercised through appointed

³³² E. J. Van Donzel, *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia, 1642–1700: Documents Relating to the Journey of Khodja Murad* (Istanbul: Netherlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1979), 78.

³³³ Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 65–92; Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Borderlands*, 54–75; Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 70–86.

³³⁴ Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 93–108; Toledano, *Ottoman Slave Trade*, 21–27; Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 18–24.

officials, garrisons, and fortifications, with the aim of safeguarding imperial maritime interests and projecting political power along the Red Sea littoral. This approach, however, was largely confined to urban centers and coastal nodes such as Massawa and the Dahlak Islands. Inland territories and hinterlands remained effectively outside Ottoman control, largely due to the geography of the Afar region—arid, rugged, and sparsely populated—and the decentralized, clan-based social organization of its inhabitants. Correspondence and travel accounts from the period reveal the limits of Ottoman authority: local Afar chiefs openly disregarded directives from Massawa, refusing to pay tribute or accept administrative oversight. Ottoman reliance on coercive measures, without significant engagement with local political structures or social norms, rendered their control partial and fragile.³³⁵

In contrast, European colonial strategies in the nineteenth century were markedly more sophisticated and adaptive, combining diplomacy, religious engagement, and political manipulation. Europeans, particularly the Italians, understood that direct military imposition in Afar territories would be prohibitively costly and likely resisted. Instead, they relied on indirect methods to secure influence and territorial footholds. One primary mechanism was missionary diplomacy: figures such as Giuseppe Sapeto operated under the guise of religious and cultural engagement to gather intelligence, build relationships with key local actors, and identify points of leverage within Afar society. Sapeto's travels alongside the French explorers Antoine and Arnaud d'Abbadie, combined with his close collaboration with Bishop Giustino de Jacobis in Abyssinia, allowed him to develop an unusually detailed and practical understanding of Afar society. Unlike many European travelers whose knowledge remained superficial or episodic, Sapeto lived for extended periods among local communities, learned regional languages, and observed everyday practices of trade, mediation, and conflict resolution. Through these experiences, he became familiar with Afar clan structures, and the layered nature of political authority that linked local chiefs, clan elders, and wider sultanates such as Rehaita.

Equally important was Sapeto's insight into internal political rivalries between Afar leaders and neighboring powers. He carefully mapped tensions among coastal Afar chiefs and highland

³³⁵ Munzinger, "A Journey through the Afar Country," 26; Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 116; Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 18–24.

authorities, as well as the competing influences of Egyptian, Ottoman, Ethiopian, and European actors along the Red Sea littoral. His association with de Jacobis, who maintained wide ecclesiastical and diplomatic networks, further sharpened Sapeto's awareness of how religious missions, trade routes, and political alliances intersected in the region.

This ethnographic and political knowledge proved decisive when Italy began to pursue a more assertive colonial strategy in the Red Sea. Sapeto was not merely a passive observer but an active intermediary who translated local norms and power relations into terms intelligible to Italian commercial and state interests. By identifying leaders who could be approached, rivalries that could be exploited, and ambiguities within local authority structures, he helped create the conditions under which the acquisition of Assab could be presented as a legitimate transaction rather than an act of outright conquest.

In this sense, Sapeto's role illustrates how missionary scholarship and exploratory travel were converted into instruments of imperial expansion. His familiarity with Afar leadership hierarchies and political divisions enabled Italy to maneuver diplomatically at the margins of Afar sovereignty, laying the groundwork for the establishment of a permanent Italian foothold on the Red Sea coast. The purchase of Assab was therefore not an isolated commercial act but the outcome of a longer process in which intimate local knowledge was strategically mobilized to advance colonial ambitions..³³⁶

European colonial agents also employed divide-and-rule tactics to undermine potential unified resistance. By exploiting existing rivalries among Afar sultanates, Europeans negotiated individually with local chiefs, offering gifts, protection, or commercial incentives to secure land or trading rights. These agreements were often presented as mutually beneficial arrangements but effectively allowed Europeans to consolidate strategic control without deploying large-scale military forces. In contrast to the Ottoman approach, which emphasized the imposition of formal authority, European methods prioritized cultural penetration, selective co-optation, and

³³⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 101–103; R. K. P. Pankhurst, "The Establishment of Italian Control over Assab," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1964): 1–18; Alessandro Triulzi, "Salt, Trade, and the Early Italian Presence on the Red Sea Coast," *Northeast African Studies* 6, no. 1–2 (1999): 35–58; Giuseppe Sapeto, *Viaggi nell'Africa Orientale* (Milan: Tipografia Lombarda, 1880), 21–39; Antoine d'Abbadie, *Géographie de l'Éthiopie* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1890), 54–61; Hervé Pennec, *Des Jésuites au Royaume du Prêtre Jean (Éthiopie)* (Paris: Centre Culturel Français, 2003), 287–93.

exploitation of internal political dynamics, thereby establishing a durable presence while minimizing overt confrontation.³³⁷

The contrast between Ottoman and European strategies underscores a key dimension of Afar resilience. Whereas the Ottomans and Egyptians repeatedly failed to extend authority beyond coastal forts due to reliance on force and their inability to integrate local governance structures, Europeans succeeded in gradually acquiring territorial footholds by embedding themselves within indigenous political systems. This does not imply the absence of Afar agency; rather, it demonstrates the effectiveness of European tactics in navigating and manipulating the social and political complexity of the region. Afar communities remained active participants in shaping the terms of engagement, leveraging their knowledge of terrain, mobility, and internal cohesion to negotiate favorable outcomes where possible.³³⁸

In sum, the comparative analysis of Ottoman and European strategies reveals a historical continuum in which the nature of external engagement evolved from coercive occupation to strategic diplomacy and indirect rule. Ottoman attempts were constrained by their reliance on conventional military authority and the difficulties of operating in remote, socially decentralized regions. European powers, in contrast, adapted to these limitations by combining missionary activity, treaty-making, and exploitation of local rivalries, thereby achieving more durable control over key coastal enclaves. The Afar experience demonstrates that local societies were not passive recipients of external power but crucial agents in shaping the success or failure of imperial and colonial projects. Recognizing these dynamics allows for a more nuanced understanding of Red Sea history, highlighting both the strategic ingenuity of colonial actors and the enduring resilience and agency of indigenous communities.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 93–108; Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 19–27.

Table 4. Comparative Strategies and Afar Responses in the Red sea coastal territory

Ottoman Strategy	European Strategy	Afar response
Military control • garrison and forts)	Missionary diplomacy • guiseppesapeto	Evasion and Resistance • retreat to hinterlands • reject imperial Authority
Direct rule • taxation and tribute	Divide and rule • exploit local rivalries	Sultans and local chiefs Autonomy • maintain local administration and customary law • resist foreign control
Limited reach • coastal enclaves	Treaties and Agreements • land Acquisition	Strategic negotiation • leverage internal rivalries • selective agreements

3.2 Treaties and Territorial Agreements between Afar Sultans, Local Chiefs, and European Colonial Powers

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the Afar-inhabited Red Sea coast emerged as a focal point of European commercial and strategic expansion. Italian and French involvement in the region did not initially take the form of direct military conquest; instead, it advanced through a series of treaties, leases, and so-called “friendship” agreements concluded with Afar sultans and coastal authorities. While formally presented as commercial or protective arrangements, these instruments were typically negotiated within a context of profound power asymmetry. European representatives possessed superior military, economic, and diplomatic leverage, enabling them to secure terms that disproportionately favored imperial interests. Consequently, many of these treaties functioned less as mutually binding agreements than as mechanisms for the gradual extension of colonial control, often undermining local sovereignty while preserving the outward appearance of consent. At the same time, the participation of Afar leaders demonstrates that

colonial penetration was not purely coercive but involved complex processes of negotiation, adaptation, and strategic accommodation..³³⁹

The earliest Italian involvement on the southern Red Sea coast began in 1869, when representatives of the Rubattino Shipping Company—acting through the missionary and political agent Giuseppe Sapeto—concluded an agreement with Sultan Ibrahim of the Ankala tribe and his brother Hassan. The agreement authorized the purchase of a small coastal strip at the harbor of Assab.³⁴⁰ This land was explicitly designated for use as a shipyard and coal depot, underscoring the commercial and logistical motivations behind the arrangement rather than territorial annexation. At this stage, Italian interests were limited to securing a maritime foothold to support Red Sea navigation and trade.

Italian expansion continued through subsequent agreements with the Sultanate of Rahaita. On 30 December 1879, Sultan Burhan Dini of Rahaita signed an agreement with Sapeto concerning the lease and purchase of several strategic islands—Umm al-Bahr, Ras al-Mal, and Darmerket. These islands were valued for their proximity to maritime routes and their potential utility for coaling stations and naval logistics. In 1880, a further agreement was concluded with Sultan Burhan Muhammad, under which Italy acquired land on the Additional islands, located approximately two nautical miles (3.6 km) offshore. Together, these agreements consolidated Italy's maritime presence while remaining formally grounded in contractual relations with Afar rulers.³⁴¹

A more politically significant treaty was concluded on 18 April 1883 between Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa and the Italian agent Pietro Antonelli. This agreement, composed of ten articles, articulated a reciprocal framework of protection and cooperation. Italy undertook responsibility for protecting the Afar population from hostile attacks by sea, while the Sultan pledged to ensure

³³⁹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 101–03; Pankhurst, “Italian Control over Assab,” 1–18; Triulzi, “Salt, Trade,” 35–58; Sapeto, *Viaggi nell’Africa Orientale*, 21–39; d’Abbadie, *Géographie de l’Éthiopie*, 54–61; Pennec, *Des Jésuites au Royaume du Prêtre Jean*, 287–93.

³⁴⁰ Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, letter to Giovanni Branchi, Italian Consul at Assab, 28 January 1884, in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. IV: *Colonial Powers and Ethiopian Frontiers, 1880–1884* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press; Lund: Lund University Press, 1994), doc. no. 152.

³⁴¹ Sultan Burhan Dini of Rahaita, agreement with Giuseppe Sapeto concerning Umm al-Bahr, Ras al-Mal, and Darmerket, 30 December 1879, in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. III: *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats, 1869–1879* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press; Lund: Lund University Press, 1990); Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 100–02.

the safety of Italian merchants and travelers on land. Crucially, the treaty emphasized the security of the trade route linking Assab to Shewa, including the protection of caravans operating along this corridor. Articles 3, 7, and 8 repeatedly affirmed Italy's obligation to provide maritime protection, while other provisions addressed commercial relations, religious non-interference, and the maintenance of peace along the Assab–Shewa route. The involvement of King Menelik of Shewa, who also signed the agreement, highlights the broader regional significance of this arrangement and its integration into highland–lowland political relations.³⁴²

Italian diplomatic correspondence from the mid-1880s reveals the deliberate restraint with which Italy sought to present its presence in Afar territory. In a letter dated 17 May 1884, the Italian Foreign Minister Mancini assured Sultan Muhammad Hanfare that Italy had no intention of occupying Afar lands beyond what was necessary to protect the interests of the Danakil (Afar) people.³⁴³ Similarly, an order issued on 19 May 1885 by the Italian Ministry of the Navy to the commander of the Red Sea fleet, Admiral Le curesi, explicitly instructed that Italy's occupation should not be perceived as colonial in nature.³⁴⁴ The Italian Foreign Ministry formally addressed Sultan Mehmed Hanfare in a diplomatic letter dated 21 May 1883, employing highly honorific and symbolic language that reflected both Ottoman–Islamic political idioms and European diplomatic flattery. The letter opened with an elaborate salutation that elevated the sultan's religious, military, and intellectual authority, presenting him as a sovereign ruler of the Afar realm. It read:

*“May the light shine brightly among the sultans, the powerful, the lion, the light of Islam, the master of the sword and the pen, the king and king of the entire Afar Empire, Sultan Muhammad Hanfar.”*³⁴⁵

³⁴² Treaty between Sultan Mohammed Hanfari and the Kingdom of Italy, signed 9 December 1888, in Edward Hertslet, R. W. Brant, and H. L. Sherwood, *The Map of Africa by Treaty* (London: Printed for H.M. Stationery Office by Harrison and Sons, 1909), treaty no. 119.

³⁴³ Hanfari, letter to Branchi, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, IV, doc. 151.

³⁴⁴ Admiral Le Curesi, Italian Ministry of the Navy, letter to Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, 19 May 1885, cited in Hashim Gamaluddin Ibrahim A-Shami, *Almanhal*, Amharic translation by Shek Ahmed Mohammed Kibo Al-Harari (Addis Ababa: Addis Quality Printing, 2007), 355.

³⁴⁵ Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, Italian Foreign Affairs, letter to Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, 21 May 1883, cited in Hashim Gamaluddin Ibrahim A-Shami, *Almanhal*, Amharic translation by Shek Ahmed Mohammed Kibo Al-Harari (Addis Ababa: Addis Quality Printing, 2007), 355.

Such phrasing was not merely ceremonial. It was a calculated diplomatic gesture intended to recognize—and rhetorically amplify—the political legitimacy of the Awsa sultanate, thereby facilitating Italian negotiations and strategic interests along the Red Sea and in Afar territories.

The directive emphasized that Italian authority was to be exercised only with the consent of local populations, framed as beneficial to them, and symbolized by the Italian flag only when desired by the Afar themselves. These statements illustrate how Italy sought to legitimize its expansion through the language of protection, partnership, and local consent.

Parallel to Italian efforts to secure a foothold along the Red Sea coast, France pursued a deliberate and methodical expansion along the Afar littoral through a series of treaties concluded with coastal and inland sultanates. Rather than relying on direct military conquest, French expansion in the Afar region was achieved primarily through diplomacy framed in the language of peace, friendship, protection, and commercial cooperation. These agreements, while often presented as mutually beneficial, gradually transformed French involvement from limited maritime access into formal colonial sovereignty and reconfigured Afar political authority within an emerging imperial order.³⁴⁶

If anything must be clarified in this debate, it is the persistent claim—frequently repeated in segments of Ethiopian historiography—that Sultan Ibrāhīm or other Afar leaders “sold Assab.” This formulation, often presented as an unquestioned historical fact, compresses a multilayered diplomatic process into a politically charged slogan. It detaches the agreements from their geographical context, ignores the legal vocabulary in which they were framed, and isolates Afar actors from the broader diplomatic culture of the nineteenth-century Horn of Africa.

The territory initially concerned was a barren and sparsely inhabited coastal stretch between Kiloma and Buya. Contemporary descriptions portray it as commercially marginal, lacking permanent settlement and agricultural productivity. It was precisely because this area was peripheral and underdeveloped that it became the subject of limited commercial concession. In the political economy of the Red Sea world, such peripheral zones were frequently utilized for trade depots, coaling stations, or maritime provisioning points without implying alienation of sovereign authority. The decision to allocate this area for commercial purposes should therefore be

³⁴⁶ Ali Coubba, *Ahmed Dini et la politique à Djibouti* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), 25.

understood as a strategic calculation within a frontier environment rather than as an outright territorial surrender.

Equally significant is the legal identity of the recipient. The concession was not granted to the Kingdom of Italy as a sovereign state, but to a private commercial enterprise—the Rubattino Shipping Company. This distinction is fundamental in nineteenth-century international law. Across Africa and the Red Sea basin, European commercial companies often preceded formal state annexation. Indigenous rulers entered into agreements with such companies for trade, infrastructure, or investment. These arrangements were typically conditional, revocable, and limited in scope. They did not automatically constitute a transfer of sovereignty unless explicitly framed as cession treaties between recognized states.

The Assab agreement required investment, development, and the safeguarding of local interests. In form and function, it resembled a lease or conditional concession rather than a permanent sale. The conceptual vocabulary of “sale” oversimplifies what was, in legal terms, a negotiated commercial arrangement within a plural political order. The Afar sultanates, like other regional polities in the Horn, exercised jurisdiction through customary authority, negotiated tribute systems, and maritime regulation. Their diplomatic engagements were pragmatic responses to shifting economic and geopolitical pressures in the Red Sea, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Subsequent agreements reinforce the limited and conditional nature of the concessions. On 30 December 1879, Sultan Burhān Dīnī of Raḥayta concluded an agreement with Giuseppe Sapeto, acting on behalf of the Rubattino Company, concerning the lease-purchase of the islands of Umm al-Baḥr, Ras al-Māl, and Darmarket. The terminology used explicitly refers to lease-purchase, not sovereign cession. The distinction between islands and mainland territory was not incidental; it was central to the scope of the agreement. In 1880, another agreement was concluded with Sultan Burhān Muḥammad regarding land in the Additional Islands, located approximately two nautical miles offshore. Again, these agreements concerned offshore islands and did not include the mainland coastline or maritime sovereignty. No document demonstrates an explicit and voluntary alienation of the coastal hinterland as sovereign Italian territory.

Despite these limitations, Italian officials gradually advanced a broader interpretation of their rights, claiming that they had legally purchased not only the islands but also the sea and adjacent

coastal territory. This expansion of claims reflected imperial ambition rather than the original contractual language. When disputes emerged, the Sultan of Raḥayta addressed a formal letter to the Italian representative at Assab on 22 April 1881, reaffirming that the agreements applied solely to the islands and insisting that the mainland coast remained under Afar authority. This correspondence demonstrates that Afar leaders did not conceive of the agreements as permanent transfers of sovereignty. Rather, they perceived them as bounded and conditional arrangements whose limits were being exceeded by Italian expansionism.

The debate becomes even clearer when situated within the broader diplomatic practices of nineteenth-century Ethiopia. Territorial concessions, protective treaties, and land grants to European powers were not unique to Afar authorities. For example, the land grant issued by Menelik II (then King of Šäwa) to Pierre Arnoux on 16 June 1876 conveyed extensive proprietary rights over a large district centered on the Awadi river basin. The document granted “full right of ownership,” including rights of irrigation, mineral exploitation, construction, and transfer. The scale and language of this concession demonstrate that substantial territorial grants were an accepted instrument of diplomatic and economic policy among highland rulers.³⁴⁷

Similarly, the treaty of 29 December 1859 between Nigusē Welde Mikael and Napoleon III granted France extensive coastal territories and sought French protection in return. An earlier agreement of 2 October 1849 between Dejazmach Wube of Simen-Tigray and the French consul at Massawa likewise invited foreign assistance in securing the coast. As carefully documented by the historian Sven Rubenson, Ethiopian rulers across different regions engaged European powers through concessions, protectorate proposals, and territorial negotiations as pragmatic strategies in an era of intensifying imperial rivalry.³⁴⁸

This comparative evidence is critical. It demonstrates that Afar rulers were not exceptional in negotiating with European actors. They participated in the same diplomatic environment as their highland counterparts. The difference lies not in the existence of agreements but in how later historiography has interpreted them. Imperial-era narratives, and in some cases modern nationalist interpretations, have tended to portray Afar concessions as betrayal while presenting highland

³⁴⁷ Sven Rubenson, ed., *International Rivalries and Foreign Policy, 1869–1879*, vol. 3 of *Acta Aethiopica* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000), doc. no. 171, 234.

³⁴⁸ Rubenson, *Tewodros and His Contemporaries*, 94–95 and *Correspondence and Treaties*, 171–73.

concessions as strategic diplomacy. Such asymmetry reflects political memory rather than consistent legal analysis.

The nineteenth-century Horn of Africa was characterized by layered sovereignties, overlapping jurisdictions, and negotiated authority. Concepts of territorial sovereignty were fluid, particularly in coastal and frontier zones. Agreements were often embedded in personal diplomacy, tribute relationships, and customary law rather than modern notions of absolute state borders. To retroactively impose twentieth-century territorial nationalism onto nineteenth-century agreements risks distorting their original meaning.

A balanced historiographical approach must therefore distinguish between three stages: the original commercial concession, the gradual expansion of Italian claims, and the eventual transformation of Assab into a colonial foothold. Conflating these stages produces the misleading conclusion that Afar leaders directly and definitively “sold” sovereign territory. In reality, the documentary record suggests a more incremental process in which commercial arrangements were later reinterpreted and expanded by an emerging colonial power.

Professional historical analysis demands consistency and contextualization. If imperial Ethiopian rulers could grant land, river basins, and coastal territories to European powers for strategic advantage, then similar agreements concluded by Afar rulers must be evaluated within the same diplomatic framework. To single out Afar local chiefs while minimizing or reframing comparable imperial concessions risks transforming historical scholarship into political polemic. The evidence instead reveals that territorial concessions were widely employed diplomatic instruments across the Ethiopian and Red Sea political landscape.

Consequently, the enduring claim that Afar leadership uniquely “sold Assab” oversimplifies a complex diplomatic history. It substitutes a moralized narrative for a contextual legal analysis and obscures the broader patterns of nineteenth-century statecraft in the Horn of Africa. A more rigorous interpretation recognizes that Afar rulers, like their contemporaries, navigated an expanding imperial world through negotiation, conditional concession, and pragmatic adaptation—strategies that must be understood within their historical moment rather than judged through retrospective nationalist lenses.

Therefore, Afar sultanates acted within established norms of commercial diplomacy, and the subsequent expansion of Italian claims resulted not from legitimate purchase, but from distortion, coercion, and colonial opportunism.

Beyond the textual evidence of the agreements themselves, Afar oral and written records also attest to repeated complaints and confrontations between Afar local chiefs and Italian representatives as Italian territorial ambitions expanded beyond the original commercial concessions. When Italian agents began to reinterpret lease agreements as territorial purchases, Afar leaders objected forcefully, arguing that such actions constituted a breach of trust and a violation of the original terms.

Afar local chiefs consistently maintained that the agreements concluded with Italian commercial agents were limited strictly to commercial purposes—primarily trade, provisioning, and maritime access—and did not authorize territorial expansion, sovereignty claims, or border demarcation. As Italian activities moved inland and along the coastline, Afar authorities lodged formal protests and demanded clarification, insisting that the Italians were deliberately misleading both local communities and external powers regarding the nature of the agreements.

These disputes are documented in correspondence exchanged between Afar rulers and Italian officials, particularly during the early 1880s, when Italy began consolidating its presence in Assab. Afar chiefs accused Italian representatives of misrepresenting agreements and of exploiting ambiguities in translation and legal terminology. In several instances, Afar leaders explicitly rejected Italian attempts to extend control over coastal lands, reiterating that no agreement had been made concerning mainland territory or maritime sovereignty.

It is essential to situate these developments within the broader framework of colonial diplomacy and state formation in the Horn of Africa. The separation and reorganization of the Red Sea coastal territories were not negotiated directly with Afar local authorities or traditional rulers. Rather, major territorial agreements concerning borders, spheres of influence, and coastal administration were concluded between Ethiopian rulers and European colonial powers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These diplomatic arrangements were undertaken at the imperial level and largely excluded Afar participation and consent, despite the fact that many of the territories concerned were historically inhabited and administered by Afar sultanates.

Historical evidence further demonstrates that Afar leaders did not formally recognize several attempts at colonial territorial expansion and the subsequent redefinition of control over the Red Sea coast. A series of letters written by Afar sultans reflected strong opposition to Italian territorial encroachment within Afar territories. For example, letters sent by Sultan Burhan Mohammed of the Rahayto Sultanate on 22 April 1881 and 25 March 1883, as well as letters written by Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of the Awsa Sultanate on 30 December 1883 and 28 January 1884, reveal continued resistance by Afar rulers against Italian territorial expansion and interference in Afar political authority. Similarly, a jointly signed letter submitted on 14 April 1883 by Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of the Awsa Sultanate, Sultan Burhan Mohammed of the Rahayto Sultanate, and Sultan Hamad Laoyta of the Goba'ad Sultanate expressed collective opposition to Italian territorial encroachment and emphasized the need to respect existing agreements and Afar territorial authority.³⁴⁹

The 1883 agreement concluded between Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of Awsa and the Italian authorities primarily focused on cooperation, security, and commercial access. Articles 3 and 8 of the agreement emphasized Italian protection along the coastal areas and the Sultan's role in securing routes between the coast and the Ethiopian interior.³⁵⁰ However, the agreement did not establish a fixed territorial border separating Afar territories from Ethiopia, nor did it authorize the permanent political separation of the Red Sea coast from Afar-controlled territories.

In contrast, the 1908 border treaty concluded between Emperor Menelik II and Italy formally demarcated territorial boundaries by stipulating that Ethiopian authority would remain approximately sixty kilometers inland from the Red Sea coast.³⁵¹ This agreement effectively institutionalized the political separation of significant Afar coastal territories from the Ethiopian state. Importantly, Afar sultanates and local authorities were neither parties to this treaty nor consulted during the negotiation process. Consequently, many Afar leaders regarded such agreements as externally imposed arrangements that failed to reflect indigenous territorial realities, traditional authority structures, and the historical unity of Afar territories.

³⁴⁹ Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. no. 112, 140, 151, 152 and 117.

³⁵⁰ Treaty between Italy and Mohammed Hanfare, cited in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 118.

³⁵¹ Convention between Italy and Ethiopia for the Settlement of the Frontier between the Italian Colony of Eritrea and the Provinces of the Ethiopian Empire, signed at Addis Ababa, 16 May 1908, cited in E. Hertslet, K.C.B., *The Map of Africa by Treaty*, vol. 3 (London, 1909), no. 381, 1225.

The political consequences of these externally negotiated agreements continued into the postcolonial period. The independence of Eritrea in 1991 further formalized the separation of the Red Sea coast from Ethiopia, again without meaningful consultation with Afar traditional authorities whose communities historically inhabited the coastal regions. Afar leaders opposed this process on the grounds that it disregarded the historical, political, and socio-economic interconnectedness of Afar territories across the Horn of Africa.

Among the most prominent voices was Sultan Alimirah Hanfare of Awsa, who strongly opposed Eritrean separation from Ethiopia. He reportedly emphasized the historical attachment of the Afar people to Ethiopia by stating that “even the Afar camels know the Ethiopian flag.” His opposition to the political reorganization of the region brought him into conflict with the ruling authorities, and he was eventually compelled to flee into exile in Saudi Arabia.

These developments illustrate that the separation of the Red Sea coast was largely formalized through treaties concluded between Ethiopian imperial authorities and European colonial powers. As a result, the restructuring of territorial sovereignty in the region significantly affected the political autonomy, territorial continuity, and historical cohesion of the Afar people across the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, the recurring accusation that Afar leaders “sold Assab” is not substantiated by available historical evidence. Such claims often overlook documented instances of Afar resistance, the legal distinction between commercial concessions and the transfer of territorial sovereignty, and the fact that decisive boundary-making agreements were concluded elsewhere without meaningful Afar participation. Consequently, the narrative of “selling Assab” reflects less a balanced historical interpretation than a politicized discourse that obscures the complexities of colonial expansion and diminishes Afar agency in the process.

French engagement with the Afar coast is generally dated to 1862, when a treaty was concluded between Sultan Dini Ahmed Abubakar of Raheita and the French agent Henri Lambert. Signed in Paris, the agreement granted France rights over the port of Mersa, the Obock anchorage, and adjacent coastal areas extending toward Ras Doumeirah. Although framed at the time as a commercial arrangement intended to facilitate maritime trade and coaling operations, the treaty has often been regarded as an important political milestone in the expansion of European influence

along the Red Sea littoral. It represented one of the earliest instances in which a European power secured formally recognized rights on the Afar coast through a bilateral agreement.

However, historians differ in their interpretation of the treaty's legal implications. Some view it as conferring substantial territorial authority, while others argue that it amounted primarily to a limited concession for commercial and strategic purposes rather than an unequivocal transfer of sovereignty. The agreement is therefore best understood within the broader geopolitical context of intensifying European rivalry in the Red Sea region, where France sought to counter British dominance at Aden and to secure a foothold amid emerging Italian ambitions further north. For Sultan Dini Ahmed Abubakar, the treaty may be interpreted as a pragmatic accommodation to shifting regional power dynamics, including the waning influence of Ottoman and Egyptian authorities and the growing presence of European naval forces.

Between 1870, Ottoman and Egyptian involvement along the western Red Sea and Gulf of Aden littoral had only a limited and superficial impact on Afar political space, particularly in Zeila and the Sultanate of Tadjoura. Although imperial claims were asserted through diplomatic language and limited port administration, they never translated into sustained territorial authority over Afar society, governance, or land. By the nineteenth century, Ottoman authority in the Horn of Africa had become largely residual, surviving more as a historical and juridical claim inherited from the sixteenth century than as an effective system of governance. Ports such as Zeila were formally associated with the Ottoman *garrison* province, yet control remained episodic and symbolic, expressed mainly through Islamic legitimacy and intermittent customs arrangements rather than through direct administration or inland penetration.³⁵²

Egyptian involvement, acting under Ottoman suzerainty, represented the most tangible expression of imperial authority during this period, particularly after the 1840s. Under Muḥammad 'Alī and Khedive Ismā'īl, Egypt sought to consolidate Red Sea ports to secure trade routes, pilgrimage corridors, and strategic influence while countering European expansion. In Zeila, Egyptian authority was manifested through a small garrison, an appointed governor, and customs

³⁵²Peter Malcolm Holt, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 219–23; Salih Özbaran, *The Ottoman Response to European Expansion* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1994), 87–92.

administration; however, this authority remained strictly confined to the port town itself and depended heavily on negotiated relations with local Somali and Afar leaders.³⁵³ Egyptian officials lacked the capacity to impose taxation, law, or military control beyond the immediate coastal enclave, and the surrounding Afar territories remained outside imperial administration.³⁵⁴

In the case of Tadjoura, Ottoman and Egyptian influence was even more marginal. The Sultanate of Tadjoura remained firmly under Afar political control, with no evidence of permanent Ottoman or Egyptian garrisons, fiscal systems, or administrative institutions. Afar sultans exercised authority over both the coast and hinterland through long-established indigenous mechanisms, regulating caravan routes to Shewa and Awsa, levying transit dues, enforcing customary law (*mada'a*), and mediating regional diplomacy.³⁵⁵ Any Ottoman or Egyptian presence was largely symbolic, expressed through religious affiliation or diplomatic acknowledgment rather than direct intervention in local governance.³⁵⁶

Afar rulers were therefore not imperial subjects but autonomous political actors who selectively engaged with Ottoman and Egyptian authorities when such engagement served their interests. Recognition of imperial sovereignty was often instrumental and did not entail surrender of territorial control or political autonomy. Contemporary European travelers consistently observed that Afar rulers governed independently, mobilized their own armed forces, and enforced law without reference to Ottoman or Egyptian officials.³⁵⁷ This autonomy became particularly evident in the mid-1880s, when Egyptian forces withdrew from Zeila following Egypt's financial collapse and the British occupation of Egypt. The rapid disappearance of Ottoman–Egyptian authority did not disrupt Afar political order, underscoring the fact that imperial control had never been deeply rooted in Afar territory.³⁵⁸ Instead, Afar sovereignty persisted and was only gradually undermined

³⁵³ Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 85–87.

³⁵⁴ Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 21–25.

³⁵⁵ Pankhurst, *An Economic History of Ethiopia*, 65–69.

³⁵⁶ Didier Morin, *Poésie traditionnelle des Afars* (Paris: Peeters, 2009), 33–36.

³⁵⁷ Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country,” 26; Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 116.

³⁵⁸ Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 92–94.

later through colonial treaties, military pressure, and externally imposed borders rather than through conquest or imperial succession.³⁵⁹

Nevertheless, by introducing European treaty law as the juridical basis of territorial authority, the Franco–Afar agreement marked a decisive transformation in the political order of the western Red Sea coast.³⁶⁰ What had previously been governed through customary sovereignty, clan authority, and regional diplomacy was now reframed within the vocabulary of European international law. In theory, the treaty concluded between France and the ruler of Zeila, Abu Bakr Basha, was intended to restore and protect his authority after the decline of Egyptian administration. In practice, however, it exposed Afar coastal sovereignty to the vulnerabilities of imperial rivalry and great-power calculation.

The agreement itself was structured to reaffirm Abu Bakr Basha’s legitimacy and stabilize governance. Article Two restored the rights that had been restricted during Egyptian occupation, formally recognizing him as the lawful political authority in Zeila. Article Four granted him the right to organize and maintain local security forces, financed primarily through customs revenues and local taxation. Should those revenues prove insufficient, France pledged to provide financial assistance in consultation with him. Article Five extended this guarantee further, stipulating that salaries for Abu Bakr Basha and his son, Burhan Abu Bakr—designated head of security—would be secured through state revenues, with France again assuming responsibility in case of deficit. On paper, therefore, the arrangement resembled a protectorate in embryo: France would secure political authority, stabilize administration, and underwrite financial shortfalls.³⁶¹

Yet the effectiveness of such provisions depended not on their wording but on the willingness and capacity of France to enforce them. It was precisely at this point that the limits of French commitment became evident. Before France could consolidate its influence on the ground, British strategic interests in the Gulf of Aden intervened. British forces moved swiftly to occupy Zeila,

³⁵⁹ Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 41–44.

³⁶⁰ Daoud Aboubaker Alwan and Yohanis Mibrathu, *Historical Dictionary of Djibouti* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 37.

³⁶¹ Agreement between Abobeker Pasha, Governor of Zeila, and France, 20 October 1885, cited in Hashim Gamaluddin Ibrahim A-Shami, *Almanhal*, Amharic translation by Shek Ahmed Mohammed Kibo Al-Harari (Addis Ababa: Addis Quality Printing, 2007), 355.

arrest Abu Bakr Basha, and dismantle the existing administrative structure. The port was subsequently absorbed into British Somaliland. The Franco–Afar agreement, though never formally annulled, was rendered meaningless by *faits accomplis* imposed through military presence.

The personal predicament of Abu Bakr Basha during this crisis is poignantly documented in his letter of 1 September 1863 addressed to Édouard Thouvenel, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of France. In this correspondence, he declared that he had remained in Zeila under French protection and loyalty. When Ottoman authorities in Hodeida demanded the remittance of revenue, he refused compliance, explicitly stating that he acted under French instructions and not under the orders of the Ottoman pasha. His refusal was not merely administrative—it was a political statement aligning Zeila with France against Ottoman claims across the Red Sea.³⁶²

However, the letter reveals deep anxiety and urgency. Abu Bakr Basha emphasized that he stood “between the governments,” exposed and uncertain. He warned that the Ottoman authorities would not repeat their demands and that their character was such that refusal might provoke decisive action. He insisted that he would not hand over the revenue, yet he urgently requested immediate guidance from France so that he could “base himself” on their decision. His words convey the isolation of a local ruler who had staked his authority on foreign protection but had not yet received tangible backing.

France’s inability—or unwillingness—to respond swiftly and decisively left Abu Bakr Basha in a precarious position. Diplomatic caution, broader European strategic considerations, and the absence of immediate military enforcement meant that French assurances remained largely declaratory. The delay in response weakened his standing vis-à-vis the Ottoman authorities and emboldened rival imperial actors. In effect, he had defied Ottoman fiscal authority in reliance upon French support, but France did not provide the urgent protection necessary to sustain that defiance.

Thus, Abu Bakr Basha became emblematic of a broader structural dilemma facing many Red Sea rulers in the mid-nineteenth century. By entering into European treaty relations, they sought to secure autonomy and counterbalance Ottoman or Egyptian influence. Yet such treaties also

³⁶² Rubenson, *Tewodros and His Contemporaries*, 218–19.

entangled them in the geopolitical calculations of distant powers whose priorities could shift rapidly. When imperial rivalries intensified, local rulers bore the immediate consequences.

Further insight into the precarious diplomatic position of Abu Bakr Ibrāhīm, governor of Zeila, emerges from his letter of 13 August 1862 addressed to Napoleon III and to Édouard Thouvenel, Foreign Minister of France. In this correspondence, Abu Bakr sought to demonstrate both his loyalty to France and the mounting pressures exerted by rival imperial powers along the Red Sea coast.³⁶³

He reported that shortly after the departure of the French representative (Mr. Schefer), two British vessels—one steamship and one sailing ship—appeared off the coast and cast anchor at Rahīta. Their arrival was not a routine maritime visit but a calculated show of presence. Sultan Dīnī, however, refused to receive their officers, and no formal communication took place. The ships then proceeded to Tajura, where they encountered a similarly cold reception and departed “completely embarrassed.” Notably, they did not attempt to land at Zeila itself. Abu Bakr presented these events as evidence that local rulers, acting in solidarity with French alignment, had resisted British overtures and influence.

Yet the episode did not end there. Shortly afterward, Ahmad, the son of the governor of Massawa—representing Ottoman interests—arrived at Rahīta and urged Sultan Dīnī to raise the Ottoman flag. This symbolic act would have signified formal submission to Ottoman sovereignty. Sultan Dīnī categorically refused and rejected all proposals, replying that “the whole country belonged to France.” Ahmad departed in visible frustration, having failed to reverse the French alignment of the coastal leadership.

In recounting these incidents, Abu Bakr aimed to reassure Napoleon III and Thouvenel that Afar rulers were actively upholding French claims and resisting both British and Ottoman encroachment. The correspondence reflects a deliberate political strategy: by portraying steadfast loyalty and resistance to rival powers, Abu Bakr sought to strengthen the case for decisive French protection and recognition.

However, this alignment placed him in an increasingly dangerous position. By openly rejecting Ottoman authority and rebuffing British naval approaches, he effectively staked his political

³⁶³*Ibid.*, 192-194.

survival on French backing. The declaration that “the whole country belonged to France” was not merely rhetorical—it was a public and diplomatic commitment that challenged the ambitions of two powerful empires operating in the Red Sea region.

The difficulty lay in France’s limited capacity—or willingness—to translate diplomatic assurances into immediate military or administrative enforcement. While French representatives negotiated treaties and received declarations of loyalty, Paris remained cautious in confronting Britain directly in the Gulf of Aden, especially given Britain’s strategic dominance following the consolidation of its position in Aden. British naval mobility and regional intelligence networks far exceeded those of France in the area. Thus, when British ships tested local allegiances or later moved to assert control, France was not prepared to respond with comparable force.

For Abu Bakr Pasha, this imbalance proved fatal. His correspondence demonstrates that he actively resisted British approaches and Ottoman demands in reliance upon French protection. Yet when Britain ultimately occupied Zeila and incorporated it into British Somaliland, France did not intervene militarily to defend its treaty partner. The earlier diplomatic solidarity expressed in letters to Napoleon III could not counterbalance British strategic calculations in the western Gulf of Aden.

The result was a profound asymmetry between promise and power. Abu Bakr had declared loyalty, rejected Ottoman suzerainty, discouraged British penetration, and publicly identified his territory with France. But France’s engagement remained largely diplomatic and symbolic, whereas Britain’s response was operational and coercive. When British authority materialized through occupation, arrest, and administrative restructuring, French protest—if any—did not alter the outcome.

In this sense, Abu Bakr Ibrāhīm’s experience encapsulates the structural vulnerability of Red Sea coastal rulers during the age of high imperial rivalry. By invoking European treaty law and aligning with one imperial power, they sought protection against others. Yet the protection was contingent, selective, and often subordinated to broader geopolitical priorities. Abu Bakr stood between Ottoman influence pressing from Massawa, British naval power projecting from Aden, and French diplomacy operating without decisive enforcement. His loyalty to France, though repeatedly affirmed in correspondence, could not secure him against British intervention.

Thus, the letters of August 1862 and September 1863 collectively reveal not only his political agency but also the limits of French commitment. They illustrate how local declarations of sovereignty “under France” could not withstand imperial competition when France chose caution over confrontation. In the final analysis, Abu Bakr Pasha’s predicament was not a failure of loyalty but a failure of power balance: France could not—or would not—defend him urgently against British expansion, leaving him exposed to the very forces he had resisted in France’s name.

Therefore, in the case of Zeila, the consequences were decisive. Britain’s occupation, the imprisonment of Abu Bakr Basha, the displacement of Afar inhabitants, and the subsequent administrative incorporation of the port into British Somaliland demonstrated that treaty assurances without enforcement mechanisms offered little protection. The Franco–Afar agreement had symbolized the promise of restored sovereignty under French patronage; its collapse exposed the fragility of that promise. Abu Bakr Basha stood, quite literally and politically, between French protection that remained unrealized and Ottoman influence that retained coercive weight—an untenable position that ultimately foreshadowed the reconfiguration of sovereignty along the Red Sea coast under direct imperial control.

According to the observations of the French explorer Arnauld-Michel d’Abbadie, the Sultanate of Tajura in the late 1860s functioned under a form of indirect British control exercised from Aden. Although Tajura formally retained its political autonomy, British officials and agents were able to intervene decisively in its internal and external affairs, particularly in matters related to trade, diplomacy, and inland travel toward Shewa.

D’Abbadie recounts that Sher Mark, an agent connected to Captain Haynes, the British governor of Aden, attempted deliberately to conceal the intended destination of European travelers operating in the Red Sea and Somali coast. However, once it became known that their destination was Tajura, Sher Mark immediately communicated with his superior in Aden. Acting on orders from Captain Haynes, instructions were issued for Captain Christopher to sail without delay to Tajura. These orders went beyond mere observation: the British agents were instructed to enter the port and actively encourage the inhabitants to resist the arrival and movement of the expedition.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ Arnauld-Michel d’Abbadie, *Douze ans de séjour dans la Haute-Éthiopie* (Paris, 1868), Amharic translation by Gennet Ayyelle, 2010, 472.

British opposition intensified when it became clear that the travelers intended to negotiate directly with the Sultan of Tajura to proceed inland toward Shewa. D'Abbadie notes that British representatives reacted with open hostility, threatening severe economic retaliation. They warned that English merchant vessels would cease all trade with Tajura and that British authorities would confiscate slaves brought to market—an especially powerful threat given Tajura's economic dependence on Red Sea commerce and the slave trade at the time.

These threats created divisions within Tajura itself. One faction among the inhabitants supported the British position, arguing that the travelers' rights should be curtailed to preserve relations with Aden. Another faction questioned why passage should be denied when established caravans regularly traveled from Tajura to Shewa. Caught between these opposing pressures, the Sultan of Tajura found himself increasingly constrained.³⁶⁵

The extent of British influence became even more evident with the arrival of British naval power. A British warship, *Ephratas*, entered the port of Tajura and remained there for several days, later replaced by another vessel. For several weeks, these ships closely monitored all movements in and out of the harbor. Their presence served as a clear demonstration of British coercive capacity and reinforced the Sultan's subordination.

Subsequently, the Sultan received explicit instructions from the British Council in Aden to postpone indefinitely the departure of the caravan bound for Shewa. This order caused alarm among the leaders of the convoy and confirmed that key decisions affecting Tajura's foreign relations were no longer made independently. Attempts by the travelers to send a message to the ruler of Shewa, Sahl Selassie Debdebe, through merchants were thwarted by the Sultan's fear of provoking British displeasure. As a result, merchants departed secretly, without informing the Europeans of the time or date of their journey.³⁶⁶

In a final revealing admission, when the travelers later informed the Sultan that they were prepared to depart, he expressed his personal willingness to assist them. However, he bitterly acknowledged that he was acting under British influence. While promising to escort them safely as far as possible,

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 73

his statement underscored the reality that British authority in Aden effectively overrode the sovereign will of the Sultanate of Tajura.³⁶⁷

Therefore, D'Abbadie's account illustrates how, by 1868, British power in the Red Sea operated not solely through formal colonization but through informal imperial control. Naval presence, economic coercion, and political pressure enabled the British Council in Aden to dictate the actions of the Sultan of Tajura, particularly regarding access to inland Ethiopia and the regulation of trade routes. Tajura thus functioned as a buffer and subordinate polity, its autonomy compromised long before the formal colonial partition of the Horn of Africa.

During the 1880s, the political landscape of the Afar coast and its inland corridors was shaped not only by European expansion but also by the strategic agency of Afar rulers themselves. Among them, Sultan Ḥamad bin Sultan La'īta of the Sultanate of Gobad (Goba'ad) stands out as a particularly astute and resilient political actor. Unlike Abu Bakr Pasha of Zeila—whose reliance upon exclusive French protection ultimately left him exposed to British intervention—Sultan Ḥamad adopted a calibrated and multi-directional diplomacy that preserved his authority in the face of competing colonial ambitions.

On 9 August 1884, France concluded a treaty of “perpetual peace and friendship” with Sultan Ḥamad La'īta. The agreement reflected France's determination to secure inland caravan routes linking Obock with Awsa and the Ethiopian highlands. Under its provisions, the Sultan guaranteed the safety of French agents, workers, and caravans traveling between the coast and the interior. In return, France acknowledged his continuing authority over inland commerce and explicitly authorized him to levy transit taxes—one thaler per camel and one thaler per European traveler. This recognition was significant. It affirmed not only Gobad's control over key caravan corridors but also its fiscal sovereignty. French commercial penetration was thus negotiated through, rather than imposed upon, existing Afar political structures.³⁶⁸

In November 1884, however, Sultan Ḥamad concluded another treaty—this time with the government of the Italy, represented by its consul at Aseb. The articles of this agreement reveal

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁶⁸ Treaty of Friendship and Perpetual Peace between France and Sultan Ahmed Loitah (Hummed La Oita) of the Sultanate of Goba'ad, concluded at Obock, 9 August 1884.

the Sultan's sophisticated balancing strategy. While affirming perpetual friendship and accepting Italian "protection" over specified coastal territories—from the Gulf of Qubbat al-Khārāb to Lake 'Assal—the treaty simultaneously preserved his "exclusive rule and sovereign rights" over the Danākil lands. Even as he granted Italy the right to establish stations at Dabbakan and elsewhere, and to raise its flag, he retained internal political authority.³⁶⁹

Crucially, Article 5 placed restrictions on the alienation of territory, stipulating that Sultan Ḥamad would neither sell nor divide his lands without Italian approval—especially the strategically vital Lake 'Assal. Yet the same article reserved salt extraction rights to himself, his people, Sultan Maḥammad Ḥanfadhē, and King Minīlik of Shewa, while prohibiting maritime export of salt for foreign nations. In this way, control over one of the most economically valuable resources in the region remained anchored in Afar and Ethiopian political networks rather than ceded outright to a European power.

The earlier Convention of 17 March 1884 between Sultan Ḥamad and Italy further underscores his diplomatic flexibility. He guaranteed safe passage for caravans between Aseb, Gobad, and Shewa, exempted Italian caravans from certain taxes, and secured Italian naval protection along the Danākil littoral. At the same time, the convention required approval from Menelik II, thereby embedding the arrangement within broader regional diplomacy rather than isolating Gobad under unilateral European control. Multiple language versions—Italian, Arabic, and Amharic—highlight the negotiated and multilingual character of the agreement.³⁷⁰

What distinguishes Sultan Ḥamad La'īta's diplomacy is that he did not bind his political survival exclusively to a single imperial patron. Whereas Abu Bakr Pasha of Zeila aligned himself almost entirely with France—publicly rejecting Ottoman authority and resisting British overtures in reliance upon French protection—Sultan Ḥamad cultivated parallel relationships. He negotiated with France to secure commercial engagement through Obock while simultaneously concluding protection arrangements with Italy centered on Aseb. This dual engagement reduced the likelihood that one European power could isolate or abandon him without consequence.

³⁶⁹ Rubenson, *Colonial Powers and Ethiopian Frontiers*, 266–67.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

Moreover, the treaties with Gobad consistently reaffirmed the Sultan's sovereign rights over internal governance, taxation, and customary authority. European powers were granted commercial privileges, protection clauses, and limited territorial concessions for stations—but not wholesale administrative takeover. The Sultan remained the indispensable intermediary controlling caravan security, inland access, and salt resources. His authority was recognized not merely as symbolic but as structurally necessary for European trade ambitions.

This strategic multiplicity rendered the Sultanate of Gobad comparatively “untouchable” during this phase of imperial competition. By distributing diplomatic commitments across rival European powers—and anchoring them within existing Afar and Ethiopian political frameworks—Sultan Ḥamad avoided the vulnerability that accompanied exclusive dependence. He neither surrendered sovereignty outright nor confined himself to a single promise of protection. Instead, he transformed imperial rivalry into a resource, extracting guarantees, payments, and recognition from competing powers while retaining decisive control over inland routes and local administration.

In contrast to the fate of Zeila, where French assurances proved insufficient against British occupation, Gobad under Sultan Ḥamad La'īta demonstrates a different model of Afar political strategy: calculated engagement without exclusive subordination. Through parallel treaties, fiscal retention, and regional alliances, the Sultan preserved a meaningful sphere of autonomy even as European influence expanded along the Red Sea littoral.

A more decisive shift occurred on 21 September 1884 with the agreement concluded between France and Sultan Hummad Mohammed of Tajoura. While the treaty reaffirmed permanent friendship and pledged non-interference in the Sultan's internal laws and customs, it placed the Sultanate under French protection and effectively transferred control over external relations to the French government. France assumed responsibility for defending Tajoura against foreign encroachment, thereby removing the Sultan's capacity to engage independently in diplomacy or military alliances. Despite its conciliatory language, the agreement marked a clear transition from indirect influence to formal colonial incorporation. By preserving local legal institutions in name while subordinating political sovereignty in practice, France established a system of rule that combined outward continuity with substantive imperial control. The incorporation of Tajoura was of particular strategic importance, as the Sultanate occupied a critical position along the southern Red Sea coast and controlled access to both maritime and inland routes. Securing Tajoura enabled

France to consolidate its coastal holdings and prepared the ground for the establishment of Djibouti as the colonial administrative center.³⁷¹

Taken together, these treaties demonstrate how colonial power transformed its presence along the Afar coast from limited commercial engagement into formal colonial rule. Although couched in the language of friendship, protection, and respect for local customs, the agreements systematically transferred sovereignty, external relations, and strategic control to the French state. At the same time, they reveal the agency of Afar rulers, who negotiated these treaties within the constraints imposed by intensifying imperial competition, seeking to preserve political authority, economic resources, and regional security. Ultimately, French expansion along the Afar coast reshaped the political and economic geography of the southern Red Sea and laid the foundations for the colonial entity that would later emerge as French Somaliland, now Djibouti.

3.3 The Rise of Conflict between Afar Rulers and Colonial Authorities in the Red Sea Littoral

The rise of conflict between Afar rulers and colonial authorities along the Red Sea littoral emerged from the fundamental contradiction between European imperial ambitions and Afar conceptions of sovereignty, land tenure, and political authority. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, colonial powers increasingly framed their intervention in Afar territory through treaties that promised protection, friendship, and commercial cooperation. Yet these agreements, negotiated within highly unequal power relations and across incompatible legal traditions, became instruments through which colonial administrations asserted territorial claims that Afar rulers neither intended nor accepted. As Italian, French, and British interests converged on the strategic Afar coast, conflict intensified, taking the form of diplomatic protest, armed resistance, forced exile of traditional leaders, and long-term political fragmentation.

One of the earliest violent encounters illustrating this dynamic occurred when a Turkish–Egyptian military officer Ali Afendi, accompanied by a small detachment of soldiers, approached the house of an Afar man named Mohammed Osman under the pretense of peaceful dialogue. The apparent objective was to arrest him through deception. However, when Mohammed Osman’s cousin, Mohammed Asa-Ali, intervened and wounded the Egyptian officer with a spear, Egyptian troops

³⁷¹ *Treaty between France and Tadjourah, 21 September 1884, in Edward Hertslet, The Map of Africa by Treaty (London: Printed for H.M. Stationery Office by Harrison and Sons, 1909), treaty no. 184.*

immediately opened fire, triggering a brief but intense confrontation. Although the Egyptian officer survived and was carried back by his soldiers, the incident forced the Egyptian force to withdraw, while Mohammed Osman escaped capture. This episode exemplifies early Afar resistance to foreign military intrusion and deception.³⁷²

At the same time, broader geopolitical maneuvering was unfolding within the Ethiopian highlands. Emperor Menelik of Shewa, then a rival to Emperor Yohannes IV, secretly cultivated relations with Egyptian authorities, particularly Khedive Ismail (Qadif Ismail Basha), in an effort to undermine Yohannes's authority. According to Smidt Wolbert, this clandestine diplomacy was facilitated by Qees (Qais) Biru, a defector from Yohannes's camp, who traveled to Egypt to broker reconciliation between Menelik and the Egyptian government. Evidence of this covert relationship appears in a letter dated 6 December 1875, in which Ismail Basha acknowledged Menelik's message and affirmed receipt of his intentions. The same source confirms that Qais Buru accompanied the Egyptian expeditionary force as it marched through the Awsa region toward Ethiopia and was killed during the campaign.³⁷³

Werner Munzinger's role in these events is central to understanding Egyptian expansionist ambitions in the Afar region. As Wolbert Smidt explains, Munzinger demonstrated a clear appetite for territorial expansion and military confrontation, as reflected in his aggressive correspondence with Emperor Yohannes IV. His mission to Awsa was not merely diplomatic, as publicly claimed, but formed part of a broader Egyptian strategy aimed at annexation rather than genuine cooperation. Munzinger even formulated contingency plans for his own survival, hoping to enter the service of King Menelik of Shewa as a foreign advisor. Indeed, Menelik reportedly dispatched one of his highest-ranking nobles, Ras Birru, to accompany Munzinger's group through Awsa toward Shewa. By this stage, Munzinger had already negotiated terms for his personal security and was preparing for a role within the Ethiopian state apparatus should the Egyptian campaign succeed.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Ahaw Ali, *Eritriya anke Fanah*, 23–24; Hashim, *Almanhal*, 345.

³⁷³ Wolbert G. C. Smidt, C. Detlef G. Müller, and Werner Munzinger, in Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3: He–N (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 1070–73a.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

However, Egyptian expansion in Ethiopia collapsed catastrophically in 1875. As Smidt further notes, nearly all Egyptian armies invading Ethiopia from multiple directions were annihilated in November of that year. The force advancing from Massawa under Arakel Bey Dabroyan was destroyed at the battles of Gundet and along the Mereb River, leaving almost no survivors.

Another Egyptian contingent under Muhammad Rauf Pasha landed at Zeila on the Somali coast and pushed inland toward the historic city of Harar. This force succeeded in occupying Harar on 11 October 1875, deposing the reigning emir and briefly establishing Egyptian control over the Emirate of Harar and parts of the surrounding region until its eventual withdrawal a decade later.³⁷⁵

Similarly, the Egyptian expedition led by Munzinger through Awsa ended in complete failure. The independent Afar Sultan of Awsa appears to have been fully aware of Egypt's broader objectives and understood that Munzinger's claims of peaceful negotiation masked an agenda of annexation.³⁷⁶ Determined to preserve Awsa's sovereignty, the Sultan rejected Egyptian overtures and resisted their advance.

This resistance culminated dramatically when the Egyptian army attempted to enter Ethiopia through Tadjoura in 1875. Under the leadership of Munzinger, the invading force encountered the Awsa army commanded by Sultan Muhammad Hanfere (Ilalta). The confrontation occurred at Giifu Mountain, where the Egyptian force was decisively defeated and virtually annihilated. Contemporary accounts emphasize that not a single Egyptian soldier survived the engagement. Further details are provided in *History of Ethiopia* by Andrzej Bartnicki and Joanna Mantel-Niećko (Amharic translation by Alemayehu Abebe), which describes how, after reaching Awsa territory and resting near Lake Asal in early November 1875, Munzinger's troops were surrounded at night by Afar fighters. A small group infiltrated Munzinger's tent and killed him with knives, after which the remaining Egyptian soldiers were massacred. Although later reports suggested that approximately twenty soldiers survived, the campaign was effectively destroyed. The same account indicates that Sultan of Awsa was allied with Emperor Yohannes IV and that the attack on Munzinger's army was carried out on the Sultan's orders.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 74.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ Andrzej Bartnicki and Joanna Mantel Niećko, *Historia Etiopii* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), Amharic translation by Alamayehu Abbabe, 2003, 317.

These events demonstrate that Sultan Muhammad Hanfere firmly rejected Menelik's proposal to cooperate with Munzinger in an attack against Emperor Yohannes from Awsa.³⁷⁸ This refusal had long-term consequences. After Menelik eventually consolidated power and became Emperor, he sought to punish Awsa for its earlier resistance and perceived betrayal of his ambitions. Consequently, Menelik ordered a large-scale military expedition against Awsa. His forces, led by Ras Welde Giorgis and supported by commanders such as Tessema Nadew and Wolde Tsadiq, advanced into Afar territory. They were met by the Awsa army under Sultan Muhammad Hanfere at the battlefield of Arado in present-day Dubti Woreda.³⁷⁹

The ensuing battle was fierce and prolonged, lasting from dawn until dusk. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, but ultimately the Awsa forces succeeded in defeating Menelik's army, forcing it to withdraw. Ethiopian chroniclers, including Menelik's own court historians such as Gebre Selassie and Berihun Kebede, acknowledge the intensity of the engagement and the failure of the imperial forces to subdue Awsa on this occasion.³⁸⁰ The historical record of the Battle of Awsa remains remarkably underrepresented in Ethiopian historiography, despite its profound significance for the Afar people. According to surviving accounts, Sultan Muhammad Hanfere, the ruler of Awsa, faced the advancing forces of Emperor Menelik II, led by prominent commanders including Ras Wold Girgis, Dejach Tessema Nadew, and Woldetsadiq, the commander of the prison. While Ethiopian sources acknowledge the march of Menelik's 15,000-strong army into Awsa, they remain conspicuously silent regarding the outcome of the campaign, the fate of the army, or the broader consequences for the local population.³⁸¹

Contemporary Afar oral traditions, however, tell a different story. These accounts affirm that the Afar suffered losses during the conflict, yet ultimately, it was Sultan Muhammad Hanfere and his forces who emerged victorious. The Sultan's leadership and military prowess were widely recognized, and his reputation spread beyond the region, consolidating his authority over the Afar people. Unlike other regions subjugated by Menelik—such as Arsi, Harar, the Muslim Gurage,

³⁷⁸ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 335.

³⁷⁹ Tsahafe Tizaz Gebresillase, *History of Menelik, King of Kings of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2008), 108.

³⁸⁰ Gebresillase, *History of Menelik*, 182; Berihun Kebede, *History of Haile Selassie* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa Artistic Printing Press, 1993), 1279.

³⁸¹ Kebede, *History of Haile Selassie*, 1279.

Wolayta, and Kefa, whose defeats were extensively recorded in Ethiopian chronicles and school histories—the triumph of Awsa remained largely undocumented.

The discrepancy between written Ethiopian sources and Afar oral accounts may explain why many historians have downplayed or ignored the conflict. Ethiopian historian Gebre Selassie, for example, reported on the campaign but claimed Menelik had won without providing evidence of plunder, territorial gains, or other customary signs of victory. Other scholars, such as Berihun Kebede, do not record either a decisive defeat of Menelik’s forces or the aftermath of the battle, leaving the conflict largely invisible in mainstream historical narratives.

The Battle of Awsa, therefore, represents a hidden chapter in the history of Ethiopian-Afar relations: a war that the Afar regard as a testament to their resilience and the authority of Sultan Muhammad Hanfare, yet one that remains underrepresented in Ethiopian historiography. Its omission underscores a broader pattern of selective documentation, in which the victories of local rulers resisting imperial expansion are minimized or erased, while the conquests of the empire are celebrated.

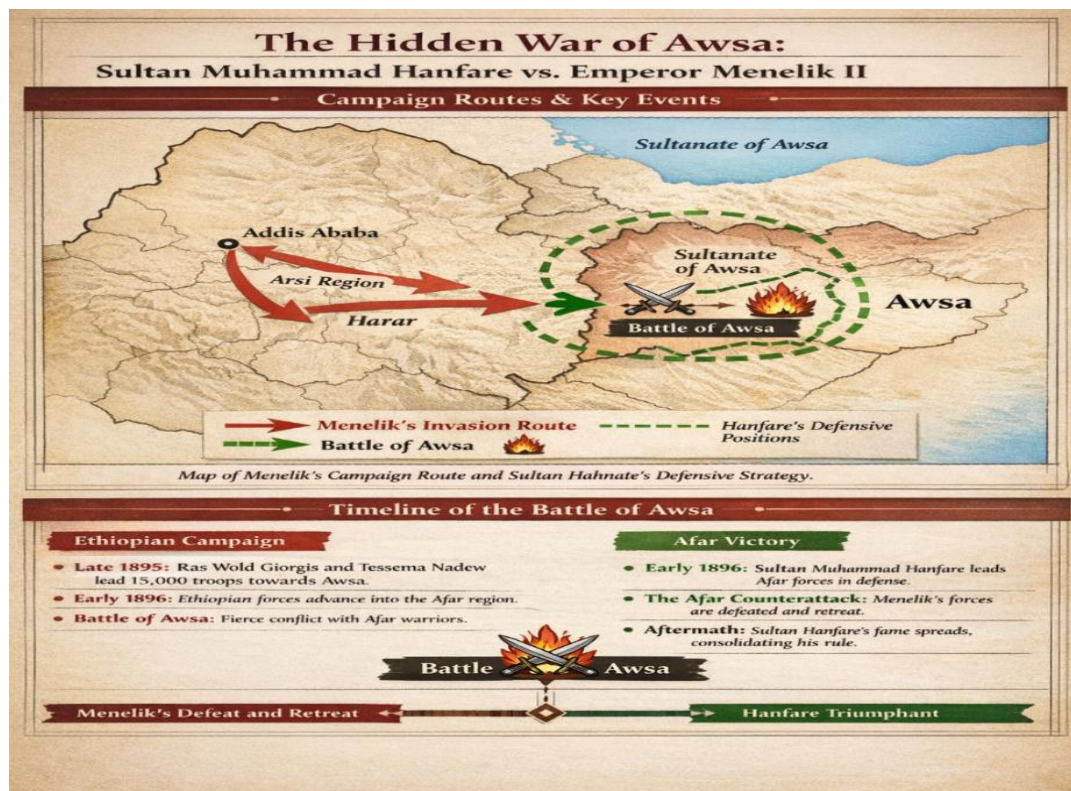


Figure 8. This illustration was created by the author

Taken together, these episodes underscore the strategic importance of Awsa, the political autonomy of the Afar Sultanate, and its decisive role in shaping the outcomes of both foreign colonial incursions and internal Ethiopian power struggles during the late nineteenth century.

Italian involvement in Afar territory began with limited commercial objectives but rapidly evolved into territorial expansion. Early agreements, such as those negotiated by Giuseppe Sapeto on behalf of the Rubattino Company, were understood by Afar rulers as permissions to use specific coastal points for trade-related purposes, including ship repair and coal storage. These arrangements did not imply the transfer of sovereignty or permanent alienation of land. However, Italian authorities progressively reinterpreted these agreements through European legal and cartographic frameworks, treating them as territorial cessions. This divergence in interpretation laid the groundwork for persistent conflict. The 1883 Treaty of Awsa epitomized this process. While Italy pledged to protect Afar lands from maritime enemies and to respect existing boundaries, Italian forces soon advanced inland beyond the areas explicitly discussed in the treaty. The occupation of Mergable, located 2 Mile distance from the coast, was perceived by Afar leaders as a blatant violation of both the letter and spirit of the agreement.³⁸²

Sultan Dini Mohamed Bourhan of Rahaita articulated this grievance with remarkable clarity in his correspondence with Italian authorities. In his letter to the Italian Foreign Minister Pasquale Stanislao Mancini dated March 25, 1883, the Sultan rejected the Italian claim that Mergable fell within the two-mile limit stipulated in the treaty. He emphasized that neither the name of Mergable nor inland territories had been mentioned during negotiations and explicitly stated his ignorance of European units of measurement, swearing before God that he did not know how far a mile extended.³⁸³ His demand for the restoration of Mergable was framed not as a hostile act but as a plea for justice and the preservation of friendship, revealing the Sultan's continued belief—at least at that stage—that Italy might still honor its commitments. Earlier correspondence reinforced this position. In a letter dated April 22, 1881, addressed to Bir Sahib, the Italian representative at Assab, the Sultan of Rahaita insisted that the agreement concerned offshore islands rather than coastal or

³⁸²Sultan Burhan Mohammed, letter to Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, Foreign Minister of Italy, 25 March 1883, cited in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. IV: *Colonial Powers and Ethiopian Frontiers, 1880–1884*, doc. no. 112.

³⁸³*Ibid.*

inland land and urged Italy not to break its word.³⁸⁴ These letters collectively demonstrate that Afar rulers did not passively accept colonial encroachment but actively contested it through diplomatic channels grounded in moral obligation and customary law. Giovanni Branchi, the Italian consul at Assab, wrote to Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa offering Italian military assistance to support the Afar against the Issa. In a firm response, On 28 January 1884, the Sultan rejected the proposal, asserting that “our soldiers are sufficient to defeat the Issa,” thereby emphasizing the autonomy and self-reliance of the Afar forces. Sultan Hanfare’s refusal effectively blocked Italian ambitions to incorporate the Afar into their colonial expansion plans.³⁸⁵

As a result, Italy redirected its support to the Issa, providing them with arms, military training, and access to profitable livestock markets in exchange for their cooperation during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1936–1941), particularly in the strategic area of Dire Dawa.³⁸⁶ Armed and organized by the Italians, the Issa exploited the opportunity to encroach upon traditional Afar lands, especially the Allideghi plains, while the Afar allied with Ethiopian forces resisting the occupation.

Historical accounts underscore the consequences of this shift. Herrie (2008) notes that when the Italians were defeated and withdrew from the region, they left all military equipment in the hands of the Issa-Somali, enabling them to decisively defeat the Afar and expand their territorial control.³⁸⁷ Marcus (1995) further confirms that even during the final phases of the Italian withdrawal, Italian-led Somali troops retained their arms, and Italy continued to rearm local leaders under its trusteeship role, strengthening the Issa position.³⁸⁸ Tadesse M. (2006) similarly emphasizes that the Italian invasion fundamentally altered the Issa-Afar balance of power, enabling the Issa to acquire modern weapons, logistics, and military organization while dismantling traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution between the two communities.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁴ Sultan Burhan Mohammed, letter to Bir Sahib, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, IV, doc. 45.

³⁸⁵ Sultan Mohammed Hanfare, letter to Branchi, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, IV, doc. 152.

³⁸⁶ John Markakis, “Anatomy of a Conflict: Afar and Issa,” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 96 (2002): 447.

³⁸⁷ H. Ali Herrie, “Historical Perspectives of the Afar and Issa-Somali Conflict in North-Eastern Ethiopia” (M.Sc. thesis, University of Molde Business School [UMB], Norway, 2008), 34–35.

³⁸⁸ Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellassie I: The Formative Years, 1892–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8.

³⁸⁹ Tadesse, “The Afar–Issa Conflict,” 15.

Ultimately, Sultan Muhammad Hanfare's principled refusal to accept Italian support demonstrates a deliberate assertion of Afar sovereignty. Meanwhile, Italian backing of the Issa facilitated their expansion into Afar territory, altering the regional balance of power and leaving a lasting impact on Afar-Issa relations during and after the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

When diplomatic protests failed to halt Italian expansion, conflict escalated into armed resistance. The Italian occupation of the Barasoli area near the port city of Baylul marked a critical turning point. For the Afar population, this move signaled an irreversible attempt to seize their territory. Resistance erupted, and a fierce battle ensued between Italian soldiers and Afar fighters in the Barasoli region. The confrontation exposed the fragility of Italian control and underscored the capacity of Afar communities to mobilize militarily in defense of their land. Alarmed by the intensity of the resistance, Italian officials sought to de-escalate the situation by appealing to Afar rulers.³⁹⁰ Meetings were convened with the Sultan of Rahaita and Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa, whose authority remained decisive among the Afar. The sultans agreed to intervene and calm their people on the condition that Italian forces cease further advance and respect Afar settlement rights. As a result, Italian troops withdrew without entering Baylul, a temporary victory for Afar diplomacy that demonstrated the continued relevance of indigenous political authority.³⁹¹

Despite these assurances, Italian violations continued unabated. Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa emerged as a central figure in resisting Italian encroachment through sustained correspondence and warnings. In a letter dated December 30, 1883, addressed to Giovanni Branchi, governor of Assab, the Sultan emphasized that the area under dispute was a small territory historically granted to the Afar by the Ankala clan and warned that interference with Afar rights would inevitably lead to trouble.³⁹² He followed this with a direct appeal to Afar communities, instructing them to defend their rights and avoid submission to unlawful occupation. Within a month, on January 28, 1884, he sent another letter to Italian authorities, acknowledging the territory already occupied by Italy but categorically demanding that expansion into other Afar states cease. He affirmed the Afar people's right to move freely within their land and urged Italy to care for, rather than oppress, the local population. These letters reveal a sophisticated political

³⁹⁰ Andrzej Bartnicki and Joanna Mantel Niećko, *Historia Etiopii* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), Amharic translation by Alamayyehu Abbabe, 2003, 317.

³⁹¹ Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, letter to Branchi, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, IV, doc. 151.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

strategy that combined pragmatic recognition of Italian presence with a firm defense of Afar sovereignty.³⁹³

Nonetheless, between 1869 and 1888, Italian authorities succeeded in consolidating control over the entire Red Sea coast. What began as a narrow coastal foothold expanded inland through a combination of military pressure, legal manipulation, and administrative consolidation. In 1888, Italy formally transformed territories previously held by commercial companies into state-owned colonial possessions, extinguishing any remaining pretense of limited occupation. This process unfolded within the broader context of the European partition of Africa, during which Afar territory was divided among multiple colonial regimes.

When the Italian colonial administration began extending taxation into rural Eritrea, it encountered immediate resistance from Afar political authorities, particularly the Sultan of Rahaito. The imposition of taxes was perceived not merely as an economic burden but as a direct violation of Afar sovereignty and customary autonomy. Members of the Aden Laga tribe openly declared that they would not comply with Italian tax demands. Tensions escalated further when Italian forces seized camels belonging to the Weima tribe and transported them to Assab. In response, Afar groups, under the leadership of the tribal chief Aden Laga, launched a swift retaliatory attack, successfully recovering the stolen livestock and demonstrating their capacity for organized resistance.³⁹⁴

European observers themselves acknowledged the persistence of Afar resistance during this period. In *The History of Ethiopia*, written in Italian by Andrzej Bartnicki and Joanna Mantel-Niećko and translated into Amharic by Alemayehu Abebe, the authors note that although early encounters between Italian soldiers and the Danakil (Afar) were limited to sporadic skirmishes, the situation changed dramatically by the end of 1886. They record that serious clashes erupted when the expedition led by Pietro Porro (Paros), officially presented as a scientific mission to study the landscape, was completely destroyed, underscoring the dangers faced by Italian incursions beyond coastal enclaves.³⁹⁵

³⁹³ Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, letter to Branchi, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, IV, doc. 152.

³⁹⁴ kaamil, *Afar Aydaadu*, 97.

³⁹⁵ Bartnicki and Niećko, *Historia Etiopii*, 317.

At the same time, Italy pursued a broader regional strategy aimed at weakening Ethiopian resistance through diplomatic manipulation. In the 1880s, Italian authorities facilitated the transport of weapons and ammunition to Menelik of Shewa along the Assab–Shewan route. This policy was intended to exacerbate tensions between Menelik and Emperor Yohannes IV, thereby diverting Ethiopian attention inward and granting Italy greater freedom of action along the Red Sea coast and adjacent Afar territories.

Direct confrontations between Italian expeditions and Afar sultanates repeatedly ended in disaster for the colonial forces. In 1881, Italian officers Giulietti and Biglieri attempted to penetrate beyond the limits of the territory granted to them near Assab. Sultan Haisema Aha of the Bidu (Girifo) Sultanate confronted the expedition and successfully blocked its advance into the interior. Undeterred by this failure, Italy launched a punitive expedition in 1884 under the leadership of Bianchi. Once again, Afar resistance proved decisive. Sultan Haisema Aha personally led his forces at the Battle of Girifo, defeating the invading army and forcing it to retreat to the coast.³⁹⁶

These repeated defeats are corroborated by European travel literature. L. M. Nesbitt, in *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, observes that three major expeditions—those of Munzinger in 1875, Giulietti in 1881, and Bianchi in 1884—were all annihilated, with no European member surviving. Nesbitt emphasizes that Munzinger, acting in the interests of Khedive Ismail of Egypt, was killed along with his entire escort near Lake Assal, while Giulietti, Biglieri, and their sailors perished while attempting to open a route from Assab to the Abyssinian plateau through Afar territory. Similar accounts are provided by Wilfred Thesiger in *Danakil Diary*, where he notes that no European had succeeded in entering Awsa during the nineteenth century, despite multiple attempts that ended in complete annihilation by Afar forces.³⁹⁷

Italian colonial tactics increasingly relied on deception as well as force. In one instance, Italian authorities established a military camp known as Wadi within ,SultanYasin Haysama Biru(Girifo) Sultan’s territory under false pretenses. Upon learning of this intrusion, the Sultan Yasin Haysama ordered an attack on the camp, resulting in the capture of Italian soldiers. Italian officials responded with diplomatic duplicity: the commander-in-chief sent a conciliatory message claiming that the conflict was merely a misunderstanding with the governor of Assab and requesting that the Sultan

³⁹⁶ Nesbit, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 301–02; Thesiger, *Danakil Diary*, 65.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*

suspend hostilities while negotiations were arranged. Trusting this message, the Sultan delayed further action. Under cover of night, however, Italian forces advanced from two directions and surrounded the Sultan's position. Despite fighting for two days against a fully armed colonial force, the Sultan's army eventually exhausted its supplies and ammunition and was compelled to surrender.

The consequences were severe. The Sultan and his secretary, Jamaladdin Ibrahim Khalil Ashami³⁹⁸, were imprisoned in solitary confinement at an undisclosed location, while members of the Sultan's family and military entourage were summarily executed. Among those killed was the prominent Afar noble Abdukadir Hanfare, whose execution became emblematic of the brutality accompanying Italian consolidation of power in Afar territories.³⁹⁹

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 marked a new phase in Afar–Italian relations. Sultan Muhammad Yayo of Awsa sought assistance from Emperor Haile Selassie to resist the advancing colonial forces, but no support was forthcoming. Instead, Italian aircraft bombed the Sultan's palace at Aysaita, demonstrating Italy's determination to neutralize Afar resistance. As Emperor Haile Selassie went into exile, Italy effectively assumed control over the region. Facing overwhelming military pressure and political isolation, Sultan Muhammad Yayo had little choice but to accommodate Italian authority.⁴⁰⁰

Italy subsequently pursued a policy of indirect rule in Awsa. In exchange for the Sultan's recognition of Italian sovereignty and his cooperation in maintaining order, colonial authorities restored local administrative authority to him. This arrangement allowed Sultan Muhammad Yayo to govern his people during the Italian period with a degree of autonomy and preserved prestige. In 1939, he accompanied Italian officials to Rome, where Benito Mussolini accorded him a

³⁹⁸ **Note:** Gamal al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Khalīl al-Shāmī, father of Hāshim Gamal al-Dīn, served as secretary of the Sultanate of Biru under Sultan Yāsīn Ḥaysama and was closely connected to the ruling family through marriage. He recorded events—including the Sultan's conflicts with Italian forces—based on manuscripts, notes, and oral accounts. Hāshim Gamal al-Dīn later edited and compiled these materials into *al-Manhal*, making it a key primary source on the Biru Sultanate and Afar–colonial interactions.

³⁹⁹ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 335.

⁴⁰⁰ Habib Mohammed Yayyo (son of Sultan Mohammed Yayyo), oral interview by the author, Asayita, Ethiopia, June 8, 2024.



Figure 9. Sultan Muhammad Yayyo met Benito Mussolini and Victor Emmanuel III in Rome, on 12 July, 1939

Italian colonial violence against the Afar intensified during the twentieth century, particularly under fascist rule. Maahi Rasu also known as Yangudi, located at the eastern part of Afar region. It is bordered with Awsi Rasu from the north, Gabbi Rasu from the South, Harri Rasu from the West and Shenille Zone of Somali region from the East. It is divided in five Woreda and 67 Kebele administrations. It has an area of 16,411 square kilometres. historically, border of the Eastern Zone

⁴⁰¹ Kaddafo, *Hidden Royalty*, 74–79.

extends up to Erer and Dire Dawa.⁴⁰² However, The territorial displacement of the Afar from the Erer–Dire Dawa corridor must be understood within the broader context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century inter-pastoral competition in the northeastern Horn of Africa. The expansion of the Issa Somali clans into the Erer valley and adjacent grazing zones progressively altered the demographic and political landscape of the region. As Issa groups advanced westward and consolidated control over key water points and pasturelands, segments of the Afar population were compelled to withdraw from areas they had historically occupied. This process of displacement resulted in significant Afar out-migration from the Erer basin and the environs of Dire Dawa, reshaping patterns of settlement and territorial authority.

Following this movement, the Issa established durable settlements across the reclaimed territories, gradually institutionalizing their presence. In the contemporary federal arrangement of Ethiopia, these areas were incorporated into what became known as the Shinile (Shinelle) Zone within the Somali Regional State. The administrative demarcation reflects the demographic predominance that emerged over time, though it overlays a more complex historical landscape marked by layered claims and shifting pastoral frontiers.

Nineteenth-century European observers provide important testimony regarding earlier patterns of occupation. The British explorer William Cornwallis Harris, who travelled through the region during his diplomatic mission to the Ethiopian highlands in the 1840s, recorded that the territory bounded by the Erer River was inhabited by the Danakil—an exonym widely used in contemporary sources to denote the Afar. Harris specifically noted that the We‘ima (Weima) tribe exercised residence and influence in this locality, indicating that the Erer basin formed part of the Afar pastoral domain prior to subsequent Somali expansion. His account constitutes an external corroboration of Afar presence in the region before the later shifts in control.⁴⁰³

Taken together, oral traditions, colonial travel narratives, and subsequent administrative transformations suggest that the Erer–Dire Dawa corridor was historically contested terrain. The displacement of the Afar and the settlement of the Issa clans were not isolated events but rather

⁴⁰² Letter from Menelik II to Abubeker, head of Dire Dawa, 9 May 1898, in Paulos Ngongo, *Emperor Menelik II: Internal Exchange of Letters* (Addis Ababa: Aster Nega Publisher, 2010), doc. no. 210, 83; Haj Beshir Daoud, *Around the Process of My Life* (Addis Ababa: Nejashi Printing Press, 2002), 37–38.

⁴⁰³ Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, 153.

components of a prolonged process of ecological competition, clan mobility, and political reconfiguration in the Horn of Africa.

Sylvia Pankhurst documented the Afar response to Italian aggression during the invasion of Ethiopia, emphasizing that Dankali communities sheltered Ethiopian resistance fighters and pledged to assist all Ethiopians fleeing colonial repression.⁴⁰⁴ Herrie (2008) recorded the massacre and aerial bombardment of Afar villages such as Foqo, Ado-ela, Eeroli, Hamoysa, and Mandaela.⁴⁰⁵ Pankhurst further described large-scale Italian military expeditions involving tens of thousands of troops, supported by aircraft, whose objectives included forced disarmament, heavy taxation, cultural assimilation, and the abduction of children to impose the Italian language and Roman Catholic faith.⁴⁰⁶ Afar resistance persisted despite these atrocities. Leaders such as Hamedu Mumin of Ba'adu and Wererai of the Debnes reportedly shot down Italian aircraft, acts that symbolized both military resistance and defiance of colonial domination.⁴⁰⁷ Italian retaliation was brutal, culminating in the execution of eighty-two prominent Afar elders between Hurrso and the Erer River, an atrocity allegedly facilitated by rival Somali leaders aligned with Italian interests.⁴⁰⁸

Italian, French, and British interventions fractured Afar land into three separate political entities: Italian Eritrea to the north, French Somaliland to the west, and the eastern regions of Ethiopia to the south. Although politically divided, these regions remained culturally and institutionally linked, forming what the Afar themselves identify as the Afar Triangle, characterized by shared political institutions, clan structures, and social norms.⁴⁰⁹

French colonial involvement followed a similar trajectory of treaty-based penetration followed by coercive consolidation. The 1862 Treaty of Obock allowed France to establish a presence under the guise of friendship and trade. Over the following decades, France expanded its control, establishing the Territory of Obock and Protectorate of Tadjourah in 1884. Although French

⁴⁰⁴ Sylvia Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Patriots," *Ethiopian Observer* 3, no. 10 (1959): 329.

⁴⁰⁵ H. Ali Herrie, *Historical Perspectives of the Afar and Issa-Somali Conflict in North-Eastern Ethiopia* (M.Sc. thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences [UMB], 2008), 34–35

⁴⁰⁶ Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Patriots," 347.

⁴⁰⁷ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 87–88.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁹ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 79.

authorities initially secured their position through a series of treaties concluded with Afar chiefs—treaties that enabled effective control over the greater part of the territory—this foundational political reality was subsequently obscured through deliberate colonial rebranding. In 1888, following new agreements with Issa leaders, the French administration officially redesignated the colony as French Somaliland. This change in nomenclature selectively elevated one community while marginalizing the earlier Afar-centered treaties that had constituted the legal and political basis of French territorial acquisition. Far from being a neutral administrative adjustment, the renaming functioned as a calculated political strategy: it reconfigured narratives of sovereignty and legitimacy, effaced the Afar foundations of French rule, and sought to legitimize colonial authority by aligning it with Somali populations increasingly favored by French administrators in the shifting landscape of regional alliances and imperial interests..⁴¹⁰ Contemporary observers and later scholars have emphasized the demographic and political distortion inherent in this nomenclature. Spencer (1979) noted that Djibouti was predominantly Afar until recent decades and that Somali migration, encouraged under colonial rule, transformed the city’s demographic profile.⁴¹¹ Morin (2005) traced the origin of the term Côte Française des Somalis to Haji Diideh, a Gedebursi merchant, while Said Y. (1978) described the term as a misnomer because most of the territory lay under Afar sovereignty.⁴¹² When relations between the Afar population and the French colonial administration deteriorated, the relocation of the colonial capital from Obock, an Afar-centered political and social space, to the more remote coastal site of Djibouti became a deliberate instrument of colonial control. Far from being a purely technical or geographic decision, the transfer of the capital was closely linked to rising Afar resistance to French territorial claims and administrative encroachment. By distancing the seat of government from Afar-dominated areas, the colonial administration sought to minimize Afar political influence, weaken indigenous authority, and insulate colonial governance from sustained local opposition.

This shift coincided with a broader reorientation of French colonial policy in the late 1880s, marked by new treaties concluded with Issa leaders and the subsequent renaming of the territory

⁴¹⁰ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 93.

⁴¹¹ John H. Spencer, “A Reassessment of Ethiopian–Somali Conflict,” *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 3 (1979): 25.

⁴¹² Didier Morin, “Gadabuursi,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 640; Abdi Y. Said, “The Mini-Republic of Djibouti: Problems and Prospects,” *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 2 (1978): 35–40.

as French Somaliland in 1888. Although France had initially secured its foothold through agreements with Afar chiefs—treaties that enabled it to assert control over nearly three-quarters of the territory—the renaming of the colony selectively obscured these Afar foundations of French rule.⁴¹³ As Said Y. observed as early as 1978, the designation *French Somaliland* was fundamentally misleading, since “most of the territory acquired by the French was under Afar sovereignty.”⁴¹⁴ This practice reflected a broader colonial pattern in which European powers preferred to govern through latecomers or minority groups, whom they perceived as more amenable to colonial objectives, in order to bypass entrenched indigenous authorities.

French efforts to consolidate their physical and administrative presence in Afar territories were met with sustained resistance. Afar traditional leaders rejected French claims of ownership, arguing that such claims violated Afar customary law. Mohamed Kadamy (1996) notes that the original name *Colony of Obock* was intended to reflect the terms of the 1862 treaty with the Sultan of Raheita, which authorized French presence without transferring sovereignty.⁴¹⁵ Sultan Dini Mohamed Bourhan later contested French assertions of territorial purchase, insisting that under Afar common law property rights could not be alienated: only usufruct could be granted, and even the sultan lacked the authority to transfer ownership. This fundamental legal and cultural incompatibility contributed to a relationship characterized by rejection, repression, and retaliation, culminating in the exile of numerous Afar leaders—reportedly ninety-three sultans from Goba‘ad, Tağura, and Raheita—to Madagascar.

Contemporary and later observers have underscored the political intent behind these policies. Lewis M. (1955) argued that French colonial strategy explicitly sought to negate the existence of the Afar—then commonly referred to as Danakil—whom administrators regarded as a major obstacle to deeper colonial penetration. The adoption of the name *French Somali Coast* thus symbolized the erasure of Afar political primacy.⁴¹⁶ Similarly, Ugut-Toosi (2009) cited by yasin Mohammed(2010) emphasized that despite Afars inhabiting the majority of the territory and owning approximately 85 percent of the land, France retained a Somali-centered colonial identity

⁴¹³ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 93.

⁴¹⁴ Said, “The Mini-Republic of Djibouti,” 35–40.

⁴¹⁵ Kadamy Mohamed, “Djibouti: Between War and Peace,” *Review of African Political Economy* 23, no. 70 (1996): 512.

⁴¹⁶ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160.

for decades, a choice that carried profound political consequences. This symbolic transformation was reinforced by the physical relocation of the capital from the Afar-dominated north to Djiboutville, a newly constructed coastal city.⁴¹⁷

While French officials publicly justified the transfer of the capital on strategic and logistical grounds (Yasin 2010), scholars such as Bollée (2003) have noted that Djibouti was deliberately developed across the Gulf of Tağura as a new administrative center precisely because it offered greater control and separation from resistant Afar communities.⁴¹⁸ In this sense, the relocation of the capital was not merely an outcome of strategic geography, but a colonial response to Afar resistance, designed to neutralize indigenous influence and consolidate French authority in a space more conducive to long-term military, administrative, and diplomatic domination.

When Derder Habib emerged as heir apparent, he openly opposed what he regarded as unnecessary and excessive atrocities committed by French colonial forces against the Afar population. His resistance to colonial violence resulted in his arrest and prolonged detention; he was held hostage by the French authorities in Madagascar for seven years before his eventual release.⁴¹⁹

During this period, French colonial expansion intensified in the Afar hinterlands. A French militia leader, Abten Koule, launched attacks against Afar communities residing in the countryside, though these confrontations eventually culminated in a temporary reconciliation. Nevertheless, the violence provoked strong resistance. Mohamed Gedakali Hassan, outraged by the treatment of his people, retaliated by attacking caravans transporting food and supplies to French militias and soldiers. In response, French forces adopted punitive measures, forcibly displacing Afar communities and driving them, along with their livestock, toward the foothills of surrounding mountains, thereby disrupting pastoral livelihoods and regional trade networks.⁴²⁰

Colonial aggression escalated further in 1927, when Alphonso Lipment, the French government's representative in Dekel (Djibouti), launched a military invasion into Awsa. This incursion was met with organized resistance under the leadership of Sultan Yayo Muhammad, who mobilized the

⁴¹⁷ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 93.

⁴¹⁸ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 94; Amedee Bollee, "Djibouti: From French Outpost to US Base," *Review of African Political Economy* 30, no. 97 (2003): 211

⁴¹⁹ Kaamil, *Afar Aydaadu*, 102.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

Simbille forces. The Afar forces inflicted a decisive defeat on the invading troops and captured their commander, Alphonse Slipiman. After several days of imprisonment in Awsa, Slipiman was released only after signing a colonial treaty with Sultan Yayo, underscoring the Afar leadership's continued reliance on diplomacy alongside military resistance.⁴²¹

French colonial authorities, however, sought revenge for this humiliation. In 1935, forces stationed in Dekel launched another campaign against Sultan Muhammad Yayoi, advancing as far as Afambo in an attempt to reassert colonial control. Sultan Muhammad Yayo reorganized his forces and confronted the invading army at a site known as Modahto. In this decisive engagement, the Afar forces defeated the colonial troops, killing Bernard, the governor of the Afar city of Dekel, and forcing the remnants of the army to retreat back toward Awsa.⁴²²

Parallel to these conflicts, Italian colonial authorities, acting in coordination with the French, began forcibly extracting salt from Lake 'Asal (Lak' Asal) through caravan traders without the consent of the Afar inhabitants. This act directly challenged Afar sovereignty over a critical economic resource. In response, Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa addressed a formal letter to the Italian agent in Assab, asserting Afar ownership and political authority over the salt lands. In his protest, he emphasized that earlier relations with European powers had been established peacefully and without loss, but warned that the unauthorized extraction of salt constituted a violation of Afar territorial rights and could not be tolerated without permission.⁴²³

French colonial policy increasingly targeted Afar political institutions as obstacles to effective control. Mohamed Kadamy (1996) emphasized that Afar customary law fundamentally rejected the notion of permanent land alienation.⁴²⁴ According to Sultan Dini Mohamed Bourhan, land could never be sold or transferred; only use rights could be granted, and even the Sultan lacked the authority to alter communal ownership. France's claim to have purchased Obock thus rested on a

⁴²¹ Habib Mohammed, *Decline of Adal Sultanate and Formation of Awsa Sultanate* (Addis Ababa: Alpha Printers PVT. LTD. CO, 2006), 61–70.

⁴²² Thompson and Adolf, *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa*, 11.

⁴²³ Colette Dubois, *L'or blanc de Djibouti: Salines et sauniers (XIXe–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 27. Colette Dubois, *L'or blanc de Djibouti: Salines et sauniers (XIXe–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 27; kaamil, *Afar Aydaadu*, 102.

⁴²⁴ Kadamy Mohamed, "Djibouti: Between War and Peace," *Review of African Political Economy* 23, no. 70 (1996): 512.

legal fiction incompatible with Afar norms. When Afar leaders continued to challenge French authority, colonial administrators resorted to repression. Dozens of sultans and chiefs from Goba'ad, Tadjourah, and Rahaita were arrested, imprisoned, and deported to Madagascar, a practice intended to dismantle indigenous leadership and suppress resistance. French policy sought to negate the existence of the Afar, whom colonial officials viewed as an impediment to further expansion. Documented cases include the arrest of Wizir Houmed Mohamed Mandaytou in 1928, the deportation and death in exile of Sultan Laoyta Houmed of Goba'ad in 1931, and the internment of Chief Houmed Mohamed of the Namm'Ad'ali confederation in 1943, among many others. These measures profoundly destabilized Afar society and entrenched hostility toward colonial rule.⁴²⁵

Taken together, these events demonstrate that the conflict between Afar rulers and colonial authorities was neither sporadic nor incidental but constituted a sustained struggle over sovereignty, land, and political legitimacy. Colonial treaties served as instruments of dispossession, while Afar rulers responded through diplomacy, protest, and armed resistance rooted in customary law and collective identity. The partition of Afar territory and the repression of its political institutions left enduring legacies of marginalization and fragmentation, yet the persistent resistance of Afar communities underscores their historical agency and their central role in shaping the political history of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa

⁴²⁵ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 94.

Chapter IV: The Political, Social, and Economic Impacts of Colonialism on the Afar People(1885-1977)

4.1 Political Impact

Prior to the incursion of European colonial powers, the Afar local Chiefs and sultanates exercised autonomous political authority over a vast and strategically significant territory spanning the Red Sea coast, the Danakil lowlands, the Awash Valley, and adjoining highlands. Their governance was structured around a hybrid system combining centralized sultanates with decentralized clan-based administration. Sultanates such as Ankala, Raheita, Tadjoura, Awsa, and Goba'ad managed defined territorial domains, levied taxes, administered justice, regulated trade routes, and maintained military forces capable of defending their lands from both internal disputes and external threats. Simultaneously, clan elders, dardars, and customary councils oversaw local governance, including dispute resolution, land and water allocation, and inter-clan coordination. This combination of centralized and decentralized authority allowed the Afar to maintain political cohesion and social stability despite the environmental harshness of their territory and the dispersal of communities across the arid landscape.⁴²⁶ Although much of the Afar country has long been portrayed in travel accounts and colonial writings as uniformly arid and inhospitable, a closer examination reveals the existence of distinct green and agriculturally productive landscapes, particularly along perennial river systems and well-watered depressions. Scholars have emphasized that Afar livelihoods were closely tied to these ecological zones rather than to constant long-distance mobility. Bondestam (1974), for example, demonstrated that the Afar were not continuously nomadic; instead, most communities remained near rivers during the long dry season from September to May, moving only once annually to more distant grazing areas. This pattern underscores their heavy dependence on riverine pasturelands and riparian vegetation, which sustained both livestock and human settlement.⁴²⁷

The Awsa (Aussa) Sultanate, centered along the middle and lower Awash River, stands out as the most prominent agricultural heartland of Afar territory. As documented by Cossins (1973), the

⁴²⁶ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 171; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160; Yasin Mohammed, *Political History of the Afar*, 42, 58; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 11–21.

⁴²⁷ Lennart Bondestam, *People and Capitalism in North Eastern Lowlands of Ethiopia; A Study of the Afar*, (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1974), 426.

Awsa region possessed a long-established tradition of cultivation supported by access to fertile alluvial soils and reliable water sources.⁴²⁸ Nesbit's early twentieth-century observations further attest to the presence of an indigenous irrigation system in Awsa, originally constructed with the assistance of Arab specialists brought by Afar sultans. Although he characterized the system as "primitive," Nesbit acknowledged its effectiveness in sustaining local agriculture and noted that it could be significantly expanded. Agriculture in Awsa, combined with large herds of cattle, goats, camels, and horses, provided a stable economic base and reflected a deliberate balance between production and security rather than ecological limitation.⁴²⁹

Historical descriptions that emphasized the barrenness of Afar lands often stemmed from limited geographical knowledge. While travelers such as James Bruce stressed the harshness of the inland environment, Richard Pankhurst later noted that such accounts overlooked fertile zones such as Awsa, of which early observers were often unaware. Pankhurst's broader analysis of the Adal and Afar regions highlights the diversity of ecological conditions and economic practices across the territory. Communities settled near the Awash River and Lake Abbe combined crop cultivation with cattle rearing, benefiting from seasonal flooding, natural pastures, and permanent water, while greener riverine corridors formed stable centers of habitation and production.⁴³⁰

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that Afar territory was not uniformly barren, but rather characterized by ecological variation, with well-defined agricultural and pastoral zones embedded within the wider semi-arid landscape. The riverine plains of Awsa, the Awash basin, and areas near Lake Abbe constituted enduring green cores that sustained agriculture, livestock, and political authority, challenging portrayals of the Afar homeland as exclusively harsh or marginal.

The legitimacy of Afar authority derived from multiple interwoven sources, combining lineage, religious influence, and demonstrated capacity to enforce law and maintain security. Leadership positions, including amoyta (sultan), dardar, and clan chief, were validated through their ability to uphold *mada'a* (customary law), enforce *afaré* (codes of moral conduct), and mediate disputes through *dinto* (mechanisms of inter-clan negotiation and peaceful coexistence). These frameworks

⁴²⁸ N. J. Cossins, *Green Heart of a Dying Land: A Study of the New Cotton Wealth of the Old Afar Sultanate of Awsa* (London: Hurst & Company, 1973).

⁴²⁹ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 217–218.

⁴³⁰ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 61.

governed compensation for injury or loss, regulated communal access to water and grazing, and coordinated collective defense and migration. Political authority was thus inseparable from the social and legal fabric, with leadership contingent upon communal recognition and adherence to established norms.⁴³¹

The late nineteenth century introduced a decisive rupture. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the subsequent scramble for African territories drew the attention of France, Italy, and Britain to the Red Sea littoral, bringing the Afar into direct confrontation with European imperial ambitions. Strategic ports such as Obock, Tadjoura, Baylul, Assab, and Zeila became central nodes in these calculations, and Afar lands were increasingly viewed as valuable both for maritime access and for their geographic buffer against rival powers. “Colonial powers employed treaties, military force, and coercion to undermine Afar autonomy, often resulting in the marginalization of indigenous authority while claiming legitimacy for European administration.”⁴³²

Prior to colonial intervention, the Afar people constituted a politically interconnected society composed of multiple autonomous sultanates, clan authorities, and customary institutions that maintained long-standing relations through kinship ties, trade networks, military alliances, and shared customary law. Although the Afar sultanates and clan authorities maintained significant political interconnectedness through alliances, kinship systems, customary law, trade relation and shared cultural institutions across the wider Afar territories.

A key mechanism of colonial political marginalization was territorial fragmentation. Colonial powers imposed artificial boundaries that divided historically interconnected Afar sultanates, disrupted inter-clan communication networks, and separated communities that had long maintained political, social, and economic relations. French Somaliland, Italian Eritrea, and Ethiopian-administered territories were carved out of the Afar Triangle without regard for existing political arrangements, customary authority, or patterns of territorial influence. This fragmentation weakened the capacity of Afar sultans and clan leaders to enforce customary law, coordinate regional defense, and sustain inter-sultanate cooperation.

⁴³¹ Johan Helland, *Five Essays on the Study of Pastoralism and the Development of Pastoralism* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 1980), 118; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 11–36.

⁴³² Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 79; Yassin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 65.

The Sultanate of Raheita exemplifies the consequences of such fragmentation. Sultan Dini Mohammed Burhan initially resisted Italian encroachment, protesting the unilateral extension of colonial boundaries into his territory. His appeals, however, were ignored, and Italian military superiority eventually forced submission. Burhan's authority was curtailed to ceremonial functions while Italians assumed control over administration, security, and diplomacy, effectively neutralizing the sultanate's political agency. Similarly, in French Somaliland, the sultanates of Tadjoura and Goba'ad faced direct repression. Leaders who opposed French control were arrested and deported, often to Madagascar, creating leadership vacuums that colonial administrators filled with loyal intermediaries. These actions removed the traditional elite who embodied governance and legitimacy, leaving communities without experienced political leaders and disrupting established systems of mediation and law enforcement.⁴³³

The Sultanate of Awsa, located in the interior lowlands, initially retained relative autonomy due to its geographic distance from coastal colonial centers.⁴³⁴ However, its political influence was constrained by the surrounding partitioned territories and the selective empowerment of rival leaders by colonial powers. French and Italian authorities deliberately manipulated relationships among sultanates, fostering competition and rivalry. This divide-and-rule strategy weakened the collective capacity of the Afar to resist encroachment, disrupted inter-sultanate communication, and eroded the cohesion that had historically allowed Afar societies to negotiate, trade, and defend their territories collectively.

Colonial marginalization also targeted traditional legal systems. Indigenous frameworks, which had regulated justice and social behavior for centuries, were systematically undermined. *Mada'a* was supplanted by foreign legal codes, and mechanisms such as *dinto*, which had ensured inter-clan reconciliation and conflict resolution, were disregarded or co-opted into colonial administration. The French, for example, imposed policies that violated customary law by claiming ownership of land or ports while ignoring local prohibitions against permanent alienation of communal property. On the other hand drawing on the correspondence of Afar rulers with Italian authorities, it becomes clear that early Italian expansion along the Red Sea coast directly conflicted

⁴³³ Yassin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 94.

⁴³⁴ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 217–218; Thesiger, *The Danakil Diary*, 65.

with Afar customary law governing land, water, and maritime space. In a letter attributed to Sultan Muḥammad Ḥanfare of Awsa, the Sultan relayed complaints from coastal communities of Modayta, who protested against the conduct of the Italian consul at Assab. According to the Sultan, the consul—after returning from Tigray—had begun “*tearing down the mountains and digging wells everywhere,*” actions that exceeded any locally recognized rights of access. Sultan Muḥammad Ḥanfare firmly reminded the Italians that they were obligated to remain strictly within the land they had purchased from the Ankala clan, whose boundaries—“*the length and the width*”—were clearly known to both buyer and seller. Any encroachment beyond these limits, particularly interference with Danakil caravan routes and pasturelands, was denounced as a grave moral and legal offense. The Sultan emphasized that “*violating people’s rights is a great offense and misdeed for which you have no excuse,*” invoking Afar customary norms that treated land and water as communal trusts rather than alienable commodities.⁴³⁵

A similar position was articulated by Sultan Burhān Muḥammad of Raḥayto, who challenged Italian claims over the wider coastal zone. Responding to assertions that the entire gulf belonged to Italy, Sultan Burhān clarified that the original transaction concerned specific islands only, not the gulf itself or the surrounding mainland. While he expressed willingness to tolerate Italian *protection* over certain areas as a political arrangement, he categorically rejected the notion that sovereignty or ownership of the sea and coast had been sold. His statement—“*we sold you the islands; we did not sell the gulf*”—underscores the Afar distinction between limited, conditional agreements and the permanent transfer of collective property, which customary law explicitly prohibited. Even in diplomatic terms, Sultan Burhān framed friendship as reciprocal and voluntary, not as a justification for unilateral reinterpretation of agreements.⁴³⁶

Taken together, these letters demonstrate that Italian colonial policy systematically violated Afar customary law. Italian officials and diplomats redefined narrowly circumscribed agreements—often concerning islands, trading posts, or temporary use rights—as outright purchases conferring permanent ownership and sovereignty over land, ports, and maritime spaces. In doing so, they ignored deeply rooted local prohibitions against the permanent alienation of communal land and

⁴³⁵ Letter from Sultan Mohammed Hanfare to Branchi, December 30, 1883, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. no. 151.

⁴³⁶ Letter from Sultan Burhan Mohammed to Bir Sahib, April 22, 1881, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. no. 45.

water resources. This legal and cultural disjuncture was not merely a misunderstanding but a deliberate colonial strategy: by imposing European notions of private property and territorial sovereignty, Italy marginalized indigenous authority, undermined customary governance, and justified territorial expansion that Afar leaders themselves consistently contested in writing.

By subordinating Afar law and moral authority to colonial dictates, European powers delegitimized traditional leaders and eroded the social structures that had sustained governance and conflict management.⁴³⁷

4.2 Socio-Political impact

Colonial intervention profoundly transformed the social structure and communal life of the Afar people. Beyond political domination and territorial occupation, colonial rule disrupted indigenous institutions, weakened customary systems of social organization, and altered long-established patterns of social cohesion and intercommunal relations. Traditional authorities, clan institutions, and customary mechanisms that had historically regulated social life were increasingly marginalized, subordinated, or manipulated to serve colonial interests.

One of the most significant social consequences of colonialism was the weakening of customary leadership and communal authority. Clan elders, religious leaders, and customary authorities, who had traditionally played central roles in social mediation, conflict resolution, resource management, and the maintenance of communal solidarity, were either incorporated into subordinate colonial administrative structures or bypassed altogether. Their declining authority weakened traditional mechanisms of social cohesion and reduced the capacity of communities to regulate their own affairs according to indigenous norms and customary law. As a result, colonial rule undermined the social autonomy of Afar communities and increased dependence on foreign administrative systems.⁴³⁸

Colonial authorities also employed symbolic and cultural measures that reshaped the social identity of the Afar people. The renaming of territories, particularly the transformation of Tadjoura, Obock, and surrounding Afar regions into “French Somaliland,” contributed to the

⁴³⁷ kaddamy, “Djibouti: Between War and Peace,” 512; Helland, *Five Essays on Pastoralism*, 118; Morin, “Gadabuursi,” 640.

⁴³⁸ kaddamy, “Djibouti: Between War and Peace,” 512; Helland, *Five Essays on Pastoralism*, 118; Morin, “Gadabuursi,” 640. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 20–25, 180–185.

erosion of indigenous historical identity and collective memory. At the same time, colonial administrations selectively favored groups and local actors perceived as cooperative while marginalizing those associated with resistance. These practices disrupted existing social balances and reinforced divisions within Afar society, thereby facilitating colonial control over local communities.

Specific historical experiences further illustrate the social consequences of colonial rule. In Tadjoura, the deportation of the sultan and prominent elders removed important figures who traditionally mediated disputes and maintained communal stability. Similarly, in Raḥayto, colonial pressure and intimidation weakened indigenous leadership structures and reduced the ability of local communities to preserve their customary systems of social organization. In Goba'ad, colonial treaties imposed under coercive circumstances undermined traditional patterns of consultation and consensus-building that had long characterized Afar communal governance. Across the Afar territories, colonial administrations increasingly replaced customary practices with externally imposed systems that diminished the role of indigenous social institutions.

Colonial divide-and-rule policies further disrupted social cohesion among the Afar. Historically, Afar society was socially interconnected through clan affiliation, kinship networks, shared cultural traditions, and customary institutions that extended across present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. Although Afar clans and sultanates maintained local autonomy, social relations were historically regulated through norms of mutual recognition, kinship solidarity, intermarriage, and customary cooperation. Colonial intervention weakened these relationships by encouraging rivalry, mistrust, and competition among communities that had previously coexisted within a relatively stable social framework.⁴³⁹

The disruption of intercommunal relations was intensified through colonial manipulation of local alliances and social distinctions. External powers exploited internal disagreements and selectively supported particular groups, thereby deepening tensions among Afar communities and weakening broader social solidarity. Over time, these interventions contributed to the erosion of collective

⁴³⁹ Didier Morin, "Mahammad 'Illalta' Hanfare," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 647–48. Colette Dubois, "Goba'ad," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 816.⁴³⁹ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 455.

identity and undermined the customary mechanisms through which conflicts had traditionally been managed and resolved.

Colonialism also affected everyday social life by weakening indigenous control over communal resources and customary social regulation. Clan elders gradually lost authority over grazing rights, water access, pastoral mobility, and dispute mediation. Traditional norms governing social interaction, leadership succession, and communal responsibility became increasingly subordinated to colonial administrative priorities. This transformation altered the social fabric of Afar society and diminished the effectiveness of indigenous institutions that had historically maintained social order and communal balance.

Despite these disruptions, Afar society historically remained fundamentally egalitarian in its social organization. Unlike rigid caste or feudal systems found in some other societies, Afar social structure was traditionally based on clan autonomy, kinship solidarity, and relative equality among clan groups. As noted by Yasin Yasin Mohammed, Afar society lacked a fixed class hierarchy comparable to caste-based or feudal systems elsewhere. Although Afar society consisted of numerous clans and tribal groupings, each clan traditionally regarded itself as socially equal to others regardless of demographic size or territorial influence. Within this framework, the clan (kedo) served as the principal foundation of social identity, belonging, and cooperation.⁴⁴⁰

Scholarly discussions have nevertheless referred to distinctions between the so-called “red people” (Assahimera) and “white people” (Adohimera). However, many scholars question the interpretation of these labels as rigid social classes. Historically important Afar sultanates such as Raḥayto and Goba’ad themselves fell within categories associated with the “white” designation, demonstrating the limitations of interpreting these distinctions as fixed hierarchies. Scholars such as Stephen L. Pastner and Assefa Fiseha argue that these categories were fluid and historically complex rather than expressions of entrenched social stratification.⁴⁴¹ Earlier observers such as

⁴⁴⁰ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 50.

⁴⁴¹ Stephen L. Pastner, “Afar,” in *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, vol. 1, ed. Richard V. Weekes (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 11. Tewodros Assefa, *The Sedentary Afar of North-Eastern Ethiopia: Economy and Relations with Neighboring Highlanders* (M.A. thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1995), 13.

Werner Munzinger also questioned the validity of interpreting these labels as meaningful racial or hierarchical distinctions.⁴⁴²

Afar oral traditions further indicate that the politicization of the Assahimera–Adohimera distinction intensified only after conflicts involving the Goba’ad and Awsa Sultanates. What initially reflected temporary political alignments gradually became more rigid over time. Colonial authorities later exploited and amplified these distinctions as part of broader divide-and-rule strategies, transforming flexible social identities into more politicized and divisive categories.⁴⁴³ Similar colonial practices elsewhere in Africa likewise manipulated local identities and communal distinctions to facilitate external domination.

Importantly, both the Gobad and Awsa ruling lineages traced their ancestry to the same genealogical origin, Hadel-Mahis, illustrating the fundamentally shared social foundations of Afar society. Within indigenous Afar social organization, no clan was regarded as inherently superior or inferior to another. Each clan maintained authority over its own affairs, while broader social legitimacy rested upon customary norms of equality, kinship, and communal recognition. Consequently, the portrayal of Afar society as historically divided into rigid hereditary social classes misrepresents the more egalitarian nature of indigenous Afar social organization.

Overall, colonialism had a profound social impact on the Afar people. Colonial intervention weakened customary leadership, disrupted kinship networks, undermined communal solidarity, manipulated social distinctions, and transformed indigenous systems of social organization. Through symbolic, administrative, and social interventions, colonial authorities eroded long-established patterns of cooperation and social cohesion that had historically structured Afar society. The colonial period therefore represented a major rupture in the social history of the Afar people, producing long-term transformations that continued to affect communal relations, social identity, and indigenous institutions long after the end of formal colonial rule.

⁴⁴² Munzinger, *Narrative of a Journey through the Afar Country*, 212.

⁴⁴³ Note: Like the Afar colonial classifications of Adohemara and Asahemara, the Rwandan labels Hutu and Tutsi were originally fluid social categories within a shared cultural world, but European colonial administrations transformed them into rigid, hereditary identities through administrative codification and racialized governance, thereby institutionalizing division and long-term political conflict.

4.3 Economic Impact

Before European colonial expansion, Afar communities played a notable role in the regional economic landscape of the Horn of Africa. Their homeland encompassed the Afar Depression, the Red Sea littoral, and the principal caravan arteries linking the Ethiopian highlands to the coast. Far from constituting a peripheral desert margin, this region functioned as a connective corridor through which commodities, currencies, and political influence circulated over many centuries. Control over mobility—rather than fixed territorial enclosure—formed the foundation of Afar economic power. Authority derived from the ability to regulate access to caravan routes, wells, riverine corridors, and coastal anchorages within an ecologically demanding environment where movement itself constituted wealth.

As demonstrated by Karl Bondestam, Afar pastoralism was not characterized by indiscriminate nomadism but by structured seasonal mobility. Communities rotated between dry-season and wet-season pastures, often remaining for extended periods near permanent water sources and riverine systems, particularly along the Awash. This pattern produced a flexible but organized pastoral economy adapted to climatic variability. Mobility allowed herders to exploit dispersed grazing lands while maintaining clan cohesion and political authority over defined territorial spheres.⁴⁴⁴

Pastoral production coexisted with sedentary and semi-sedentary agriculture along the Awash River basin. In Awsa (Aussa), flood-retreat cultivation, irrigated agriculture, and permanent settlements sustained cereal farming, horticulture, and localized markets. The Awsa sultanate emerged as a demographic and economic nucleus within this wider pastoral matrix. As noted by Getachew Kassa, Afar political authority was closely anchored to control over these fertile riverine zones. The sultans' power rested not only on lineage legitimacy but also on command of productive land, taxation of trade, and regulation of caravan passage. In this sense, the Awash valley functioned as an economic core embedded within a broader mobile pastoral frontier.⁴⁴⁵

Through a combination of pastoral production, caravan transport, maritime exchange, and salt extraction, the Afar constructed a diversified and resilient economic system. Their strategic

⁴⁴⁴ Lars Bondestam, "People and Capitalism in the North-Eastern Lowlands of Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 12, no. 3 (1974): 423–39.

⁴⁴⁵ Getachew Kassa, *The Awash Valley: Land, State, and the Transformation of Pastoral Livelihoods* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2001), esp. chs. 2–3.

position allowed them to mediate exchange between the Red Sea ports—particularly Tadjoura—and the markets of the Ethiopian highlands. Caravans departing from Awsa and Tadjoura traversed Afar-controlled corridors en route to Shewa, Wollo, and Tigray, carrying salt, livestock, hides, coffee, ivory, and imported goods. This circulation integrated the Afar into a transregional commercial network extending from the Red Sea basin into the interior of northeast Africa.⁴⁴⁶

Nineteenth-century European observers underscored the prominence of Afar merchants within these exchange systems. The British diplomat and traveller William Cornwallis Harris, describing the commercial center of Aliyu Amba in the kingdom of Shewa, noted that the entire trade of the town was effectively in the hands of the Danakil (Afar). They were, he observed, treated by the monarch of Shoa with marked deference and respect, reflecting their indispensable role in sustaining the salt and caravan economy upon which the highland state depended. During the fair season, caravans reportedly arrived each month from Awsa and Tadjoura, and despite logistical and environmental challenges, the traffic was described as brisk and profitable.⁴⁴⁷

Central to this system was the production and distribution of amole salt bars extracted from the Danakil salt plains. These salt bars not only supplied markets across Abyssinia but circulated deep into the African interior. Amole functioned simultaneously as a commodity and as a standardized medium of exchange, operating as a unit of account, store of value, and instrument of taxation. The salt economy thus linked Afar production zones directly to highland fiscal systems, embedding Afar resources within the monetary foundations of surrounding polities.⁴⁴⁸

The demographic composition of Aliyu Amba further illustrates this integration. According to Harris, roughly one-fourth of the town's population consisted of Harari and Danakil (Afar) residents, underscoring the cosmopolitan character of this caravan hub and the sustained Afar presence within highland commercial centers.⁴⁴⁹ Such evidence confirms that prior to colonial restructuring, the Afar were not marginal desert nomads but key intermediaries in a sophisticated regional economy. Their authority derived from ecological adaptation, control of strategic

⁴⁴⁶ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, esp. 150–70; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 38–39.

⁴⁴⁷ Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, 376.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 384.

corridors, and mastery of exchange networks that connected coast and interior in a mutually dependent system of trade and political negotiation.

Therefore, Economic authority in Afar society was inseparable from political and legal institutions. Sultanates such as Awsa, Raheita, Tadjoura, and Goba'ad, alongside decentralized clan structures, exercised jurisdiction over land, pasture, water sources, ports, and trade routes. Customary law (*mada'a*) regulated access to resources and ensured that economic activities reinforced social cohesion and political legitimacy. Transit duties, protection fees, and negotiated tolls imposed on caravans constituted a major source of revenue, while the ability to guarantee safe passage through Afar territory enhanced the bargaining power of Afar leaders vis-à-vis neighboring states and trading communities.⁴⁵⁰

The Afar economy was outward-oriented and deeply embedded in long-distance trade networks. Historical and archaeological sources attest to Afar participation in Red Sea commerce from antiquity through the medieval and early modern periods. Afar sailors and merchants operated vessels linking ports such as Adulis, Massawa, Baylul, Assab, Tadjoura, and Obock with Arabian ports including Jeddah, Yanbu, Suakin, and Jizan.⁴⁵¹ These maritime networks facilitated the export of gold, incense, hides, livestock, and slaves from the Ethiopian interior, as well as the import of textiles, metals, and luxury goods. Afar control over ports and anchorages allowed them to extract customs duties and regulate foreign access, ensuring that maritime trade strengthened indigenous economic authority rather than undermining it.

Equally significant were the caravan routes traversing Afar territory. Camel caravans connected the salt flats of the Afar Depression with markets in Tigray, Wollo, Shewa, and beyond. Afar pastoralists provided transport animals, guides, and armed escorts, making caravan trade both possible and profitable. The organization of these caravans reflected Afar social institutions: labor was mobilized through kinship networks, risk was shared collectively, and information was transmitted through systems such as *dāgu*, which enabled traders to anticipate dangers and

⁴⁵⁰ Helland, *Five Essays on the Study of Pastoralism*, 110–25; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 150–70.

⁴⁵¹ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 239.

opportunities across vast distances. Economic exchange thus rested on trust, reciprocity, and negotiated relationships rather than formal contracts or centralized bureaucracies.⁴⁵²

Within this broader economic system, salt production occupied a uniquely strategic position. Salt (*amolê*) was not simply a commodity but a medium of exchange, a unit of account, and a fiscal instrument used by highland states for taxation and military provisioning. By the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the Afar salt economy of the Danakil Depression had developed into a highly organized commercial system, linking the salt plains with the northern Ethiopian highlands through regulated caravan routes and market centers.

A century earlier, the Swiss explorer Werner Munzinger had provided a detailed account of the salt markets operating across the Afar region, revealing a dense network of periodic markets governed largely by Afar local authorities. According to Munzinger, Ala market (located in present-day Berahle Woreda) was held on Saturdays and led by an Afar chief named Hodale Meyu Borali. Ayba Market, situated in what is now Koneba Woreda (Uruh Kebele), convened on Mondays and Thursdays under the supervision of a local administrator, Wolde Sheko. Gebla Gubi Market, also held on Saturdays, was managed by an Afar notable named Wolde Derder. Additional markets included Gef market, located in present-day Dallol district and held on Thursdays, and Efiso market, in Koneba district, which met on Mondays.⁴⁵³

Munzinger's quantitative analysis illustrates the extraordinary scale of commercial activity in these markets. He estimated that approximately 700 people traded daily at Ala market, 1,500 at the combined Ayba and Efiso markets, and around 800 at Gebla Gubi. In addition, he recorded an average of 300 traders operating outside the main salt markets on market days. Each trader typically brought around 250 salt bars, resulting in an estimated 750,000 bars exchanged on a single major market day. Over the course of a four-day festival cycle, this amounted to approximately 3,000,000 salt bars sold. Munzinger further calculated that, on average, about 1,500,000 transactions occurred annually, with twenty salt bars exchanged for one dollar. At the

⁴⁵² Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 27.

⁴⁵³ Munzinger, *Narrative of a Journey through the Afar Country*, 221.

same time, the cost of hiring a camel to transport salt from the plains to the highlands stood at approximately twenty-five dollars per trip.⁴⁵⁴

The organization of production and exchange was shaped by strict territorial and political controls. As Nesbitt later observed, the salt itself originated deep within Danakil (Afar) territory, into which highland caravans were not permitted to enter. Afar producers extracted and transported the salt to the boundaries of their territory, where it was transferred to Abyssinian traders for onward movement to the highlands. This system ensured Afar control over production and initial distribution, while facilitating long-distance trade through interregional exchange networks.⁴⁵⁵

Control over salt extraction in the Afar Depression conferred immense economic and political leverage. Afar clans exercised near-exclusive authority over access to the salt flats, regulated extraction according to lineage rights and seasonal norms, and organized large-scale caravans for distribution to the highlands. For centuries, highland rulers and traders depended on Afar cooperation to secure salt supplies, placing the Afar in a position of structural advantage.⁴⁵⁶

The relationship between Afar producers and highland traders in the precolonial period was characterized by asymmetrical interdependence. Highland merchants profited from distributing salt in interior markets, but they lacked direct access to extraction sites and remained subject to Afar transit regulations. Prices, quantities, and routes were shaped by Afar decisions, and highland political authority rarely extended into the Afar lowlands. As Abir (1966) notes, control over salt translated into control over people, as access to this essential commodity influenced political allegiance, taxation, and military logistics. Afar economic autonomy thus functioned as a constraint on highland expansion.⁴⁵⁷

This balance began to erode in the mid-nineteenth century with the expansion of the Ethiopian imperial state and the increasing militarization of regional politics. The acquisition of firearms and the consolidation of imperial authority enabled emperors such as Yohannes IV to challenge Afar

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁵⁵ Nesbitt, *The Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 62.

⁴⁵⁶ Richard Pankhurst, "The Maria Theresa Dollar in Pre-War Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1963): 8–26.

⁴⁵⁷ Mordechai Abir, "Salt, Trade and Politics in Ethiopia in the 'Zāmānā Māsafent'," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1966): 4.

control over salt. By granting Christian highland traders direct access to the salt flats, Yohannes undermined the Afar monopoly and reoriented the salt economy toward imperial interests.⁴⁵⁸

In the 1860s, while Kassa Mercha of Tigray—later Emperor Yohannes IV—was in rebellion against Emperor Tewodros II, he spent periods of exile in several frontier regions, including Kala Ab'ala in northern Afar territory. There, he received protection and asylum from the Herto clan leader, Yakumi Serri Ali, who guaranteed his security against threats from the neighboring highlands.¹ During this period, Yohannes developed a close relationship with Yakumi, relying on Afar protection, mobility, and local knowledge as he sought to consolidate his political position.⁴⁵⁹

Following his accession to the imperial throne, however, Yohannes' relationship with his former Afar ally deteriorated. As part of his early efforts to assert imperial authority, he dispatched two officials, Subhato and Ginti Raya, to Ab'ala to collect taxes. Yakumi's son, Humed, intervened on behalf of the Herto clan and accompanied Subhato during the mission. According to local accounts, prior military actions led by Subhato had already resulted in the deaths of two prominent Herto figures, Dimis and Idahis. In retaliation for their deaths, members of the Herto clan killed Subhato during the tax-collection mission. These events occurred around 1871, during the first year of Emperor Yohannes' reign.⁴⁶⁰

Local oral traditions further maintain that, following Subhato's death, Yakumi attempted to restore peace by offering his sister, Deto Sira Ali, in marriage to Emperor Yohannes. Although she was a widow and the mother of one child, the emperor accepted the marriage as a means of securing loyalty from the Herto clan. Subsequently, Yohannes requested that the town and district of Ab'ala be granted to Deto Sira Ali. Yakumi refused, arguing that Ab'ala was communal land belonging collectively to the Herto clan and that he lacked the authority to alienate it unilaterally. This disagreement escalated into open conflict, culminating in a violent confrontation in which Yakumi was killed along with approximately thirty of his sons.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁹ Ousman Ibrahim, interview by the author, Abala Woreda, Afar Region, December 10, 2016; Yasin, *Political History of the Afar*, 42, 58; Nagash Kahsay Abay, *Unpublished Personal Notes*, 1–4.

⁴⁶⁰ Dima Hummed, Ousman Ibrahim, and other local informants, interview by the author, Abala Woreda, Afar Region, December 10, 2016.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Another episode preserved in Afar oral history highlights the deepening personal tensions between the Afar leadership and the emperor. During a visit by Yohannes to Ab'ala, Yakumi instructed his sister, Datto Siriali, to formally welcome the emperor. She approached him while holding the bridle of his horse, an act of ceremonial respect that reportedly drew the emperor's attention. Yohannes subsequently ordered that she be taken by force, further intensifying Afar resentment and reinforcing perceptions of betrayal and coercion.⁴⁶²

These events are recounted in detail in the memoirs of Negash Kahsay Abay was a prominent figure of mixed Afar and Tigrayan lineage. He was born to an Afar mother, the daughter of Addowe Yakumi, and to a Tigrayan father, Ras Kahsay Abay, the chief of Adwa and Tembien. In his account, Negash Kahsay emphasizes that Yohannes, while fleeing Emperor Tewodros, had been warmly received by Yakumi Serri Ali, who granted him asylum and protection in Ab'ala. Their early relationship, he notes, was built on mutual trust and cooperation, including the importation of firearms through the port of Mersa Fatuma.⁴⁶³



Figure 10. *Negash Kahsay Abay* (photograph taken by the author from the owner).

⁴⁶² Abay, *Unpublished Personal Notes*, 1–4.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

According to this narrative, the rupture between the two leaders occurred only after Yohannes became emperor, when demands for land, taxation, and dynastic marriage replaced earlier bonds of reciprocity. Despite repeated military resistance by the Afar, imperial forces eventually prevailed. Yakumi, already advanced in age, was fatally wounded during the fighting and brought before Yohannes. Before his death, he is said to have cursed the land of Ab'ala, declaring that neither Yohannes nor his descendants would ever legitimately possess it.⁴⁶⁴

The conflict between the Afar and the Tigrayan rulers was not limited to personal or dynastic disputes but extended into broader territorial and economic struggles. During Yohannes' reign, the long-standing Afar monopoly over the salt mines of the Afar Depression came under direct challenge. Traditionally, Afar clans controlled the extraction and movement of salt, while highland traders purchased salt only from Afar caravans operating at the margins of the highlands. Yohannes broke this arrangement by insisting that highland Christian traders be granted direct access to the salt basin itself. Afar clans resisted this intrusion, frequently attacking caravans entering the mining zones. These conflicts persisted into the late nineteenth century, intensifying tensions between Afar groups and highland traders.⁴⁶⁵

The legacy of Afar–highland conflict resurfaced in the mid-twentieth century. In 1948, after Ras Seyum Mengesha was appointed Supreme Governor of Tigray, he sought to appropriate Afar lands in Ab'ala and Kuneba. Emperor Haile Selassie authorized the use of what the state defined as “uncultivated” Afar land and instructed the Enderta Awreja administration to permit settlers from Wajirat to cultivate it. In response, Afar nobles appointed Negash Kahsay Abay as their legal representative and dispatched him to Addis Ababa to inform the emperor that no agreement regarding the transfer of Afar land had been reached. The Afar representatives included Ibrahim Mohammed, Gedo Aydahis, Awol Aydahis, Ahmed Ibrahim, Wagris Aydahis, Nuru Burhan Aydahis, Ali Bashir, Dawood Ali, and Sheikh Ali Abdullahi.⁴⁶⁶

As tensions escalated, Ras Seyum summoned Afar nobles from Kuneba to Mekelle, declaring that imperial orders required the acquisition of Afar land. In response, Qenazmach Mohammed Ibrahim openly rejected the demand, stating that the Afar would not surrender even a small portion of their

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 150; Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935*, 241.

⁴⁶⁶ Abay, *Unpublished Personal Notes*, 1–4.

territory and invoking the historical memory of Emperor Yohannes' campaigns against their ancestors. The Afar leadership subsequently pursued legal redress through Negash Kahsay, who successfully argued their case before Emperor Haile Selassie, preventing the expropriation of their land.⁴⁶⁷ This dispute is well documented in contemporary correspondence exchanged among Afar nobles, Tigrayan elites, and the imperial court, which records the land claims and legal proceedings involving Negash Kahsay and Ras Seyum Mengesha during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. On this basis, the archival letters presented below detail the Afar land case and the court proceedings involving Negash Kahsay and Ras Seyum Mengesha before the Emperor.

Taken together, these episodes illustrate the enduring nature of Afar resistance to external political domination, whether imperial or regional. They reveal how alliances based on hospitality and mutual support could rapidly dissolve under pressures of state expansion, taxation, land appropriation, and economic control, particularly over strategic resources such as salt. The Afar–Tigrayan conflicts of the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries thus reflect broader processes of Ethiopian state formation and frontier incorporation.

European colonial expansion accelerated and deepened this process of economic marginalization. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Red Sea assumed unprecedented strategic and commercial importance. Italian and French colonial ambitions focused on securing ports, trade routes, and resource zones along the Afar coast and hinterland. Colonial agents such as Giuseppe Sapeto exploited their knowledge of Afar social structures to negotiate treaties that ostensibly recognized Afar authority while, in practice, facilitating the gradual transfer of economic control to colonial states.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷ Note: Negash Kahsay was the son of Kahsay Abay, who married a daughter of Ras Seyum Mengesha, with whom he had two children. Although Negash Kahsay was raised in his father's homeland, between Adwa and Temben, he grew up with an awareness of the grievances and injustices experienced by his mother's Afar relatives. Following his mother's death and upon reaching adulthood, he facilitated direct engagement with his maternal kin in Afar to assess the broader political and social conditions. Owing to his dual familial affiliations, Negash Kahsay was thus positioned to mediate between the two sides and pursue a more balanced approach to the dispute.

⁴⁶⁸ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 101–103 and *The Establishment of Italian Control over Assab*, 1–18;; Sapeto, *Viaggi nell'Africa Orientale*, 21–39; d'Abbadie, *Géographie de l'Éthiopie*, 54–61

Colonial treaties frequently promised free trade, protection of indigenous property rights, and commercial partnership. Yet these assurances were systematically violated. Italian agreements with Afar rulers in Awsa and Raheita were used to justify the annexation of Assab and surrounding territories, while Afar rights to levy transit taxes and regulate trade were abolished or absorbed into colonial customs systems. French agreements in Obock and Tadjoura followed a similar pattern, masking the erosion of Afar economic sovereignty beneath the language of cooperation and modernization.⁴⁶⁹

Colonial restructuring of port economies had particularly severe consequences for Afar merchants. Ports such as Massawa and Assab were transformed into colonial commercial hubs dominated by European and Indian trading houses operating under state protection. Licensing systems, monetary taxation, and legal requirements excluded Afar traders, whose economic practices were rooted in customary law and non-monetized exchange.⁴⁷⁰ Infrastructure investments—roads, warehouses, and shipping facilities—were designed to serve colonial export interests rather than indigenous trade networks, accelerating the decline of Afar participation in maritime commerce.

Colonial intervention in the salt economy marked a decisive rupture with the past. In French-controlled Djibouti, salt extraction was transferred to concessionary companies such as the *Société des Salines de Djibouti* in 1912, which industrialized production and redirected exports toward international markets in Asia and the Indian Ocean. Afar clans were dispossessed of their regulatory authority and excluded from decision-making, receiving little benefit from an industry built on their ancestral land.⁴⁷¹ In Italian Eritrea, similar policies integrated salt production into colonial fiscal systems and facilitated access for highland and foreign traders, further marginalizing Afar interests.

These transformations benefited highland traders disproportionately. Supported by colonial infrastructure, standardized currencies, and legal protections, highland merchants expanded their role in salt distribution and inland trade. Whereas Afar economic systems depended on mobility, negotiated access, and collective regulation, colonial capitalism privileged sedentary commerce, fixed transport corridors, and formal property relations. This structural incompatibility placed the

⁴⁶⁹ Yemane Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism: A Case Study of Eritrea*, 56.

⁴⁷⁰ Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935*, 241.

⁴⁷¹ Robert Tholomier, *Djibouti, Pawn of the Horn of Africa* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 107.

Afar at a systemic disadvantage. Highland traders adapted to colonial frameworks and accumulated capital, while Afar economic institutions were delegitimized and dismantled.

Colonial boundary-making compounded Afar economic marginalization. The partition of Afar territory among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti fragmented caravan routes and disrupted seasonal mobility essential to pastoralism and salt transport. Customs posts, tariffs, and movement restrictions criminalized practices that had sustained Afar livelihoods for centuries (Yasin 2008). The imposition of rigid borders transformed a unified economic space into a fractured landscape governed by competing administrative regimes, increasing transaction costs and vulnerability to famine and impoverishment.⁴⁷²

Colonial administrations also pursued divide-and-rule strategies that further weakened Afar economic power. Rival groups, particularly Issa/Somali traders and pastoralists, were granted preferential access to markets, arms, and transport corridors.

By the early twentieth century, the cumulative effect of these processes had transformed the Afar from autonomous controllers of regional exchange into marginalized participants within externally dominated economic systems. Loss of control over salt mines, ports, and caravan routes stripped Afar society of its principal sources of wealth and bargaining power. In comparative perspective, while highland traders benefited from imperial expansion and colonial integration, the Afar—whose economy was adapted to mobility, customary authority, and negotiated exchange—were structurally disadvantaged by colonial capitalism. The strategic geography that had once underpinned Afar prosperity was converted into a mechanism of dispossession, embedding patterns of economic marginalization that continue to shape Afar–state relations in the postcolonial Horn of Africa.

In addition to the loss of control over trade, ports, and the salt economy, colonial intervention in Afar territories profoundly disrupted pastoral economic systems that had evolved over centuries in close adaptation to the arid ecology of the Horn of Africa. Prior to European penetration, Afar pastoralism functioned as a sophisticated and resilient mode of production grounded in seasonal mobility, communal land tenure, and negotiated access to water and grazing resources.

⁴⁷² Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 79.

Afar identity is to a large extent constructed and continuously negotiated around culturally embedded concepts of hospitality, protection, and welcoming.

These values are deeply rooted in, and regulated by, Afar customary law (*mad'a* or *meda'a*), which functions as a moral and legal codex governing ethical conduct, social relations, and the construction of the self in relation to others, including humans and animals.⁴⁷³ Hospitality within Afar society is therefore not merely a social virtue but an institutionalized norm embedded within the wider customary governance system.

Central to Afar customary administration—commonly referred to as *afarre*—is the principle of clearly defined territorial authority. Under this system, each tribal leader or local chief (*makaban* or *kedo aba*) exercises full administrative, judicial, and moral responsibility over a specifically recognized territorial domain. Territorial occupation and authority are not arbitrary but are historically established and socially acknowledged through clan affiliation and customary precedent. Land in pastoral areas is held collectively and regulated on a clan basis, rather than through individual ownership, reinforcing communal responsibility and shared access to resources.⁴⁷⁴

Seasonal mobility, a defining feature of Afar pastoral life, operates within this framework of territorial respect. When a clan or lineage temporarily moves into the territory of another tribal leader during periods of drought or pasture scarcity, the newcomers fall under the authority and protection of the host territory's chief. Their settlement, security, and conduct become the responsibility of the local leader of the occupied area. This principle is clearly articulated in a well-known Afar proverb: "*Da'ar, da'ar tabbakkah; mad'a da'ar matabta*," meaning "You may move from one place to another, but the customary law of your original land does not move with you." The proverb underscores the obligation of migrants to respect the *mad'a* and authority of the territory in which they temporarily reside.

Accordingly, Afar customary law strictly prohibits interference by a tribal leader in the internal affairs of another leader's territory, even when members of his own clan are involved. If a clan member becomes a victim or party to a dispute while residing in another clan's territory, the case

⁴⁷³ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 27.

⁴⁷⁴ Abebe Mulatu and Solomon Bekure, *The Need to Strengthen Land Laws in Ethiopia*, 186–94.

is handled exclusively under the jurisdiction of the host chief and his customary institutions. The original clan leader holds no authority beyond his territorial domain. Authority, responsibility, and justice are thus territorially bounded, ensuring order, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among mobile pastoral groups.

Beyond governance and conflict resolution, Afar customary law also regulates access to Pasturelands and migration corridors were regulated through customary law (*mada'a*), ensuring that livestock production—especially camel herding—remained sustainable and socially embedded. Livestock constituted not only the principal source of subsistence but also the foundation of wealth, political authority, and social status within Afar society.⁴⁷⁵

The Afar possess well-defined indigenous systems for using and managing land, water, and livestock. Historically, land and camels were considered to exist outside commercial exchange; they were regarded as collective clan wealth, rather than commodities. Camels, in particular, symbolize the pride, honor, and political strength of a clan. While ownership is collective, every clan member retains the right to access and benefit from these resources and their products, reinforcing social solidarity and economic security.⁴⁷⁶

Therefore, Afar traditional administration system (*afarre*), governed by *mad'a*, is fundamentally organized around the recognition and respect of territorial authority. Each tribal leader exercises sovereign responsibility within his own domain, while mobility across territories is regulated through customary norms that emphasize hospitality, accountability, and legal pluralism. This system has historically enabled the Afar to maintain social cohesion, manage scarce resources, and govern a highly mobile pastoral society without centralized state institutions.

European colonial administrations, however, fundamentally misunderstood and devalued pastoral land use. Colonial officials frequently characterized Afar grazing systems as unproductive, wasteful, or anarchic, reflecting a sedentary agrarian bias embedded in colonial political economy. As a result, pastoral land was reclassified as vacant or underutilized, enabling colonial states to assert sovereignty over extensive areas traditionally managed by Afar clans. This legal fiction of

⁴⁷⁵ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 38–39.

⁴⁷⁶ Hassen, *A Final Research Report on Pastoral Adaptation*, 32.

“empty land” erased indigenous tenure systems and legitimized the appropriation of rangelands for colonial infrastructure, military installations, ports, and concessionary enterprises.

In French-controlled territories along the Red Sea coast and in Djibouti, colonial expansion transformed large tracts of Afar pastoral land into zones of strategic and commercial importance. The establishment of ports, railways, saltworks, and administrative centers disrupted established grazing patterns and restricted access to key water sources. Pastoral mobility, essential for coping with climatic variability, was increasingly constrained by colonial boundaries, policing, and taxation. Afar herders moving livestock across newly demarcated zones were subjected to fines, confiscation, or violence, effectively criminalizing traditional pastoral practices.⁴⁷⁷

Italian colonial rule in Eritrea similarly undermined Afar pastoral economies through spatial and administrative reorganization. The colonial administration prioritized the development of settler agriculture, transport corridors, and export-oriented trade, often at the expense of indigenous grazing systems. Rangelands along rivers and coastal plains—critical dry-season pastures—were alienated and reassigned to colonial settlers or commercial enterprises. Roads and railways cut across migratory routes, fragmenting pastoral space and increasing livestock mortality by limiting access to water and forage.

Colonial fiscal and regulatory policies further eroded Afar pastoral livelihoods. Livestock taxation, veterinary controls, and movement permits were imposed without consideration of pastoral rhythms or ecological constraints.

Pastoral labor relations were also transformed under colonial rule. As access to grazing land diminished, some Afar were compelled to seek wage labor in colonial enterprises such as ports, saltworks, and infrastructure projects. This shift represented a profound rupture with pastoral modes of production and social organization. Wage labor was insecure, poorly paid, and often seasonal, offering no long-term alternative to livestock-based livelihoods. The erosion of pastoral autonomy thus translated into growing economic dependency on colonial markets and employers.

French colonial policy in French Somaliland underwent a decisive shift in the early 1960s. As Schraeder (1991) notes, “*in the early 1960s, the French administration shifted its weight from the*

⁴⁷⁷ Tholomier, *Djibouti, Pawn of the Horn of Africa*, 107.

Somali to the Danakil side of the equation.” In preparation for the 1963 elections, the colonial authorities redrew electoral districts in a manner that deliberately reduced Somali political influence while increasing Afar (Danakil) representation in the territorial legislature. This administrative engineering temporarily enabled the Afar to dominate the political life of the territory prior to independence.

However, this selective empowerment was neither principled nor sustainable. As Said Y. (1978) argues, “*the favoritism shown to the Afar [from 1967 to just before independence] only increased the resentment of the Issa and their commitment to Somali nationalism.*”⁴⁷⁸ Rather than fostering political inclusion, French policy entrenched ethnic polarization by alternately privileging one group over the other, reinforcing competition rather than coexistence.

Within this context, Afar intellectuals and political elites—most notably Ali Arif Burhan, then president of the Territorial Council—emerged as central figures in articulating Afar political interests. Yet their prominence also exposed them to persecution as colonial priorities shifted. In 1959, French Somaliland was renamed the *Republic of Afar and Issa*, a move that symbolically acknowledged Afar claims but simultaneously deepened Somali suspicions and resistance. Somali political actors increasingly regarded Djibouti as an integral part of a future Greater Somalia, a perception that culminated in strikes by Somali dockworkers at the Port of Djibouti, severely disrupting maritime transit and regional trade.

In response to the labor crisis, Ali Arif Burhan appealed to Sultan Alimirah Hanfare of Awsa to mobilize Afar manpower to replace striking Somali workers and restore port operations. Sultan Alimirah accepted the request and extended the call to Afar communities in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Recruitment was organized in Menda Kebele of Aledear Woreda, where Afar leaders and elders convened in 1959. Participants included Sultan Alimirah and Fitawrari Yayo Hamedu from Awsa (Ethiopia), Ali Arif Burhan from Djibouti, Mahamouda Yassin from Eritrea, and numerous Afar tribal leaders from across the region.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ Abdi, Said, *The Mini-Republic of Djibouti*, 35.

⁴⁷⁹ Allo Yayyo Mohammed, *Abalat Firisen Aydaadu (A History Written in Blood)* (Addis Ababa, 2010), 35.

The meeting resolved to resume port operations, mobilize labor from Afar-inhabited areas, and integrate experienced Afar dockworkers from Eritrea to train new recruits. Through these coordinated efforts, port services in Djibouti were restored, and for a brief period, transit and port labor came under substantial Afar control. This episode illustrates the Afar's capacity for regional mobilization and their central role in sustaining Djibouti's strategic economy.

Yet this Afar dominance proved short-lived. Following subsequent referendums, France once again recalibrated its alliances, shifting support toward the Issa/Somali elite. Afars were progressively excluded from port labor, economic decision-making, and state institutions, resulting in their marginalization from one of the territory's most vital economic sectors. Control of the port—Djibouti's economic lifeline—became a critical instrument through which political power was redistributed along ethnic lines.

The controversial 1967 renaming of the territory from *French Somaliland* to the *French Territory of the Afars and Issas (TFAI)* further intensified ethnic rivalry. While Afars welcomed the formal recognition of their name, Somalis interpreted the change as a deliberate French strategy to fragment Somali nationalism. As Said Y. observes, Afars saw inclusion, whereas Somalis perceived “*systematic division of ethnicities*”.⁴⁸⁰ Somali narratives later emphasized that the ordering of names and the referendum outcomes ultimately favored Issa dominance, reinforcing Afar perceptions of betrayal and political exclusion.⁴⁸¹ These maneuvers exemplify France's broader colonial strategy of governing through ethnic differentiation and controlled competition.

French involvement in Djibouti's post-independence security further reflected this pattern of selective intervention. In July 1977, French Foreign Minister Louis de Guiringaud declared that French forces would intervene only to defend Djibouti against external threats.⁴⁸² This position was reiterated during the early stages of the Afar-led FRUD rebellion in 1991, when French officials insisted that the conflict was an internal matter. As Schraeder (1993a) records, senior

⁴⁸⁰ Said, *The Mini-Republic of Djibouti*, 35.

⁴⁸¹ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 97.

⁴⁸² James F. Fitzgerald, “Djibouti: Petrodollar Protectorate?” *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 4 (1978): 25.

French policymakers emphasized that French troops would not intervene in what Paris perceived as a domestic confrontation between the Gouled government and the Afar opposition.⁴⁸³

However, when FRUD forces rapidly gained control of nearly three-quarters of the country, France reversed its stance and provided military assistance to an overwhelmingly Issa-dominated government army. FRUD combatants continue to recall the decisive French role in defending strategic towns such as Dikhil. This intervention marked yet another moment in which French policy contributed to the political, military, and economic marginalization of the Afar, consolidating Issa dominance while deepening the legacy of ethnic division that continues to shape Djibouti's political landscape.

Colonial intervention in the Red Sea and Afar lowlands profoundly intensified inter-group competition over increasingly constrained pastoral resources. By selectively privileging particular communities in access to trade corridors, coastal markets, and military protection, colonial administrations disrupted long-standing balances of power that had regulated relations among pastoral societies. Raids on Afar herds and caravans were frequently ignored or inadequately addressed by colonial authorities, eroding pastoral security and weakening indigenous systems of accountability. At the same time, colonial legal and military interventions undermined customary mechanisms of conflict resolution, replacing them with uneven enforcement that favored colonial commercial and strategic interests. The cumulative effect was the destabilization of pastoral economies and the entrenchment of cycles of impoverishment and violence in the lowlands.

Contemporary correspondence illustrates how these dynamics were already apparent in the late nineteenth century. In a letter dated 22 October 1870, Ahmed Ali Mattiye, ruler of Werê Himenno, addressed Aladin Bey, governor (pasha) of Massawa, regarding Ottoman–Egyptian intentions to assert control over Danakil territory, the salt-producing zones, and the land of Awsa extending toward Berbera on the coast. While the letter appears conciliatory in tone, it reveals deep anxiety over the reconfiguration of access to coastal outlets and trade routes—lifelines for inland pastoral societies. Ahmed Ali emphasized that the coast constituted the principal outlet for Afar lands and noted the eight-day camel journey linking Beylul to the interior. His appeal for “understanding”

⁴⁸³ Peter J. Schraeder, “Ethnic Politics in Djibouti: From ‘Eye of the Hurricane’ to ‘Boiling Cauldron,’” *African Affairs* 92, no. 367 (1993): 214.

and willingness to meet colonial demands for livestock or other resources underscores how colonial expansion compelled local rulers to negotiate from positions of vulnerability. Such negotiations, imposed through unequal power relations, reshaped territorial claims, sharpened competition among neighboring groups, and contributed to the emergence of new and enduring inter-communal conflicts in the Afar and wider Danakil region.⁴⁸⁴

Therefore, the fragmentation of Afar territory by colonial boundaries compounded these effects. The partition of Afar lands among Italian Eritrea, French Somaliland, and British-controlled zones disrupted seasonal transhumance patterns that crossed the Red Sea hinterland and coastal plains. Pastoralists accustomed to flexible movement across ecological zones now encountered customs posts, tariffs, and restrictions that constrained herd management strategies. These artificial boundaries undermined the ecological logic of pastoralism, increasing pressure on limited resources and accelerating environmental degradation.⁴⁸⁵

Colonial development paradigms further marginalized pastoral production by privileging sedentary agriculture and extractive industries as the primary engines of economic growth. Pastoralism was excluded from development planning and investment, reinforcing its portrayal as backward and marginal. This ideological framework justified continued neglect and dispossession, even as colonial economies relied on the resources extracted from Afar territories.

By the early twentieth century, the cumulative impact of colonial land appropriation, mobility restrictions, fiscal burdens, and ideological bias had significantly weakened Afar pastoral economies. Loss of access to grazing land and water points reduced herd viability, while the erosion of customary institutions undermined collective resource management. Although Afar pastoralism persisted, it did so under increasingly precarious conditions shaped by colonial domination rather than indigenous control. The colonial marginalization of Afar pastoral economic activities thus formed a critical dimension of broader processes of economic dispossession in the Horn of Africa, leaving enduring structural vulnerabilities that continued to affect Afar livelihoods beyond the formal end of colonial rule.

⁴⁸⁴ Ahmed Ali Marriye, chief of Were Himeno, to Aladin Bey Pasha of Massawa, October 22, 1870, in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. 3: *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats, 1869–1879*, document no. 57 (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸⁵ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 65.

Chapter V: Post-Colonial Transition and Legacy

5.1 Colonial Withdrawal and Fragmentation of Local Order

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Afar inhabited a strategically significant zone along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, where their territories connected the African interior with maritime routes to Arabia and the wider Indian Ocean world. Through pastoral mobility, control of caravan corridors, and authority over key coastal centers, Afar polities developed autonomous political institutions, including sultanates such as Rahayta, Tadjoura, Awsa, and Gobaʿad. These systems sustained a relatively stable regional order grounded in customary law, local leadership, and economic interdependence.

During the conquest, partition, and colonization of African territories by European powers in the mid-nineteenth century, French, British, and Italian colonial regimes forcibly divided the traditional homeland of the Afar people into three political units: the Italian colony of Eritrea, French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti), and the eastern regions of Ethiopia. The Afar refer to these fragmented territories collectively as the “Afar Triangle.” Despite colonial partition, the political institutions and social structures of Afar clans across the Horn of Africa remained broadly similar. Clan affiliation and kinship continued to constitute the most salient features of Afar self-identification, transcending imposed colonial borders.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt, and Ethics*, 79.



Figure 11. Ras Bir area near Obock, Djibouti. Photograph taken by the author during a field visit to Obock, Djibouti, in 2024. Source: Author's own photograph (2024).

The advent of European colonialism fundamentally altered Afar political and economic systems. Colonial policies of division and indirect rule fragmented Afar territories, undermined indigenous political authority, and obscured the historical role of the Afar in regional trade and governance. In particular, Afar contributions to the development of centers such as Zeila and Dire Dawa were marginalized or omitted from dominant historical narratives. Historians such as Didier Morin have highlighted the selective erasure of Afar history within colonial and postcolonial scholarship, noting that Afar contributions were concealed despite the existence of rich documentary sources. Ali Couba similarly argues that European scholarship contributed to enduring confusion by suppressing not only the historical role but even the very name of the Afar people. Following

colonial withdrawal, the disruption of traditional political structures further contributed to instability and the proliferation of localized conflicts.⁴⁸⁷

Historically, the Afar occupied a pivotal position in the political and economic life of the Horn of Africa. Their strategic location, autonomous political institutions, and integration into regional and global trade networks profoundly shaped the development of surrounding societies. Understanding these historical processes is essential, as the neglect or distortion of Afar history not only obscures the past but also shapes contemporary identities and power relations. As historical experience demonstrates, interpretations of the past continue to inform the realities of the present and the possibilities of the future.⁴⁸⁸

In the Horn of Africa, the Afar and Somali peoples share long-standing historical, cultural, and socio-political connections that predate the formation of modern states in the Horn of Africa. Like Somali groups more broadly, Afar nomadic pastoralists have traditionally exhibited a strong sense of cultural and linguistic cohesion, while not necessarily constituting a single, rigid ethnic unit. Scholars have emphasized that both societies are best understood as flexible socio-cultural formations shaped by pastoral mobility, clan organization, and ecological adaptation rather than by fixed ethnic boundaries.⁴⁸⁹

Afar and Issa/Somali communities in particular share a wide range of pastoral values and institutional features, including customary laws, clan-based governance systems, and adaptive strategies suited to arid and semi-arid environments. The well-known Afar traditional rugby-like game, commonly referred to as **Afar Koasso**, is also widely practiced and recognized among the Issa/Somali communities of the Horn of Africa. The game, which involves collective physical strength, endurance, and strategic coordination between opposing teams, functions as a socially regulated form of competition rather than a purely recreational activity. It is embedded in broader

⁴⁸⁷ Coubba, *Ahmed Dini et la politique à Djibouti*, 25.

⁴⁸⁸ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pt. 3, chap. 2.

⁴⁸⁹ Marco Bassi, "Customary Institutions in Contemporary Politics in Borana Zone, Oromia, Ethiopia," in *Contested Power in Ethiopia*, ed. Tobias Hagmann and Kjetil Tronvoll (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 221–50; I. M. Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

cultural frameworks that emphasize courage, masculinity, group solidarity, and controlled conflict resolution.

As documented by Lewis M. (1961), similar forms of this rugby-like contest were observed among Somali groups, particularly the Issa, where the game served as an important communal event linked to seasonal gatherings, pastoral mobility, and rites of social interaction.⁴⁹⁰ The shared practice of Koasso-type games across Afar and Issa societies reflects a long history of cultural exchange, coexistence, and interdependence shaped by geographic proximity, pastoral livelihoods, and overlapping social institutions.

Afar Koasso contributed to the maintenance of social order and provided an alternative mechanism for mitigating tensions that might otherwise escalate into violent confrontation. In this sense, Koasso represents not merely a sporting activity but a culturally meaningful institution that underscores the depth of shared traditions between Afar and Issa communities.

These similarities are reinforced by comparable ecological settings, parallel colonial experiences, and a shared historical legacy of marginalization, political neglect, and underdevelopment in the borderlands of the Horn of Africa.⁴⁹¹ Such commonalities have facilitated sustained interaction, coexistence, and, at times, integration between the two societies.

Anthropological studies further highlight similarities in material culture and settlement patterns. Braukämper (2007), for example, notes resemblances in Afar and Somali house construction, an observation closely linked to pastoral mobility.⁴⁹² Lewis (1961) similarly correlates seasonal pastoral movements with dwelling design, noting that peoples inhabiting the arid lowlands of the Ogaden and the Afar Triangle are largely camel nomads whose highly mobile lifestyles require dwellings that can be rapidly constructed, dismantled, and transported. Such architectural parallels reflect deeper convergences in subsistence strategies and environmental adaptation.⁴⁹³

Another shared feature of Afar and Somali societies is the autonomous authority exercised by clan chiefs over their constituents. Historical sources indicate that both societies maintained political

⁴⁹⁰ I. M. Lewis, “Notes on the Social Organization of the ‘Ise Somali,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 17, no. 1 (1961): 76–78.

⁴⁹¹ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts*, 65.

⁴⁹² Braukämper, *Houses in Southern Ethiopia*, 78–81.

⁴⁹³ Lewis, *Notes on the Social Organization of the ‘Ise Somali*, 79.

independence from highland states well into the early modern period. As cited in Drysdale (1966), Gastaldi's sixteenth-century map of northeastern Africa, together with the travel accounts of Francisco Álvares, attest to the independent status of both the Somali and Danakil (Afar) littoral and hinterland. Subsequent historical evidence likewise suggests that neither the Danakil nor the Somali coasts were ever fully integrated into the Ethiopian imperial system prior to modern expansion.⁴⁹⁴

Patterns of population movement further underscore the close relationship between the Afar and Somali. Abir (1980) observes that both groups exhibited similar migratory rhythms shaped by seasonal grazing cycles, water availability, and regional trade routes. These shared movement patterns facilitated sustained contact, interdependence, and social exchange across Afar–Somali borderlands.⁴⁹⁵

Oral traditions and genealogical narratives provide additional insight into the depth of Afar–Somali relations. Some traditions claim that the Issa trace their ancestry to Hadal Mahis, while certain Afar clans—such as Daheimela—trace their origins to the Darod branch of the Somali. Conversely, several Issa clans, including Urweyne, Horone, Harla, Walaldon, and Wardik, are cited in Afar oral histories, and in some cases within Issa traditions themselves, as having Afar origins. Afar elders further maintain that substantial numbers of Issa individuals were historically incorporated into Afar clans through processes of adoption, alliance, and political accommodation.

Historical ethnographic accounts corroborate these traditions. Lewis (1955) notes that the Ad Saleh, inhabiting the islands of Abbaguba and Baca in the Bay of Hawakil, were relatively recent Somali Mijertein immigrants who had severed their earlier affiliations and allied themselves with Afar groups in Buri.⁴⁹⁶ Similarly, Isenberg and his associates (1968) describe Somali bowmen living among the We'ema Danakil, who, although maintaining their Somali language and endogamous marriage practices, had become politically integrated into Afar society.⁴⁹⁷ Local

⁴⁹⁴ John Drysdale, "The Problem of French Somaliland," *Africa Report* 19, no. 8 (1966): 13.

⁴⁹⁵ Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim–European Rivalry in the Region* (London: Cass, 1980), 75.

⁴⁹⁶ I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160.

⁴⁹⁷ C. W. Isenberg and J. L. Krapf, *The Journal of C. W. Isenberg and J. L. Krapf: Detailing Their Proceedings in the Kingdom of Shoa and Journeys in Other Parts of Abyssinia, 1839–1842* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), 41.

traditions further suggest blood and alliance relations between Issa groups and Afar clans such as the Fekirtho, Awedo, and the Fidihi of Sidha Bura, who maintained close *afbeha* (friendly alliance) relations with certain Issa communities.⁴⁹⁸

Beyond shared culture, religion, and administrative systems, Afar and Somali societies were historically linked through common political struggles. During the sixteenth-century wars of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, Afar and Somali forces were integrated within the broader Muslim coalition confronting Christian polities of the Ethiopian highlands. While some historical narratives emphasize Somali leadership within the Adal Sultanate, oral traditions and regional histories indicate that Muslims from Shewa and Ifat—led by the Makhzumi and Walashma dynasties—also participated, alongside Afar warriors who constituted a substantial component of Adal’s military power. Following the decline of Adal, political continuity was maintained through the emergence of the Awsa Sultanate, which traced its origins directly to the Adal political tradition.

Finally, enduring genealogical linkages further illustrate Afar–Somali interconnectedness. Figures such as Gabla’lah are recognized as ancestral figures among certain Somali groups, particularly in Somaliland, while also constituting a major lineage within Afar society. Other groups, including the Harti and Haralla, similarly reflect overlapping historical identities that defy rigid ethnic categorization. Collectively, these political, cultural, and genealogical connections demonstrate that Afar–Somali relations are best understood not as interactions between wholly separate groups, but as the product of long-term coexistence, mutual influence, and shared historical trajectories within the Horn of Africa.

Following the withdrawal of European colonial powers from the Horn of Africa, the divide-and-rule policies they had institutionalized produced enduring political, cultural, genealogical, and territorial ruptures among communities that had previously shared interconnected histories and landscapes. Among the most consequential outcomes was the transformation of Afar–Somali relations from coexistence and regulated competition into sustained hostility. Colonial intervention not only redrew boundaries but also militarized identities, selectively empowering certain groups

⁴⁹⁸ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 67.

while marginalizing others. In this context, the Afar and Issa Somali—despite deep historical, cultural, and geographic interconnectedness—were increasingly positioned as adversaries.

Colonial restructuring significantly altered demographic and political realities in key Afar territories, particularly along strategic trade corridors and urban centers such as Zeila, Djibouti, Dire Dawa, and the Allideghi plains. Spencer (1979) observes that less than a century ago Djibouti was predominantly Afar, but large-scale Somali migration—facilitated by colonial labor demands and political favoritism—gradually transformed it into a Somali-dominated city.⁴⁹⁹ This demographic shift was not organic but deeply intertwined with colonial administrative practices and military alliances that privileged Somali intermediaries while undermining Afar authority.

Historical evidence further challenges narratives that portray the Afar as late arrivals to the southeastern Horn of Africa. Yasin (2010) demonstrates that Afar groups occupied extensive territories in the southeastern and eastern Horn earlier than Somali pastoral expansions.⁵⁰⁰ Abir (1980) corroborates this chronology, noting that the Dankali (Afar) appear to have reached parts of the southeastern Horn even before Somali migrations. These findings underscore that Afar displacement was not the result of primordial rivalry but of externally induced power asymmetries.⁵⁰¹

Italian colonial intervention played a decisive role in escalating Afar–Issa conflict by selectively arming and training Issa Somali groups. Markakis (2002) documents how the Italians recruited Issa fighters, providing them with weapons, training, and access to markets in exchange for military cooperation. These arms were subsequently used against the Afar, particularly to secure access to the fertile Allideghi plains. While the Issa benefited from Italian patronage, the Afar—who largely rejected collaboration—were collectively punished. The Afar aligned themselves with Ethiopia, which at that stage was militarily disadvantaged, exposing them to retaliation by Italian-backed forces.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Spencer, “A Reassessment of Ethiopian–Somali Conflict,” 25.

⁵⁰⁰ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 71.

⁵⁰¹ Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 75.

⁵⁰² Markakis, “Anatomy of a Conflict,” 447.

Italian attempts to co-opt Afar leadership through religious and material inducements were largely unsuccessful. Herrie (2008) notes that the Italians struggled to advance their so-called “pro-Islam” policy among the Afar, who were already deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and thus unreceptive to colonial religious propaganda. Italian demands that Afar clans supply young men as soldiers and male camels for transport were refused by Afar elders, reflecting both political autonomy and resistance to foreign domination.⁵⁰³

Colonial retaliation was severe. According to Yasin (2010), Italian forces executed eighty-two prominent Afar elders in an area between Hurrso and the Erer River, acting on intelligence provided by Issa and Gurgura Somali leaders, including Ugaas Hassen Hersi and Ugaas Buh. The targeted elders were influential clan leaders and military strategists, and their elimination was intended to dismantle Afar resistance. In Somali oral memory, the site became known as Kebri Oodiyash—“the burial place of elders.” Following these executions, Issa forces advanced deep into Afar territory, attacking villages such as Asbuli and Ayroli and pushing toward Mero with minimal resistance, as Afar communities had been militarily weakened by Italian repression.⁵⁰⁴

Further atrocities followed. Herrie (2008) records that Italian forces, again acting on information supplied by Issa informants, killed numerous Afar clan leaders. In Gewane, Italian soldiers gathered Afar men, women, and children under the pretense of reconciliation before executing prominent Mahesara and Galela clan leaders—including Hafa, Balie, Unda Momin Humed, and Ingifu—within the compound of what is now Gewane High School. These acts were accompanied by psychological terror, as civilians were forced to celebrate the deaths of their leaders. The continued presence of these graves attests to the enduring trauma embedded in Afar collective memory.⁵⁰⁵

Colonial favoritism did not end with Italy’s military defeat. As Herrie (2008) notes, upon withdrawal, Italian forces transferred their weapons to Issa Somali fighters, enabling them to consolidate control over Afar territories.⁵⁰⁶ Marcus (1995, 8) further explains that Italian-led Somali troops dispersed with their arms after the British defeat of Italy during World War II, and

⁵⁰³ Herrie, “Historical Perspectives of the Afar and Issa-Somali Conflict,” 34–35.

⁵⁰⁴ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 87–88.

⁵⁰⁵ Herrie, “Historical Perspectives of the Afar and Issa-Somali Conflict,” 34–35.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

that Italy later rearmed local leaders during its trusteeship period.⁵⁰⁷ Tadesse M. (2006, 15) argues that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia fundamentally altered the nature of Afar–Issa relations by destroying traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms and introducing a lasting imbalance of military power.⁵⁰⁸

The militarization of the Issa had profound economic and territorial consequences. The acquisition of modern weapons and logistical support enabled Issa groups to penetrate the Allideghi plains and displace Afar pastoralists.⁵⁰⁹ Somali oral poetry from the period openly celebrates this transformation, attributing newfound equality and prosperity to Italian intervention. Such expressions reveal how colonial violence was normalized and internalized within local narratives of success and survival.⁵¹⁰

Colonial policies also extended beyond military support to economic and political patronage. Mukhtar (2003) acknowledges that Italians allowed Somali forces to exact revenge on Ethiopian populations.⁵¹¹ Sylvia Pankhurst (1959) clarifies that this “revenge” entailed systematic looting, sexual violence, and abuse by Somali askaris (Banda) in cities such as Harar and Dire Dawa. She further documents Italian efforts to bribe Issa chiefs under French and British administration through gifts and money, thereby expanding Somali economic capital and regional influence.⁵¹² Lewis (1980) confirms that religious leaders and irregular Somali groups were similarly recruited and armed to destabilize border regions.⁵¹³

Overall, Italian and French colonial interventions entrenched ethnic polarization by selectively empowering the Issa Somali politically, militarily, and economically, while marginalizing and violently repressing the Afar. These policies transformed localized competition over pasture and trade into protracted ethnic conflict, the consequences of which continue to shape political relations and territorial disputes in the Afar–Somali borderlands. The Afar–Issa conflict, therefore,

⁵⁰⁷ Marcus, *Haile Sellassie I: The Formative Years, 1892–1936*, 8.

⁵⁰⁸ Tadesse, “The Afar–Issa Conflict,” 15.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵¹⁰ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 87–88.

⁵¹¹ Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 131.

⁵¹² Pankhurst, “Ethiopian Patriots,” 325.

⁵¹³ I. M. Lewis, “The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa,” *Journal of African History* 1, no. 2 (1960): 213–30.

cannot be understood as an inevitable outcome of pastoral rivalry but must be situated within the broader historical framework of colonial militarization, demographic engineering, and the systematic destruction of indigenous governance systems.

On the other side, the French acquisition of Obock in 1862, colonial expansion along the western Red Sea coast proceeded gradually but strategically, culminating in the proclamation of the *Territory of Obock and the Protectorate of Tağura* in 1884. Although France initially concluded a series of treaties with Afar chiefs that enabled it to establish control over nearly three-quarters of the territory, the colonial administration deliberately rebranded the area as *French Somaliland* in 1888, a designation that fundamentally misrepresented both the demographic and political realities of the region.⁵¹⁴ This act of renaming was not a neutral administrative decision but a calculated political intervention that reshaped identity, authority, and inter-ethnic relations in favor of Somali intermediaries while marginalizing Afar sovereignty.

As Morin (2005) notes, the term *Côte française des Somalis* itself was reportedly proposed by Hağgi Diideh of the Mahad-Ase clan of the Gedeursi, a prosperous merchant from Zayla who built Djibouti's first mosque, Ğami' ar-Raħma, in 1891.⁵¹⁵ The adoption of this name—modeled explicitly on British Somaliland—reflected not only Somali commercial influence but also French willingness to privilege latecomer groups perceived as more pliable colonial partners. Yet, as Said Yusuf (1978) correctly observes, *French Somaliland* was a profound misnomer, since the vast majority of the territory acquired by France lay under Afar sovereignty.⁵¹⁶

This pattern reflects a broader colonial strategy whereby European powers frequently preferred to negotiate with minorities or recently arrived groups in order to weaken established political systems and smooth the path of imperial penetration. In the Afar case, traditional leaders responded forcefully to French territorial claims, rejecting the notion of land alienation outright. Mohamed Kadamy (1996) emphasizes that the original designation *Colony of Obock* was more consistent with the 1862 treaty concluded with the Afar Sultan of Raħayta.⁵¹⁷ French claims that Obock had been “purchased” were explicitly contested by Sultan Dini Mohamed Bourhan, who argued that

⁵¹⁴ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 93.93.

⁵¹⁵ Morin, “Gadabuursi,” 640.

⁵¹⁶ Abdi Said, “Mini-Republic of Djibouti,” 35–40.

⁵¹⁷ Kadamy, “Djibouti: Between War and Peace,” 512.

under Afar customary law, land ownership could never be transferred; only usufruct rights could be negotiated. Even the Sultan himself lacked authority to alienate communal land permanently. This fundamental legal and cultural incompatibility rendered French claims illegitimate in Afar eyes and set the stage for a relationship defined by resistance, repression, and exile.

Indeed, French–Afar relations quickly deteriorated. In the decades following occupation, no fewer than ninety-three Afar sultans from Gobaʿad, Tağura, and Raḥayta were exiled to Madagascar, a practice that systematically dismantled Afar political leadership.⁵¹⁸ Lewis further argues that French colonial policy sought to negate the very existence of the Afar—then commonly labeled *Danakil*—whom the administration regarded as a structural obstacle to deeper colonial consolidation. The renaming of the territory as *French Somali Coast* symbolized this negation and institutionalized Somali visibility at the expense of Afar political legitimacy.

Despite this erasure, Afars remained the predominant population across much of the territory. Ugut-Toosi (2009) estimates that approximately 85 percent of the land historically belonged to Afar communities. Nevertheless, France maintained the Somali-oriented nomenclature for nearly six decades, facilitating Somali immigration and embedding demographic and political distortions that persisted beyond independence. According to the same source, postcolonial leaders—including Hassan Gouled Aptidon and later Ismail Omar Guelleh—capitalized on this colonial legacy of confusion to consolidate Somali dominance within Djibouti’s political system.⁵¹⁹

French policy further deepened ethnic imbalance by relocating the colonial capital from the Afar-dominated north to Djibouti-ville, across the Gulf of Tağura. Although the move was justified on strategic grounds, it carried far-reaching political consequences.⁵²⁰ Bolée (2003) explains that the construction of Djibouti city attracted labor, trade, and administrative power, accelerating Somali urbanization.⁵²¹ As Said Yusuf (1978) notes, the Issa Somali were far more exposed to French rule and urban life, while Afars remained largely excluded from the emerging colonial economy. This

⁵¹⁸ Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 160.

⁵¹⁹ Ugut-Toosi, “Idea of Independence,” 22.

⁵²⁰ Yasin, *Regional Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Conflicts*, 94.

⁵²¹ Bollee, “Djibouti: From French Outpost to US Base,” 211.

uneven urban integration widened socio-economic and political disparities, intensifying resentment and competition between the two groups.⁵²²

Institutional arrangements reinforced this inequality. Prior to 1963, colonial electoral systems disproportionately favored Somali representation in the Territorial Assembly.⁵²³ In the early 1960s, however, France reversed its strategy, redistricting electoral boundaries to increase Afar representation in preparation for the 1963 elections.⁵²⁴ While this shift temporarily enabled Afars to dominate territorial politics, it simultaneously intensified Somali resentment and strengthened their commitment to pan-Somali nationalism.⁵²⁵ Thus, French oscillation between Afar and Somali alliances entrenched mutual suspicion rather than reconciliation.

The 1967 renaming of the territory from *French Somaliland* to the *French Territory of the Afars and Issas* further exacerbated ethnic rivalry. Afars welcomed the recognition of their name, while Somalis interpreted the change as a deliberate attempt to fragment Somali identity and suppress irredentist aspirations.⁵²⁶ From the Somali perspective, the inclusion of the Issa clan name was seen both as recognition and manipulation—an effort to divide Somalis internally while maintaining French control. These competing interpretations underscore how colonial naming practices functioned as instruments of political engineering rather than neutral descriptors.

On the eve of independence, France once again shifted its alliance, this time favoring Issa Somali elites. Referendums organized under French supervision became sources of profound Afar resentment. According to Kaplan (1978), as cited in Yassin (2010), Djibouti was metaphorically described as “a goat waiting to be devoured by two lions.”⁵²⁷ While Afar politicians advocated postponing independence, fearing Somali domination and annexation to Greater Somalia, Somali leaders viewed independence as a gateway to pan-Somali unification.⁵²⁸ Although the 1967

⁵²² Abdi Said, “Mini-Republic of Djibouti,” 35–40.

⁵²³ Drysdale, “Problem of French Somaliland,” 14.

⁵²⁴ Schraeder, “Djibouti,” 118.

⁵²⁵ Abdi Said, “Mini-Republic of Djibouti,” 35.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ Marion Kaplan, “Djibouti: Tiny New Nation of Africa’s Horn,” *National Geographic* 158, no. 4 (1978): 523.

⁵²⁸ Shem Kassim and J. Searing, “Djibouti and the Question of Afar Nationalism,” *African Affairs* 79, no. 315 (1980): 216.

referendum officially favored continued association with France, voting patterns revealed sharp ethnic polarization, with Somali-dominated districts supporting independence and Afar regions overwhelmingly opting for continued French rule.

French interference extended beyond referendums. Kassim and Searing (1980) note that leaders such as Harbi were expelled from both the Chamber of Deputies and Djibouti itself for advocating unification with Somalia—an intervention that contrasted sharply with British non-interference elsewhere in the region.⁵²⁹ Somali intellectuals like Said Yusuf (1978) nonetheless argued that Somali unification might end the costly Afar–Somali conflict, a claim strongly rejected by Afar activists, who viewed Greater Somalia as a threat worse than colonial rule.⁵³⁰

Even after independence in 1977, French involvement continued to shape Afar–Somali relations. Although France initially claimed neutrality, it intervened decisively during the 1991 civil war when the Afar-led FRUD controlled much of the countryside. French military assistance to the Issa-dominated government, particularly in defending towns such as Dikhil, reinforced Afar perceptions of enduring colonial bias. Subsequent demobilization policies disproportionately affected Ethiopian Issa-Somalis within the Djiboutian army, while accusations persisted regarding demographic engineering along strategic transport corridors.⁵³¹

In sum, the Afar–Somali conflict in Djibouti cannot be reduced to ethnic rivalry alone. It is the product of sustained French colonial policies that manipulated names, borders, urbanization, electoral systems, and alliances to govern through division. These interventions reconfigured identities, empowered some groups while marginalizing others, and institutionalized conflict as a mode of political order—effects that continue to shape Djibouti’s postcolonial state and Afar–Somali relations across the wider Horn of Africa.

Many of the Afar’s neighboring communities have historically failed to distinguish clearly between Afar and Somali identities, let alone between the Afar and the Issa clan in particular. This lack of differentiation has obscured the deeper historical processes through which settlement

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵³⁰ Abdi Said, “Mini-Republic of Djibouti,” 39; Ugut-Toosi, “Idea of Independence,” 22.

⁵³¹ Berhe Tadesse and Adaye Yonas, *The Impact of Local Conflict on Regional Stability* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies/CPRD, 2007).

patterns, political authority, and intercommunal relations were transformed following the advent of European colonialism in the Horn of Africa. Prior to colonial intervention, Afar settlement extended continuously across what later became the contested zones between French Somaliland (Djibouti), British Somaliland, and eastern Ethiopia. The subsequent imposition of colonial boundaries—driven primarily by Franco-British rivalry—fundamentally altered this spatial and political landscape.

Within this competitive colonial environment, the Afar found themselves increasingly marginalized as colonial powers sought reliable intermediaries to secure trade routes, infrastructure projects, and political influence. Strategic corridors linking Zeyla, Tadjourah, and Shewa passed through Afar-inhabited territories, and the availability of permanent water sources—such as those around Erer—made these areas especially significant.⁵³² Historical travel accounts confirm Afar authority along these routes. Axel Baudouin records the payment of tolls to Afar chiefs near Dire Dawa, noting explicitly the transition into Danakil (Afar) territory. Similarly, Bourgeat describes Afar chiefs such as Abubeker exercising delegated authority over wells and security posts under Abyssinian administration.⁵³³

The construction of the Djibouti–Dire Dawa railway marked a decisive turning point. Afar resistance to railway construction—particularly attacks such as the Wolwol incident of 1904–1905—prompted the railway company to recruit private militias drawn largely from the Issa clan. These militias, officially tasked with protecting construction sites, operated under the leadership of Pierre Carrette-Bovet, a French adventurer later described as a “warlord among the Issa”.⁵³⁴ In practice, their activities extended well beyond security provision and included systematic displacement of Afar communities along the railway corridor. This alliance between French colonial interests, Central Government of Ethiopia, and Issa militias emerged during the governorship of Ras Mekonnen of Harar and continued after his death in 1906.

⁵³² Jules Borelli, *Éthiopie méridionale: Journal de mon voyage aux pays Amhara, Oromo et Sidama (1885–1888)* (Paris: Ancienne Maison Quantin, Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1890), 77.

⁵³³ Axel Baudouin, *Voyage en Abyssinie et au pays des Danakil* (Paris: Éditions Kailash, 2018), 85–94.

⁵³⁴ Rosanna Van Gelder de Pineda, *Le chemin de fer de Djibouti à Addis-Abeba* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995), 253.

The institutionalization of this arrangement deepened after the Compagnie Impériale des Chemins de Fer Éthiopiens (CIE) came under French control, continuing to finance Issa militias. Subsequent feasibility studies for railway expansion, such as those led by Captain Paul Ozil in 1908, encountered sustained Afar resistance, even as some Afar participated as wage laborers under coercive conditions.⁵³⁵ Administrative reshuffling further weakened Afar positions. Abubeker, an Afar leader aligned with Ethiopian central authority and related by marriage to Lij Iyasu, was appointed chief of railway surveillance, replacing Ato Mircha from the Christian highlands. While presented as administrative reform, this change disrupted established balances and eroded tacit agreements that had previously moderated conflict.⁵³⁶

Following Somali independence in 1960, pan-Somali nationalism emerged as a central regional force. Somali state propaganda, broadcast through radio and clandestine networks, mobilized Somali populations across borders and encouraged armed struggle in Ethiopia and Djibouti. Ethiopia, meanwhile, pursued an ambivalent policy—supporting opposition movements selectively while seeking to preserve access to the port of Djibouti. Organizations such as the FLCS in Djibouti and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in the Ogaden drew the region further into Cold War-era proxy struggles.⁵³⁷

In this context, Issa pastoral movements—initially permitted for seasonal grazing—gradually transformed into permanent settlement and territorial expansion within Afar lands. These movements were frequently accompanied by armed raids, contraband trade, and the establishment of strategic settlements along major transport corridors, including the Addis Ababa–Djibouti highway. Afar pastoralists, unwilling or unable to integrate into contraband economies, were progressively displaced toward the Awash Valley. Ethiopian authorities responded with increased military presence, but inconsistent policy and internal political crises undermined effective conflict management.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13

⁵³⁶ Aramis Houmed Soulé, “Lij Iyasu’s Asylum among the Afar in Awsa, 1916–1918,” in *The Life and Times of Lij Iyasu of Ethiopia: New Insights*, ed. Éloi Ficquet and Wolbert G. C. Smidt (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014), 165–178.

⁵³⁷ Markakis, “Anatomy of a Conflict,” 445–53; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 98–101.

The Ogaden War of 1977–1978 represented a culmination of these processes. Somali forces, supported by Issa guides and militias, captured key towns including Dire Dawa, Erer, Afdem, and sections of the railway line. Afdem, a predominantly Afar settlement, became a focal point of resistance. Although Afar fighters mounted sustained defense, Issa forces—armed with modern weaponry inherited from Italian colonial and Somali state support—eventually prevailed. Civilians were killed, property looted, and survivors displaced to Awash, Gewane, and Warar. These events entrenched Issa control over strategic nodes and facilitated further expansion into Afar territories.⁵³⁸

The conflict subsequently shifted toward new infrastructure corridors, particularly the Awash–Mille highway, where Issa groups established contraband bases in towns such as Bikke, Butiji, and Kilaalu. Settlements along the Addis–Djibouti road—including Gadmaytu, Undufo, and Adaytu—became flashpoints of violence. Djibouti and Somalia increasingly intervened, directly or indirectly, transforming a localized pastoral dispute into a regionalized conflict. Traditional Afar–Issa peace agreements were disregarded, and violence increasingly targeted civilians, including women, children, and the elderly.⁵³⁹

Colonial boundary-making also reshaped settlement patterns in northern Somaliland, particularly around Zeyla and Boramo—areas historically associated with Afar polities such as the Gobaad Sultanate. Franco-British rivalry led to the systematic displacement of Afar communities and their replacement by Somali groups favored by British policy. Railway construction under Sultan Hamad Laoita of Gobaad and Mohamed Abubeker initially relied on Afar cooperation, yet Issa influence expanded only later as a colonial counterweight. British facilitation of Somali migration during periods of drought further entrenched Issa presence within Ethiopian territory, often under diplomatic protection, as evidenced by British correspondence from 1956 defending Issa movements against Ethiopian police action.

Over time, Issa elites consolidated their position within colonial and postcolonial administrations in Djibouti and Ethiopia. Italian fascist occupation (1936–1941) further militarized Issa groups

⁵³⁸ Bekele Hundie, “Conflicts between Afar Pastoralists and Their Neighbors: Triggers and Motivations,” *Institute of Public Management and Development Studies, Ethiopian Civil Service College* 4, no. 1 (2010): 134–48.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

and intensified hostility toward Afar communities, whom Italians and Somali intermediaries portrayed as obstacles to foreign domination. After Somalia's independence, the ideology of "Greater Somalia" sustained clandestine aggression even after military defeat in the Ogaden, reframing territorial claims as pastoral disputes.⁵⁴⁰

As Markakis has argued, while competition over water and grazing initially framed Afar–Issa relations, foreign intervention transformed these disputes into a deeply politicized, territorial conflict. Italian, French, British, and later Somali and Djiboutian interventions exploited and magnified tensions through a classic divide-and-rule strategy. The result was the gradual displacement of Afar from areas such as Meiso, Afdem, Erer, and Dire Dawa, culminating in major confrontations in 1947 and thereafter.⁵⁴¹

In sum, the Afar–Issa conflict cannot be understood solely as an inter-pastoral rivalry. It is the historical outcome of colonial boundary-making, infrastructural penetration, militarization of intermediaries, and postcolonial geopolitical competition centered on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Afar, divided across Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, emerged as one of the most structurally vulnerable groups in this process. Until these historical realities are acknowledged and addressed through inclusive political and economic transformation, the legacy of conflict will continue to overshadow prospects for lasting peace.

5.2 Continued Economic and Political Marginalization

The withdrawal of Italian and French colonial powers from the Horn of Africa did not mark a restoration of political autonomy or a meaningful reassertion of authority for the Afar people. Despite their long history as sovereign actors in the region, controlling strategic territories along the Red Sea and inland corridors such as the Awash Valley and the Danakil Depression, the Afar were left politically marginalized and socially constrained in the postcolonial period. Historically, the Afar had exercised considerable authority through a network of confederated sultanates, including Awsa, Tadjoura, Bidu, Rahaita, Ankala, and Gobad, which were central to both political governance and regional trade. These sultanates not only facilitated commerce between inland

⁵⁴⁰ British Embassy, Addis Ababa. Letter from John Killick, Esq., Chargé d'Affaires a.i., to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 663/IA/48, July 27, 1956. Unpublished diplomatic correspondence.

⁵⁴¹ Markakis, "Anatomy of a Conflict," 445–53; Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 98–101.

highland populations and Red Sea ports but also served as centers of Islamic scholarship, diplomacy, and military coordination, reflecting the Afar's central role in the social and political landscape of the Horn of Africa. During the medieval period, the Islamic sultanates of Ifat and Adal further reinforced Afar political influence. Before the decline of Ifat following the death of Sultan Sa'ad ad-Dīn in 1402–1403, Afar leaders administered multi-ethnic polities, negotiating complex alliances and engaging in strategic warfare with neighboring Christian and Muslim states. Following the relocation of Adal's capital to Awsa in 1576 under Imam Muhammad Ge'as, the Afar preserved internal autonomy and continued to resist external pressures from the Abyssinian highlands, demonstrating both the resilience of their political institutions and their capacity to adapt to shifting regional dynamics. The decentralized and clan-based governance structures of the Afar, together with their customary legal systems (mada'a) and transhumant pastoral economy, allowed for effective management of pastoral mobility, resource allocation, and conflict resolution, ensuring cohesion and sustainability even in the absence of a centralized state apparatus. European observers, such as Henry Salt in 1816 and Werner Munzinger in 1869, consistently noted the independence of Afar communities, particularly along the Red Sea littoral, where they resisted both Turkish and Egyptian taxation and maintained control over local trade and political affairs.⁵⁴²

The advent of European colonialism, however, disrupted these long-standing structures and initiated a process of political fragmentation that would persist long after the colonial powers departed. French colonial rule in Djibouti systematically favored Somali Issa elites, placing them in positions of administrative authority and marginalizing Afar leaders, even in territories historically dominated by Afar sultanates such as Tadjoura and Gobad. Similarly, Italian colonial control in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia privileged highland Christian populations while subordinating Afar communities, especially in strategic ports such as Assab and Massawa. Ethiopia's partial incorporation of the Awsa Sultanate under nominal autonomy masked a gradual erosion of local governance, as imperial officials increasingly imposed centralized authority and redirected control over trade, taxation, and land management to state institutions. The colonial process, therefore, fragmented the Afar socio-political space, severing historical linkages between inland, pastoral, and coastal communities, and disrupting centuries of economic and political integration. The imposition of arbitrary boundaries and colonial administrative structures not only

⁵⁴²Munzinger, "Journey through the Afar Country," 26; Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 116.

divided the Afar population across emerging nation-states but also weakened the internal cohesion of their sultanates and clan networks.

Following the withdrawal of colonial powers, these divisions persisted and were reinforced by postcolonial state policies that prioritized centralization and elite domination. In Ethiopia, the defeat of Italian forces in 1941 restored nominal sovereignty over Afar lowlands, yet the imperial state pursued policies that systematically undermined Afar political institutions.⁵⁴³ Sultanates and clan authorities were reduced to ceremonial roles, while decision-making power over development projects, land allocation, and trade regulation was transferred to state bureaucracies. Large-scale agro-industrial projects, including the Tendaho Sugar Plantation along the Awash River, appropriated communal lands and restricted pastoral mobility, diminishing both the economic autonomy and the political influence of Afar communities.⁵⁴⁴

The division of the Afar people across the Red Sea coast and the Ethiopian interior cannot be adequately explained as a simple outcome of European colonial boundary-making. Rather, historical evidence suggests that the fragmentation of Afar territorial unity was largely the result of imperial Ethiopian state expansion and administrative reorganization, particularly under Emperor Menelik II and his successors. Unlike the Somali case—where colonial protectorates explicitly produced multiple externally governed Somali polities—the Afar case reflects a more complex interaction between imperial Ethiopian policies, indirect colonial interests, and Afar indigenous authority structures.

The 1883 agreement between Italy, Menelik and Sultan Muhammad Hanfare of Awsa did not constitute a formal territorial boundary demarcation between Afar communities. Instead, it was primarily a *functional and political arrangement*: Italy assumed responsibility for protecting the coastal zone from foreign encroachment, while the Sultan of Awsa guaranteed the security of the land trade corridor linking Assab with the Ethiopian highlands, particularly Shewa. This agreement recognized the Sultan as the legitimate authority over Afar territory and did not fragment Afar land

⁵⁴³ Kaddafo, *Hidden Royalty*, 74–86; Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, 7; Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire,” 3–50.

⁵⁴⁴ G. Flood, “The Nomadism and Its Future,” *The Afar, African Environment, Special Report No. 2: Drought and Famine in Ethiopia*, ed. A. M. Houssien (1976): 64–65; Maknun, *Political Economy of the Afar Region*, 52–68.

into separate sovereign units. Contemporary diplomatic correspondence indicates that Italy deliberately avoided defining internal Afar borders, likely to preserve stable relations with the Sultanate, which controlled access to the interior trade routes.⁵⁴⁵

However, this approach changed decisively with Menelik II's border agreements with Italy in 1900, 1902, and 1908. These treaties effectively positioned Ethiopia approximately 60 kilometers inland from the Red Sea and laid the foundations for the later division of the Afar people between what became Eritrea and Ethiopia. Significantly, while these agreements meticulously named geographical locations and administrative markers on the Tigrayan highland side, they conspicuously failed to specify named places or territorial units on the Afar lowland side, particularly in the region between Awsa and Assab. This asymmetry strongly suggests that Afar territory was treated not as a politically articulated space with recognized local sovereignties, but as an undefined frontier zone subject to imperial negotiation without local consultation.⁵⁴⁶

Menelik's internal correspondence further reinforces this interpretation. In letters addressed to Ras Wolde of Tigray and Ras Mikael of Wollo, Menelik explicitly ordered the administrative division of Afar communities, assigning Afars in Yejjū to Tigray and those in Werababo to Wollo's jurisdiction. He appointed imperial agents to demarcate boundaries, again without reference to Afar customary territorial organization or consultation with Afar leaders. This process marked the first systematic attempt by the Ethiopian state to fragment Afar unity, transforming a territorially coherent people into administratively dispersed subjects of multiple provinces.⁵⁴⁷

Between 1869 and 1944, therefore, there existed no clearly defined category of "Italian-protected Afar" versus "Ethiopian-protected Afar," in contrast to the Somali experience under British, Italian, French, and Ethiopian administrations. Afar political authority remained formally centralized under the Sultan of Awsa, even as imperial and colonial powers negotiated over Afar lands. The effective division of the Afar people emerged later, particularly after World War II, as

⁵⁴⁵ Treaty between Italy and Mohammed Hanfare, cited in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 118.

⁵⁴⁶ Convention between Italy and Ethiopia for the Settlement of the Frontier between the Italian Colony of Eritrea and the Provinces of the Ethiopian Empire, signed at Addis Ababa, 16 May 1908, cited in E. Hertslet, K.C.B., *The Map of Africa by Treaty*, vol. 3 (London, 1909), no. 381, 1225.

⁵⁴⁷ Emperor Menelik II, letter to Ras Walle of Tigray, 18 June 1898, cited in Paulos Ngnogno, *Menelik II's Internal Written Letters* (Addis Ababa, 2010), document no. 238, 89.

Ethiopian rulers restructured the Red Sea coast and incorporated Afar-inhabited territories into the Eritrean administrative framework.

The incorporation of Assab and the Red Sea Afar into Eritrea—first under British Military Administration and later under the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia (1952–1962)—further marginalized Afar political agency. Afar leaders repeatedly petitioned Emperor Haile Selassie for either autonomous status or reunification with the Awsa Sultanate, but these demands were consistently ignored. The dissolution of the Eritrean federation in 1962 intensified Afar exclusion, as centralized governance replaced earlier arrangements and Muslim lowland communities lost what limited autonomy they had possessed.

Armed resistance followed. Afar participation movements reflected a struggle not merely against marginalization, but against the imposed division of Afar territory and identity. Sultan Ali Mirah Hanfare's political and material support for Afar resistance movements underscores the continuity of Afar opposition to externally imposed borders.

Under the Derg regime, the question of Afar autonomy briefly appeared to find partial recognition, particularly through the autonomous status granted to Assab. Yet this arrangement failed to reunify Afar territories, and subsequent political transitions—especially following the rise of the EPRDF in 1991—once again entrenched Afar division. Despite Sultan Ali Mirah's explicit parliamentary advocacy for Afar unity within Ethiopia and resistance to Eritrean secession, Afar interests were ultimately subordinated to elite-driven state restructuring.

In historical perspective, therefore, the division of the Afar people was not an inevitable colonial outcome, but the cumulative result of imperial Ethiopian boundary-making, administrative fragmentation, and post-imperial political realignments. Menelik II's treaties and internal policies marked the initial rupture, later deepened by Haile Selassie's centralization and unresolved by subsequent regimes. The Afar case thus illustrates how African polities could be divided not only by colonial borders, but by indigenous state-building projects that ignored local political institutions and customary territorial systems.

In Eritrea, Afar marginalization continued after Italian withdrawal, as post-independence governance structures reinforced centralized authority and bypassed traditional leaders, limiting

Afar participation in political decision-making and resource management.⁵⁴⁸ From the early years of the Eritrean armed struggle, the position of the Afar people within Eritrean liberation movements was structurally marginal and politically contested. In 1960, groups opposed to Eritrea's federation and subsequent full unification with Ethiopia formed the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), also known as *Jabhat al-Tahrir*. Prominent figures such as Osman Salih Sabbe joined the armed movement, which initially drew much of its leadership from Muslim communities in western Eritrea. These leaders largely originated from groups that lacked a clearly demarcated territorial homeland and, according to Afar narratives, viewed the Afar coastal and lowland territories as strategically vital.⁵⁴⁹

Within the ELF, Afar participation was largely confined to rank-and-file membership. Afar political actors and later oral testimonies consistently argue that Afar youth were deliberately prevented from rising into senior leadership positions, particularly because Afar territorial continuity across Eritrea and Ethiopia conflicted with the ELF's emerging vision of a centralized Eritrean nationalism. Afar leaders such as Idris Gumhid and Mahamoda Yassin articulated these concerns explicitly in 1962, demanding either the incorporation of Eritrean Afar territories into Ethiopia or, alternatively, the establishment of meaningful regional autonomy within Eritrea. Their argument rested on the fear that an independent Eritrean state would fragment Afar unity and undermine Afar political survival.⁵⁵⁰

The failure of the central authorities and liberation movements to accommodate these demands contributed to armed resistance. By 1967, armed clashes erupted between Afar groups and ELF militants who had extended their control into Afar territories. Afar fighters succeeded in expelling ELF units from significant areas, demonstrating both local resistance capacity and deep political alienation from the dominant nationalist project.

In response to Afar unrest, the Ethiopian central government dispatched a delegation in 1969, led by Fitawrari Yayo Hamedu, a representative of the Sultan of Awsa, to Bera Soli. The delegation conditioned negotiations on prior disarmament by Afar rebels. This precondition was rejected, and

⁵⁴⁸ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 54–57.

⁵⁴⁹ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 330.

⁵⁵⁰ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 58.

talks collapsed, reinforcing Afar perceptions that both Ethiopian and Eritrean political actors prioritized security control over genuine political accommodation.⁵⁵¹

The fragmentation of Eritrean liberation politics intensified in 1970, when Osman Salih Sabbe broke away from the ELF and, together with Hiruy Tedla Bayru, formed the People's Liberation Forces (PLF). These developments later contributed to the emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF, *Sha'abiya*), founded at Sidha Ela in Afar territory. Initially, the EPLF sought to build alliances with the Afar population, particularly after both ELF and Ethiopian forces temporarily withdrew from Afar areas.⁵⁵²

However, Afar accounts emphasize that this period of cooperation proved short-lived. As leadership within the EPLF became increasingly dominated by highland Tigrinya-speaking and Christian cadres, Afar fighters again found themselves politically marginalized. According to Afar testimonies, Osman Salih Sabbe eventually broke with the EPLF, re-aligning with the ELF. During the internecine conflicts between the ELF and EPLF in the late 1970s, Afar combatants were disproportionately targeted. Afar sources allege that both fronts engaged in the covert elimination of Afar fighters, effectively purging them from influential military and political roles.

Among those reportedly killed during this period were Musa Rashid, Ali Usman, Yasin Abdullah, Muhammad Usman, Usman (surname unknown), Ali Muhammad Ibrahim (a member of the ELF Revolutionary Council), and Ali Abdu. While independent verification remains difficult due to the clandestine nature of wartime violence, these killings occupy a central place in Afar collective memory and are cited as evidence of systematic exclusion.⁵⁵³

By 1980, Afar forces expelled ELF fighters from Afar regions in Eritrea. Subsequently, a combination of Derg-backed militias and rival Eritrean fronts pushed ELF units westward toward Sudan, effectively removing the organization from the Eritrean battlefield. The EPLF, having consolidated military dominance, established permanent control over Afar territories.⁵⁵⁴ Afar

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵² Yasin, *Political History of the Afar*, 57–58.

⁵⁵³ Adou, *Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 56.

⁵⁵⁴ Yasin, *Political History of the Afar*, 57.

narratives contend that, once entrenched, the EPLF repeated the earlier pattern of marginalization by eliminating Afar fighters and dismantling independent Afar political structures.

Following Eritrean independence in 1991, conditions for the Afar within the new state deteriorated significantly. Critics and rights groups—including the Addis Ababa-based Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO) and refugee representative bodies—have documented a range of oppressive policies that they argue have systematically excluded Afars from meaningful political participation, restricted traditional economic livelihoods such as fishing and pastoralism, and contributed to forced displacement from parts of the Red Sea coastline. According to RSADO and allied statements, these measures have involved mass displacement, targeted persecution, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the confiscation of ancestral lands along the Dankalia coast, resulting in widespread marginalization of the indigenous Afar population. RSADO's communications to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights describe these actions as violations of fundamental rights protected under the African Charter, and they allege that Eritrean government practices have exhibited patterns that some international observers characterize as ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity. These allegations are reflected in public declarations by Afar refugee committees and submissions to regional human rights bodies seeking accountability and protection for affected communities.⁵⁵⁵

Historically, the Afar were central actors in Red Sea trade, maritime transport, and regional commerce. Their displacement from coastal zones not only severed economic lifelines but also symbolically erased Afar historical presence from strategic maritime spaces. While the Eritrean government has consistently denied allegations of genocide, Afar communities in exile maintain that post-1991 state practices amount to the destruction of Afar social, economic, and political existence in Eritrea.

Therefore, the Afar experience in Eritrea reflects severe political marginalization, forced displacement, and the long-term consequences of unresolved questions of identity, territory, and autonomy in the Horn of Africa.

⁵⁵⁵ Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), "Statement on Persecution and Marginalization of the Red Sea Afar People under Eritrean Rule," press release, Addis Ababa, July 22, 2025.

Similarly, in Djibouti, the historical favoritism extended to the Somali Issa during French colonial rule persisted after independence, concentrating political power in Issa-dominated institutions while relegating Afar leadership to peripheral roles. This exclusion provoked political unrest and periods of armed resistance in the 1990s, reflecting the enduring consequences of colonial boundary-making and institutional favoritism.⁵⁵⁶ Across the region, Afar communities, despite their historical presence and strategic control over critical trade corridors, became politically peripheral, illustrating the continuity of colonial marginalization in postcolonial state frameworks.

The continued marginalization of the Afar had profound implications for their social, economic, and cultural systems. Traditional governance mechanisms, including sultanates, mada'a councils, and customary dispute-resolution practices, were systematically weakened, limiting the capacity of Afar communities to exercise authority over their territories or resolve conflicts autonomously. Control over strategic Red Sea ports, trade networks, and inland resources—once central to the political economy of the Afar—was appropriated by national states or external investors, further reducing Afar influence. Socially, the political exclusion of the Afar reinforced their peripheralization, restricting access to formal political institutions, development planning, and legislative representation. The transboundary division of Afar populations across Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti compounded these challenges, fragmenting kinship networks, constraining mobility, and complicating coordination between pastoral and coastal communities.

According to Harbeson, Afar incorporation into the Ethiopian empire during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in a decline in their standard of living relative to other groups similarly subjected to imperial rule, leaving them worse off than they had been prior to the establishment of the modern Ethiopian state.⁵⁵⁷ This decline was closely linked to state-led interventions in the Awash Valley, particularly the expansion of irrigated commercial agriculture initiated under the imperial state and later intensified under the Derg and the EPRDF (TPLF) regimes.

⁵⁵⁶ Thompson and Adloff, *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa*, 6; Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 110–12.

⁵⁵⁷ John W. Harbeson, “*Pastoralists, Tradition, and Modernization: The Afar of Ethiopia*,” paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association (20th Meeting) and the Latin American Studies Association (7th Meeting), Houston, TX, November 2–5, 1977 (Kenosha: University of Wisconsin–Parkside, 1977), 1.

As Abdella Adou observes, conflict emerged between the Afar pastoralists—who claimed customary and hereditary rights to land—and the state, which proclaimed large areas of the Awash Valley as state property for irrigated agricultural development.⁵⁵⁸ The lower and middle Awash Valley had long been traditionally inhabited by Afar communities, whose livelihoods depended on access to land, water, and pasture. The denial of traditional land rights therefore also entailed the denial of access to essential resources, leading to the disruption of Afar socio-cultural continuity and pastoral-economic systems.

The establishment of large-scale plantations, largely coordinated through the Awash Valley Authority, fundamentally transformed land-use patterns in the region. Under the Derg regime, land nationalization policies and state farms expanded rapidly, further dispossessing Afar pastoralists of their most fertile dry-season grazing areas. This pattern continued under the EPRDF (TPLF) regime, which promoted commercial agriculture and investment-oriented development while maintaining state ownership of land. Pastoral land was converted into irrigated farms producing commercial crops, from which Afar communities derived little benefit. Much of the land appropriated for early development projects was located near riverbanks—areas that were both ecologically strategic and vital for pastoral survival during periods of drought.⁵⁵⁹

As a consequence, Afar pastoralists suffered extensive losses of grazing land and were gradually forced to abandon their ancestral territories in the middle and lower Awash Valley—lands that had been used for seasonal grazing for centuries.⁵⁶⁰ Historically, the Awash Valley functioned as the principal corridor for caravan trade between the Red Sea coast and the Ethiopian highlands. Awsa formed an important station along this route, and Awsa sultans depended heavily on revenues from trade, as did the Shoan rulers.

For the Afar, the Awash Valley was not only an economic center but also a cultural and symbolic refuge. As the only reliable oasis in an otherwise arid region, it has always been regarded as the ultimate fallback during periods of severe drought and crisis. As the only area capable of sustaining food production, the valley occupied a central place in Afar mythology and collective memory.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁸ Adou, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 58–65.

⁵⁵⁹ G. Flood, “Nomadism and Its Future: The Afar,” 64–65.

⁵⁶⁰ A. Adou Abdalla, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 70.

⁵⁶¹ Maknun, *The Political Economy of the Afar Region of Ethiopia*, 16.

In the Awsa delta, a peasantry employing an elaborate irrigation system existed long before the Muslim Imamate of Awsa came under the control of the Moodayto Afar in the mid-seventeenth century.

However, under both the Derg and the EPRDF (TPLF) regimes, state-led development policies continued to marginalize Afar customary land tenure institutions. Through land nationalization, development schemes, investment policies, and environmental regulations, these regimes consolidated state control over land, thereby weakening Afar traditional ownership, governance mechanisms, and resource-management systems.

Economically, the restriction of pastoral and agro-pastoral activities through state land appropriation and plantation development undermined Afar livelihoods and increased dependence on state support and market systems largely controlled by non-Afar actors. The interventions of the Awash Valley Authority under successive regimes thus played a decisive role in transforming the Awash Valley from a pastoral heartland into a state-controlled agricultural zone, with enduring consequences for Afar land rights, economic autonomy, and cultural survival.

Despite these structural constraints, the Afar demonstrated remarkable resilience. They maintained social cohesion through kinship networks, inter-clan alliances, and Islamic institutions, preserving cultural continuity even in the absence of formal political recognition. Religious institutions, in particular, provided mechanisms for social organization, dispute mediation, and the transmission of customary knowledge, reinforcing Afar identity across fragmented territories.⁵⁶² Moreover, Afar mobility, a historical adaptation to the arid and semi-arid ecology of their homeland, allowed communities to sustain transhumant pastoralism, access grazing resources, and engage in trade across colonial and postcolonial borders. Through these mechanisms, the Afar navigated the complex political landscapes of postcolonial states, asserting agency in everyday economic, social, and cultural life, even as formal political inclusion remained limited.

The structural continuity of marginalization from the colonial to the postcolonial era highlights how state formation in the Horn of Africa was intimately linked to the legacies of imperialism. European powers had deliberately weakened Afar political cohesion, privileging highland and coastal elites, and creating administrative boundaries that undermined historical patterns of

⁵⁶² Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 27.

mobility and governance. Postcolonial states inherited these divisions and, rather than dismantling them, often reinforced them through centralized authority, resource appropriation, and selective recognition of local leadership. Consequently, the Afar transitioned from being influential political actors—controlling trade, mobilizing armies, and administering multi-ethnic Islamic sultanates—to becoming marginalized communities within modern nation-states, their historical sovereignty rendered peripheral in the structures of contemporary governance.

The inability of the Afar-dominant Muslim political tradition, rooted in the Ifat–Adal continuum and later centered in Awsa, to re-emerge as a dominant force after the mid-nineteenth century was not the result of civilizational decline or political indifference, but rather the consequence of prolonged and systematic external intervention. From the sixteenth century onward, Ottoman, Egyptian, and later European colonial involvement fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Horn of Africa by dismantling the economic and geopolitical foundations of Muslim lowland states while simultaneously enabling the revival and consolidation of the Christian highland kingdom.

The political strength of the Muslim sultanates of Ifat and Adal had historically rested on their control of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports, including Zeila, Berbera, Tajura, Rahaita, Massawa, and Assab. These ports functioned as commercial arteries, fiscal bases, and diplomatic gateways linking the Afar–Adal world to the wider Islamic and Indian Ocean economies. This maritime orientation distinguished the Muslim lowland states from the land-based Christian kingdom and allowed Adal, particularly in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, to mobilize resources, import arms, and sustain long campaigns against the highland empire. The erosion of this advantage began decisively after 1557, when the Ottoman Empire occupied Massawa and gradually extended its authority along the Red Sea coast. Although Ottoman rule was formally Muslim, it did not empower local Afar or Adal elites. Instead, it imposed external control over customs revenues, restricted autonomous trade, and severed the inland Muslim sultanates from direct access to maritime resources.

This process of economic strangulation deepened when authority over the coast passed from the Ottomans to Egypt in the nineteenth century. Egyptian rule, like Ottoman rule before it, prioritized imperial extraction rather than local political development. Contemporary observers noted that Afar communities increasingly abandoned coastal towns, resisted taxation, and withdrew into the

interior, effectively surrendering the ports that had once underpinned Muslim political power. By the time European colonial expansion reached the region in the late nineteenth century, the Muslim lowland states had already been deprived of meaningful access to the sea. European occupation of Zeila and Berbera by Britain, Tajura and Djibouti by France, and Assab and Massawa by Italy completed the loss of maritime sovereignty. The Afar-dominant Awsa Sultanate and related Muslim polities were thus confined to the interior, cut off from customs revenues, arms imports, and international diplomacy.

While Muslim polities were being economically and territorially marginalized, the Christian highland kingdom benefited from an increasingly favorable external environment. From the early nineteenth century onward, European powers came to regard the Ethiopian monarchy as a strategically useful Christian ally in a region contested by Islam and rival colonial ambitions. This perception translated into diplomatic recognition, access to firearms, military advisers, and political legitimacy. Beginning with the rise of Tewodros II in 1855 and continuing under Yohannes IV and Menelik II, the Christian state was able to overcome internal fragmentation, defeat regional rivals, and expand territorially. European powers tolerated, and in some cases actively supported, the imperial incorporation of Muslim regions, while simultaneously preventing Muslim sultanates from securing comparable external backing.

Colonial policy thus operated through a dual mechanism. On the one hand, it strengthened a centralized Christian empire capable of imposing order and serving as a buffer against rival powers. On the other, it fragmented the historical political space of the Adal Sultanate through artificial borders, protectorates, and colonial annexations. Territories that had once formed a continuous Muslim zone from Zeila through Awsa and the Danakil coast were divided among British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Italian Eritrea, and Italian Somalia. This partition eliminated the possibility of coordinated political revival among Muslim polities and transformed them into isolated local authorities operating under severe structural constraints.

In this context, the survival of the Awsa Sultanate should not be interpreted as political stagnation or withdrawal from broader concerns, but as a rational adaptation to an adverse imperial and colonial order. Deprived of maritime access, surrounded by expanding colonial and imperial powers, and denied external support, the Afar-dominant Muslim sultanate abandoned expansionist ambitions and focused on internal stability and autonomy. Its endurance into the modern period

was achieved not through conquest but through strategic restraint, local legitimacy, and avoidance of direct confrontation with colonial authorities.

The resurgence of the Christian highland kingdom after 1855 was therefore not simply an internal revival following the Zemene Mesafint, but a transformation made possible by global power realignments. Colonial control of the coast, the partition of Muslim territories, and the selective empowerment of the Christian monarchy decisively reshaped the political landscape of the Horn of Africa. The decline of the Afar-Adal political tradition as a regional hegemon was not the result of inherent weakness, but of the systematic removal of the economic, military, and diplomatic foundations upon which its earlier power had rested.

Yet, this marginalization did not erase Afar agency. The preservation of sultanate traditions, clan networks, religious authority, and economic mobility underscores the capacity of indigenous governance systems to endure and adapt even under adverse conditions. The Afar's continued cultural cohesion and resilience demonstrate that political marginalization does not equate to social or cultural erasure. Their experience illustrates the enduring influence of colonial and postcolonial policies on the political trajectories of historically autonomous peoples, while simultaneously highlighting the adaptive strategies through which such communities navigate exclusion, preserve identity, and maintain influence in social and economic spheres beyond formal political structures.

The Afar case further exemplifies the broader dynamics of postcolonial state formation in Africa, where colonial legacies of boundary-making, elite favoritism, and administrative centralization were reproduced in new national frameworks, often perpetuating historical inequalities. In the Horn of Africa, the Afar's strategic control of coastal and inland corridors, their historical engagement with Islamic governance, and their resilience in pastoral and agro-pastoral economies underscore the contrast between precolonial political significance and postcolonial marginalization. Their experience highlights the interplay between geography, history, religion, and colonial policy in shaping the political fortunes of indigenous communities, demonstrating that the legacies of colonial intervention extend far beyond formal occupation and persist through successive state formations, boundary demarcations, and development policies.

The withdrawal of European colonial powers from the Horn of Africa did not mark an end to externally induced conflict in the Afar lowlands. Rather, the structures, boundaries, and political rationalities introduced during colonial rule were inherited, internalized, and actively reproduced

by postcolonial Ethiopian regimes. Nowhere is this continuity more evident than in the protracted conflict between the Afar and the Issa/Somali, a conflict whose origins lie in colonial boundary-making and whose persistence reflects the deliberate political choices of successive Ethiopian governments from the imperial era through the Derg and into the TPLF-dominated EPRDF period. Far from being an inevitable pastoral dispute over grazing land, the Afar–Issa conflict must be understood as a politically sustained process of marginalization, territorial dispossession, and strategic governance of the lowland periphery.

Under Emperor Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian state inherited colonial anxieties regarding the eastern lowlands, particularly their proximity to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and transnational Somali populations. These anxieties translated into policies that prioritized control over accommodation, manipulation over inclusion, and selective empowerment over equitable governance. The Issa incursion into Afar territories during the imperial period exemplifies this approach. While formally justified as a temporary response to drought and grazing shortages, the Issa movement into Afar lands was in practice enabled and protected by imperial authority, overriding local administrative decisions and undermining established territorial arrangements. When district governors and provincial authorities in Harergie attempted to regulate access to Afar lands, their decisions were nullified by direct intervention from Addis Ababa. Ugaz Hassan Hirsy’s successful appeal to Emperor Haile Selassie illustrates how imperial power was selectively mobilized to favor one group over another, bypassing local governance structures and eroding Afar autonomy.⁵⁶³

This imperial favoritism had profound political consequences. By granting the Issa not only access to Afar grazing lands but also administrative authority—appointing Ugaz Hassan Hirsy as deputy governor and special adviser—the imperial state institutionalized inequality. The Afar, despite being indigenous to the territory, were excluded from meaningful participation in administration and decision-making. Their grievances, voiced through provincial channels and parliamentary representation, were systematically ignored. The result was not merely localized tension but the normalization of Issa encroachment, violence, and defiance of state orders, including their refusal to withdraw even after environmental conditions improved. In this sense, the imperial government

⁵⁶³ Wolde Michael, Regent of Adal-Issa and Gara Guracha District, “Confidential Notice Letter to Ras Imiru Haile Selassie,” Addis Ababa, November 3, 1964 E.C., unpublished administrative document.

did not merely fail to resolve conflict; it actively produced and sustained it by privileging strategic alliances over justice and legality.⁵⁶⁴

This pattern reflects a deeper continuity with colonial governance. Just as European powers manipulated ethnic divisions to secure strategic corridors and commercial routes, the imperial Ethiopian state treated the Afar lowlands as a zone to be managed rather than a society to be integrated. The eastern periphery was deliberately kept unstable, allowing the central state to intervene repeatedly under the guise of pacification while avoiding long-term political settlement. As Haji Beshir Dawud argues, this dynamic was further shaped by Islamophobia and geopolitical calculation. The Afar, as Muslim pastoralists occupying a strategically sensitive corridor linking the Red Sea, Aden, and the Persian Gulf, were viewed with suspicion.⁵⁶⁵ A peaceful, politically organized, and economically empowered Muslim lowland population was perceived as a potential threat to central authority, particularly given its capacity for cross-border religious and cultural communication. Supporting the Issa—who enjoyed backing from Somalia and Djibouti—served both to fragment lowland unity and to secure leverage over regional geopolitics.

The overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 did not alter these fundamentals. Although the Derg came to power promising land reform and the rights of nations and nationalities, it quickly reproduced authoritarian and centralizing practices. In the Afar region, Issa expansion not only continued but intensified, facilitated by new alliances between Issa clans and Derg military commanders responsible for securing key infrastructure, particularly the Ethio-Djibouti railway and asphalt road. These relationships gave rise to new settlements such as Adaytu, Undafo, and Gedamaytu, which became centers of contraband trade, militarization, and violence against Afar civilians. Afar individuals attempting to move, trade, or conduct daily activities in these areas were routinely attacked or killed, while government soldiers consistently sided with Issa forces.

Rather than addressing the root causes of violence, the Derg framed the situation as generalized lawlessness, portraying Afar resistance as rebellion and justifying militarization of the region. Misinformation depicted Afar communities as aggressors, restricting their freedom of movement and access to grazing lands. The resulting insecurity contributed to the emergence and

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ Haj Beshir, “*Around the Process of My Life*”, 37–38.

intensification of Afar Liberation Front activities, which the state then used to further militarize the region. Even when senior Derg officials personally observed the extent of Issa militarization and contraband networks, state responses remained temporary and tactical—destroying settlements, redrawing grazing limits, and deploying new commands—without establishing durable political solutions. Over its seventeen years in power, the Derg repeatedly acknowledged Issa abuses yet failed to halt them, effectively transferring an unresolved, state-produced conflict to its successor.⁵⁶⁶

The rise of the EPRDF and the introduction of ethnic federalism initially raised hopes among the Afar for genuine self-governance. However, the dominance of the TPLF within the federal system quickly hollowed out these promises. Regional autonomy existed largely on paper, while central intervention persisted in practice. In the Afar case, this manifested most clearly in the continued reallocation of Afar territories to the Issa Somali under federal protection. TPLF-led administrations facilitated Issa settlement along the strategic Ethio-Djibouti corridor, Yangudi National Park, and the Awash River basin, areas of immense economic, ecological, and geopolitical importance.

Over the twenty-seven years of TPLF dominance, Issa expansion followed a clear spatial logic, moving systematically along highways, rivers, and trade routes—from Gedamaytu and Awash Sebat to Adaytu, Mille, Afambo, and Dubti—often under the protection or indifference of federal security forces. Afar pastoralists were forcibly displaced from roadside areas through buffer zones enforced by national security forces, effectively criminalizing Afar presence on their ancestral lands. Any Afar herdsman found within these zones faced detention or death. Peace conferences and inter-regional meetings were convened not to restore Afar rights but to legitimize Issa settlement in territories from which Afar had already been violently expelled.

Decisions such as the allocation of special Issa kebeles within Afar territory directly violated existing laws and constitutional provisions that recognized pre-1974 boundaries. These actions were taken despite Afar objections and in contradiction to transitional legal frameworks. Memoranda of understanding, such as the 2007 agreement between Afar and Somali regional

⁵⁶⁶ Zemedkun Lema, Principal Secretary of the Eastern Awash Sub-District, “Official Letter to the Chercher, Adal, Gara Guracha, and Issa ESEPA Committee and the Adal, Gara Guracha, and Issa ESEPA Administrative Office,” no. 001/፪13/፪3/፳1/ሐ/12–79, March 7, 1979 E.C., unpublished administrative document.

governments, were imposed under duress and repeatedly violated by Issa forces with impunity. When Issa attacks escalated to direct assaults on Afar regional special forces, federal authorities again failed to act decisively, revealing the fundamentally political nature of their inaction.

During the 27-year period of EPRDF governance, particularly under the security and military structures dominated by the TPLF, the Afar Regional State experienced significant challenges related to territorial administration, interregional boundary management, and the enforcement of federal authority. These challenges were exacerbated by informal economic networks, including contraband trade routes linking Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, and Kenya, which intersected with local and regional power structures.

Within this context, Issa Somali pastoral groups expanded their presence into several areas historically administered as part of the Afar region. While such movements have historical precedents, the scale and strategic depth of territorial penetration during the EPRDF period were notable. Weak regulatory oversight, selective law enforcement, and limited civilian protection mechanisms contributed to conditions in which disputes over land use and settlement increasingly resulted in the displacement of Afar communities.

One of the earliest areas affected was the Yangudi Rasa National Park and its surrounding corridor along the Ethio–Djibouti highway. Control over this corridor enabled further expansion into the middle and lower Awash River Valley, an area of considerable economic and ecological importance. From this zone, settlement and security pressures extended toward Undafo and Hari Rasu (Zone 5), bordering the Amhara Regional State.

Subsequent movements reached Dawe, Dalefage, Telalak, and Hadale-ela woredas. These locations are geographically significant due to their proximity to major urban centers and transport routes. Telalak Woreda lies approximately 50 km from Bati town in South Wollo, while Dawe Woreda is located about 60 km from Kemise. Hadale-ela Woreda is situated between Senbete and Shewarobit in North Shewa and lies roughly 14 km from the Addis Ababa–Dessie asphalt highway. By this stage, territorial control had extended to areas immediately adjacent to nationally important infrastructure.

The sequence of expansion suggests a gradual consolidation of presence along major transport corridors. Initial settlement along the Ethio–Djibouti railway was followed by consolidation along

the Ethio–Djibouti asphalt road, and later by proximity to the Dessie–Addis Ababa highway. Collectively, these developments had implications not only for regional administration but also for national connectivity and security planning.

Further expansion occurred from the Gedamaytu axis toward Awash Sebat Woreda. Gedamaytu is located approximately 30 km from Awash Sebat, which itself lies about 220 km from Addis Ababa. This axis connected long-distance migration routes originating in Somali-inhabited areas with the central Awash basin, thereby increasing the strategic importance of Gedamaytu in regional security considerations.

From the Adaytu direction, settlement pressures extended toward Awsi Rasu, the administrative and political center of the Afar Regional State. Movements reached Mile and Adaar woredas, affecting areas near internationally recognized archaeological heritage sites, including the locality associated with the discovery of *Australopithecus afarensis*. Adaar Woreda is located about 40 km from Bati, while Mile Woreda lies roughly 70 km from Semera, the regional capital.

Additional pressures were reported in Afambo Woreda through Obno village, which lies approximately 30 km from Aysaita, the former regional capital and historic seat of the Afar sultanate. Settlement and security challenges also extended through Gerani Woreda toward Datbahri Kebele and the Alalobad hot springs in Dubti Woreda, an area situated about 7 km from Semera. These developments collectively placed increased strain on the administrative and security capacities of the regional government.

Historically, Issa settlement and mobility across Afar territories can be traced back to earlier periods, extending from the coastal areas of Zeila toward Gerani Woreda and Obno Kebele, covering an estimated distance of 185 km. During the EPRDF period, however, these movements were shaped by new political and economic dynamics, including cross-border trade networks and evolving federal–regional relations.

Federal interventions in disputed kebeles—such as Adaytu, Undafoo, and Gedamaytu—often involved proposals for referenda or administrative reclassification. However, population displacement and security instability raised concerns regarding the feasibility and fairness of such mechanisms. In response, Afar regional authorities sought alternative administrative arrangements, including the designation of special kebeles within Afar jurisdiction. At the same

time, parallel decisions—such as the recognition of special kebeles for Issa settlers in strategically sensitive locations near Dubti and Semera—reflected inconsistencies in policy implementation.

Overall, the EPRDF period was characterized by a complex interaction of historical mobility, economic networks, security governance, and federal administrative practices. These dynamics contributed to the progressive encirclement of the Afar Regional State, increased proximity of contested settlements to the regional capital, and the intensification of Afar–Issa tensions. Understanding this period requires situating local conflicts within broader frameworks of state capacity, regional integration, and federal governance in Ethiopia.

Across imperial, socialist, and federal regimes, a clear pattern emerges. The Ethiopian state consistently treated Afar territory as a strategic space rather than a political homeland, prioritized alliances that secured trade routes and geopolitical leverage, and used inter-communal conflict as a tool of governance. In this sense, the Afar–Issa conflict after colonial withdrawal represents not a rupture from colonialism but its continuation through indigenous state power. Colonial borders were preserved, colonial hierarchies were internalized, and colonial methods of indirect rule were redeployed by postcolonial regimes. Scholars argue that, for the Afar people, decolonization was experienced less as political liberation than as a process in which colonial authority was effectively transferred to successive Ethiopian governments. Under this postcolonial administration, Afar communities faced persistent political marginalization, territorial dispossession, and insecurity, which became enduring features of their engagement with the state.

Therefore, the withdrawal of Italy and France did not restore the political sovereignty of the Afar people. The postcolonial states of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti inherited the structures of exclusion created under colonial rule and, in many cases, reinforced them through centralized governance, elite favoritism, and the appropriation of strategic resources. The Afar, once central actors in regional politics, were relegated to peripheral roles, their historical sultanates and clan networks marginalized in national decision-making. Nevertheless, the Afar maintained social cohesion, cultural continuity, and economic adaptability through transboundary networks, religious institutions, and pastoral mobility, demonstrating resilience in the face of enduring structural marginalization. Their experience provides critical insights into the persistence of colonial legacies, the challenges of postcolonial state-building, and the strategies through which

historically autonomous communities navigate political exclusion while sustaining their identity and agency.

In the Economic sector, the withdrawal of Italian and French colonial powers, did not alleviate the marginalization of the Afar people of the Horn of Africa, a condition that persisted across the three segments of their historical homeland—northern Eritrea, Djibouti, and the eastern regions of Ethiopia—collectively referred to as the “Afar Triangle.” The structures established by colonial administration entrenched patterns of exclusion that would be reproduced by postcolonial regimes, reinforcing both spatial and economic peripheralization. In Eritrea, the Italian administration had initially introduced formal trade networks through the port of Massawa, privileging Italian and imported traders while systematically ignoring or subordinating indigenous Afar commercial actors. After Eritrean independence in 1993, Afar communities remained largely excluded from coastal economic activities, including fishing, trade, and port administration, as state policies prioritized centralized control under the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front and later the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), with a deliberate marginalization of non-elite, non-Tigrinya communities. Afar fishermen in the Buri Peninsula and along the Southern Red Sea coast faced increasing restriction on access to maritime resources, and their traditional rights to fisheries and salt plains were curtailed, effectively rendering them economically dependent on external actors while their customary wealth systems remained unrecognized by the state.⁵⁶⁷

In Djibouti, French colonial legacies similarly constrained Afar access to economic resources. The French administration had historically favored Somali Issa groups in political and economic appointments, establishing a pattern of elite dominance that was preserved in the postcolonial state. Afar populations, although numerically significant, were systematically excluded from key economic sectors, including trade, banking, and maritime commerce, which were monopolized by Issa-Somali actors. This exclusion persisted well into the twenty-first century, leaving Afar communities with minimal legal rights to engage in commercial activity or benefit from the region’s economic growth. Traditional practices such as salt extraction, caravan trading, and

⁵⁶⁷ Hassen, *Pastoral Adaptation*, 32.

pastoralist exchange networks were curtailed by formal regulations and the monopolization of markets by the dominant Somali elites.⁵⁶⁸

In Ethiopia, the postcolonial economic marginalization of the Afar was both historical and structural. The 19th-century salt trade, controlled by Afar clans across the Afar Depression, was a vital economic resource, serving both as currency and as a commodity for barter with highland traders. However, the consolidation of imperial power under Emperors Yohannes IV and Menelik II introduced new policies that undermined Afar economic sovereignty. Emperor Yohannes' directive to allow Christian traders access to the salt flats disrupted the centuries-old Afar monopoly, leading to localized conflicts between Afar caravaneers and highland traders and signaling the beginning of systematic intrusion into Afar-controlled economic networks.⁵⁶⁹ Although compromises were reached at the turn of the 20th century, with Afar traders retaining preferential access during specific periods, the precedent of external interference had been set, and the subsequent consolidation of the Ethiopian state increasingly marginalized Afar participation in broader economic governance.

During the Haile Selassie era, the Ethiopian state pursued a project of nation-building rooted in centralized, highland-based political and economic structures, promoting Amharic language and Orthodox Christian cultural norms as the basis of national identity. This vision of "Ethiopianness" excluded peripheral groups, particularly Muslim pastoralists in the lowlands, from meaningful participation in economic decision-making and the administration of local resources.⁵⁷⁰ Successive governments ignored customary land and resource management practices, which had historically been organized on a clan basis and prioritized collective over individual ownership. Pastoral lands, camels, and other forms of clan wealth (gadda) were treated as commodities to be integrated into state-centered development schemes, often without consultation or consent from Afar communities.⁵⁷¹

In the 1950s, Sultan Alimirah of the Awsa Sultanate initiated a significant agricultural development project to modernize the Afar region. Leveraging his personal connections, notably

⁵⁶⁸ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 79; Hassen, *Pastoral Adaptation*, 32.

⁵⁶⁹ Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, 241; Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 150.

⁵⁷⁰ Donham, "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire," 3–50.

⁵⁷¹ Mulatu and Bekure, "The Need to Strengthen Land Laws in Ethiopia," 186–94.

a friendship with King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, the Sultan secured funding through the Saudi embassy in Addis Ababa, which he used as seed capital to establish farms. Despite this initiative, the Ethiopian central government, disinterested in the advancement of Afar territories, actively obstructed his efforts.⁵⁷²

Officials in Addis Ababa invited Sultan Alimirah to Dessie under the pretext of consulting on a new development plan, while simultaneously appointing Sahle as governor of Awsa. Sahle attempted to assert authority over the Sultanate, declaring Sultan Alimirah deposed and claiming governance for himself. The Afar population resisted this imposition, leading to widespread unrest and a major battle between the Sultan's forces and Sahle's troops. Ultimately, the central government ordered Sahle to withdraw, reaffirming Sultan Alimirah's authority.⁵⁷³

Upon returning, Sultan Alimirah resumed his development efforts, bringing in agricultural expertise from Sudan to expand cotton cultivation. This initiative generated substantial foreign exchange and demonstrated the potential of organized agricultural projects in Afar lands. However, tensions with the imperial family escalated when the Crown Prince sought to claim a fertile tract of land, Berga, for personal investment. Sultan Alimirah's refusal to cede Afar tribal lands resulted in the central government intervening, appointing a new governor and two Afar advisors to enforce the Crown Prince's claims. The Berga land was forcibly seized, intensifying conflicts between the Sultan and imperial authorities.⁵⁷⁴

Despite these challenges, Sultan Alimirah persisted, establishing the Agricultural Bureau in 1960 under the leadership of his son, Hanfare Alimirah. The Bureau coordinated credit and loan services through Addis Ababa Bank and the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, enabling local Afar farmers to mechanize farming and expand productivity. With further support from international partners, including Arbuthnot Export Service Limited in London, the Sultan's initiatives rapidly transformed the agricultural landscape. By the mid-1960s, Afar farmers owned tractors, bulldozers, and even aircraft to support their operations.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷² Kaddafo Mohammed, *The Background History of the Sultanate of Awsa* (Nigeria, 1993), 65.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁴ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 425.

⁵⁷⁵ Aramis, *Life Story of Sultan Alimirah*, 91.

Imperial attempts to assert control continued. Members of the royal family, including Queen Tenagne and other heirs, attempted to claim Afar lands, while the establishment of the Awash Valley Authority threatened to seize Sultan Alimirah's agricultural holdings. The Sultan consistently defended Afar land rights, emphasizing that development should benefit the local population rather than external interests. His interventions ensured that Afar farmers could access loans and manage their lands effectively, resisting imperial encroachment.⁵⁷⁶

The conflict intensified with the rise of the Derg regime in 1974. Following the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Derg sought to assert control over the Afar region. Sultan Alimirah was pressured by government officials and emissaries to submit to Derg authority, but he resisted, emphasizing Afar autonomy and the protection of local resources. Recognizing the impossibility of cooperating with the Derg, and facing the threat of military intervention, the Sultan eventually fled to Saudi Arabia. In his absence, the Derg confiscated the Awsa Sultanate's assets—including 500 tractors, over 200 bulldozers, three aircraft, and all agricultural lands—establishing direct military administration over the region.

Throughout the period, the core conflict centered on the Sultanate's efforts to develop Afar agriculture versus the imperial and later Derg regimes' attempts to control and appropriate land and resources. Sultan Alimirah's vision of autonomous, locally-led development clashed with centralizing forces seeking to monopolize agricultural productivity, highlighting the tension between regional modernization initiatives and centralized state authority in mid-20th-century Ethiopia.

Under the Derg regime and subsequent Ethiopian administrations, policies ostensibly aimed at modernization and economic growth further entrenched marginalization. Pastoral development strategies were designed by highland planners unfamiliar with the logistical and cultural dynamics of pastoral livelihoods, imposing agrarian assumptions on semi-nomadic societies.⁵⁷⁷ State-led initiatives, such as the appropriation of fertile riverine lands in Awsa and Gabbi Rasu for sugar plantations, the imposition of taxes on mobile pastoralists, and the centralization of administrative

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁷⁷ Berihun Adugna Gebeye, "Unsustainable the Sustainable: An Evaluation of the Legal and Policy Interventions for Pastoral Development in Ethiopia," *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 6, no. 2 (2016).

functions, systematically reduced Afar control over their own economic resources. The Afar were largely excluded from the management of water resources, grazing lands, and market regulation, effectively making them passive recipients of policy rather than active participants in economic life.

From 1974 to 2018, Afar economic participation in Ethiopia remained constrained by a combination of centralized state policies and elite capture by Amhara and Tigray actors. Access to government positions, economic decision-making forums, and development projects was controlled by highland elites, often without representation from Afar constituencies. In Eritrea and Djibouti, as previously noted, Afar communities faced legal and administrative restrictions on traditional livelihoods, commercial activities, and access to coastal resources. Across the entire Afar Triangle, these structural exclusions perpetuated economic dependence, reinforced social inequalities, and limited opportunities for intergenerational wealth accumulation.

The consequences of this prolonged marginalization are manifold. Afar pastoralists and traders, who historically wielded significant control over transnational trade routes, salt flats, and ecological niches, found their autonomy curtailed and their economic strategies disrupted. The imposition of state-centered economic planning, elite favoritism, and legal restrictions transformed customary systems of wealth, reciprocity, and exchange into marginalized subsistence practices. Yet, despite these pressures, Afar communities have maintained adaptive strategies, including transboundary pastoral mobility, kinship-based resource sharing, and selective engagement with markets, demonstrating resilience in the face of persistent structural exclusion.⁵⁷⁸

In sum, the continued economic marginalization of the Afar people after the withdrawal of colonial powers is deeply rooted in historical processes that combine imperial centralization, colonial boundary-making, elite favoritism, and the imposition of development paradigms unsuited to pastoralist livelihoods. Across Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, Afar communities have experienced the systematic denial of access to key economic resources and decision-making structures, perpetuating cycles of dependency, social inequality, and political exclusion that persist into the present day.

⁵⁷⁸ Trojer, *Landscapes, Salt and Ethics*, 221.

5.3 Postcolonial Ethiopian Access to the Red Sea and the Marginalization of the Afar from Decision-Making over Their Coastal Territories

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Red Sea has long functioned not merely as a maritime corridor but as a dynamic civilizational space in which the Afar people played a significant historical role. Prior to the expansion of imperial and colonial powers, Afar communities influenced sections of the Red Sea littoral, participating in maritime trade, shipbuilding, and local security practices from the Dahlak Islands through Massawa, Baylul, Assab, Tajura, and Zeila. Their social and political structures—including clan-based governance, customary law, and maritime knowledge—helped regulate coastal activities and trade networks, even if their authority was neither uniform nor uncontested.

Classical, biblical, and early modern sources describe the Red Sea as a major commercial artery linking the African interior to Arabia, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean world. Within this system, Afar maritime culture played a key role: they were skilled shipbuilders and navigators, and Afar merchants supplied commodities such as gold, frankincense, myrrh, and exotic animals, which underpinned regional and long-distance trade.⁵⁷⁹ The port of Adulis was a key node in Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks, facilitating the movement of goods between the African interior, Arabia, and the wider Mediterranean world. Historical and archaeological sources suggest that local communities, including those the Afar-affiliated Adola tribe, participated in managing trade and regulating commercial activities at the port.⁵⁸⁰ While it is difficult to determine the precise extent of Afar authority, these communities likely contributed knowledge of maritime navigation, local markets, and coastal logistics, thereby shaping the operation of Adulis as a regional trading hub. The port's strategic importance is further reflected in its role during broader geopolitical shifts: for instance, the arrival of Umayyad and Abbasid forces in the eighth century, which affected Axumite maritime connections, indicates that control over Adulis was a contested and dynamic process, involving both local and external actors.

Massawa followed a similar trajectory. Serving as a maritime outlet for Axumite rulers in the early medieval period, it later fell under Umayyad, Portuguese, Ottoman, Egyptian, and Italian control.

⁵⁷⁹ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, 441; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 16.

⁵⁸⁰ Hashim, *Almanhal*, 115; Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia*, 18.

Yet even under these successive regimes, Afar resistance to external domination remained persistent. European observers such as Henry Salt(1810) and Werner Munzinger(1869) noted that Afar communities around Massawa were not effectively governed by Turkish or Egyptian authorities and openly disregarded imperial agents.⁵⁸¹ Munzinger’s observation that the land “does not repay the trouble of occupying it” captures not geographical fatalism but the political reality of Afar autonomy, rooted in mobility, harsh ecology, and decentralized power.⁵⁸²

When Ottoman and Egyptian domination made Massawa inaccessible to Ethiopian rulers, the Ethiopian state did not abandon maritime ambitions; instead, it turned to Baylul, a port entirely under Afar control. From the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, Baylul served as Ethiopia’s principal maritime gateway. European and Yemeni sources confirm that Ethiopian emperors negotiated directly with Afar rulers to secure passage, trade, and diplomatic access.⁵⁸³ Emperor Fasilides’ efforts to strengthen the Baylul route to evade Ottoman control illustrate that Ethiopian access to the Red Sea historically depended not on conquest of the Afar coast but on cooperation with Afar authorities. This pattern of negotiated access underscores the political parity that once characterized Afar–Ethiopian relations.⁵⁸⁴

Colonial intrusion fundamentally altered this equilibrium. European powers did not conquer the Afar coast through outright military domination but through treaties, leases, and missionary diplomacy that exploited asymmetries in language, legal concepts, and cartographic knowledge. Italian acquisition of Assab began in 1869 as a purportedly limited lease for a docking station, negotiated with Sultan Ibrahim. Through successive manipulations and reinterpretations, this lease expanded into full territorial occupation by 1882, reinforced by additional treaties with Awsa and Rahaita sultans. Richard Pankhurst’s account of Giuseppe Sapeto reveals how missionary familiarity with local customs and political dynamics was weaponized to facilitate colonial

⁵⁸¹ Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 116; Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country,” 26.

⁵⁸² Munzinger, “A Journey through the Afar Country,” 26.

⁵⁸³ Ḥasan al-Ḥaymī (al-Ḥimyārī), *Riḥlat al-Ḥabasha*, cited in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, *‘Ajā’ib al-Āthār fī al-Tarājim wa-l-Akhhbār*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Būlāq, 1879), sec. on 1647 Yemeni diplomatic mission to Emperor Fasilides.

⁵⁸⁴ Pedro Páez, *História da Etiópia* (1625), ed. and trans. Ana Fernandes Boavida, Hervé Pennec, and Manuel João Ramos, vol. 1 (Lisbon: Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, 2011), 45–47.

expansion. Sapeto knew precisely whom to approach—the Afar sultans—and how to frame agreements as protection rather than dispossession.⁵⁸⁵

The language of protection masked systematic betrayal. Italy pledged to defend Afar lands from maritime enemies while gradually annexing inland territories such as Mergable. Sultan Burhan Mohammed's protest letter, in which he demanded restoration of land seized through misunderstood measurements, exposes the coercive legal fiction underpinning colonial rule.⁵⁸⁶ Similar strategies were employed by France in Obock and Britain in Zeila, where Afar authority was displaced in favor of colonial administrators and resettled populations. By the time colonial borders were formalized in the early twentieth century, Afar territories had been fragmented, ambiguously defined, and subordinated to imperial interests.

These colonial arrangements laid the foundation for postcolonial marginalization. The opening and security of the Assab–Awsa–Shewa trade corridor were primarily the result of the foresight, concern, and active efforts of the Afar Sultanate, particularly Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of Awsa and Sultan Burhan Mohammed of the Rehayta Sultanate.⁵⁸⁷ The agreements concluded between Italy, the Afar sultans, and Emperor Menelik II clearly reflect this fact.

According to these agreements, Italy's role was limited to protecting the coastal areas of Assab from external threats, while the Afar sultans were responsible for securing the caravan routes and ensuring the safety of Italian traders traveling inland toward Shewa. Article 1 of the agreement explicitly recognizes Sultan Mohammed Hanfare as the supreme ruler of the Afar, emphasizing his authority and responsibility over Afar territory from Awsa to the Sea of Assab. Articles 3, 7, and 8 further confirm that the Afar sultans were entrusted with maintaining security along the trade corridor, while other provisions addressed trade, non-interference in religion, and the protection of Assab and Shewa trade routes.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁵ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, 101–103 and “Establishment of Italian Control over Assab,” 1–18; riulzi, “Salt, Trade, and the Early Italian Presence,” 35–58; Sapeto, *Viaggi nell’Africa Orientale*, 21–39; d’Abbadie, *Géographie de l’Éthiopie*, 54–61; Pennec, *Des Jésuites au Royaume du Prêtre Jean*, 287–293.

⁵⁸⁶ Sultan Burhan Mohammed, letter, 25 Mar. 1883, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 112.

⁵⁸⁷ Mohammed Hanfare & Sultan Burhan Mohammed, letter, 16 Mar. 1883, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 109.

⁵⁸⁸ Mohammed Hanfare, treaty with Italy, 18 Apr. 1883, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 118.

Historical correspondence corroborates the central role of the Afar sultans in ensuring the viability of the Assab–Shewa route. In 1882, Emperor Menelik II wrote to the Italian official Giulio Pestalozza, claiming that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare opposed European passage through his territory and that Assab was therefore unsafe, suggesting instead the use of the Zeila port.⁵⁸⁹ However, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare personally clarified this matter in a letter to Pietro Antonelli, stating that he had never opposed the passage of Europeans and would indeed ensure a safe route for caravans traveling to Shewa. This confirmation underscores that the Assab–Awsa–Shewa corridor remained open and secure largely through the initiative and protection of the Afar sultanates, rather than through Menelik’s direct intervention.⁵⁹⁰

The Afar nobles’ vigilance and commitment to safeguarding their territory ensured that Assab remained accessible as a reliable port for Ethiopian trade, while Italy acknowledged the authority of the Afar over the region. It was through this careful coordination between the Afar sultans and Italian authorities that Ethiopia gained a secure trade link from the Red Sea to the interior, highlighting the indispensable role of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare of Awsa and Sultan Burhan Mohammed of Rehayta in the establishment of the Assab corridor.

The 1900–1908 border agreements between Italy, Britain, and Ethiopia meticulously delineated highland borders while leaving Afar territories vaguely described. This asymmetry was not accidental.

The 1908 border agreement concluded between Emperor Menelik II and Italy was negotiated and signed without the knowledge, participation, or consent of the Afar people. This exclusion fundamentally undermines the legitimacy of the treaty as it relates to Afar territories and stands in direct contradiction to the earlier 1883 agreement between Italy, Menelik II, and the Sultanate of Awsa under Sultan Muhammad Hanfare.

The 1883 Awsa agreement was not intended to demarcate territorial boundaries between the Afar and neighboring polities, nor did it transfer sovereignty over Afar lands to the Ethiopian state. Rather, it was a limited political and commercial arrangement that clearly defined functional responsibilities: Italy undertook the obligation to protect the coastal and frontier zones from

⁵⁸⁹ Menelik II, letter to Giulio Pestalozza, 1882, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 96.

⁵⁹⁰ Sultan Mohammed Hanfare, letter to Pietro Antonelli, 1882, in Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, doc. 84.

external threats, while the Sultan of Awsa assumed responsibility for ensuring the safety of Italian traders operating inland. The remaining provisions of the agreement addressed trade facilitation, non-interference in religious affairs, and mutual security guarantees. Crucially, the agreement implicitly recognized the political autonomy and territorial authority of the Afar Sultanate, particularly along the corridor extending from Shewa to Assab.

In contrast, the 1908 Italo–Ethiopian border treaty represented a unilateral attempt to redefine territorial boundaries without reference to existing political realities on the ground. At the time, large portions of the Afar region—stretching from the eastern lowlands of Shewa to the Red Sea port of Assab—were not under the effective control of Menelik II. Given this lack of administrative, military, and political authority, it is highly questionable whether Menelik possessed the legal or practical capacity to negotiate binding territorial arrangements on behalf of the Afar people.

This disconnect is clearly reflected in the cartographic outcomes of the 1908 treaty. While the borders of Tigray were carefully surveyed, precisely delineated, and mapped, Afar territories were described only in vague and ambiguous terms, notably as extending “60 kilometers inland from the coast,” without specifying a clear coastline, inland reference points, or local political jurisdictions. Such imprecision was not accidental; rather, it reflected the absence of Ethiopian state control in Afar areas and the deliberate marginalization of Afar political authority in colonial boundary-making processes.

As a result, the 1908 treaty functioned more as a diplomatic instrument between Italy and the Ethiopian highland state than as a practical or enforceable border agreement in Afar lands. Lacking Afar acknowledgment, consent, or participation, the treaty neither reflected local realities nor produced effective territorial demarcation on the ground. Consequently, it remained largely inoperative within Afar territories and failed to supersede earlier arrangements that had explicitly recognized Afar autonomy, such as the 1883 Awsa agreement.

Therefore, the 1908 Italo–Ethiopian border treaty was concluded in violation of prior agreements and without due consideration of Afar political sovereignty. Its application to Afar territories was therefore legally questionable, politically exclusionary, and practically unenforceable, reinforcing the broader pattern of colonial and imperial boundary-making that ignored indigenous authority and governance structures in the Horn of Africa.

In sum, Afar lands were left undefined precisely because they were not under effective Ethiopian control, as acknowledged even by European observers such as L. M. Nesbit and Wilfred Thesiger. Awsa was recognized as virtually independent, its sultan exercising authority beyond the reach of the Ethiopian plateau state. Maps that incorporated Awsa into Ethiopia reflected external assumptions rather than local realities.⁵⁹¹

Following the defeat of Italy in 1941, the opportunity to rectify these injustices was lost. British administrative decisions incorporated Afar coastal territories into Eritrea without Afar consent, severing historical links between Afar society and the Ethiopian interior. When Eritrea was federated and later annexed by Ethiopia, the state regained access to the Red Sea but did not restore Afar authority over ports such as Assab and Massawa. Instead, these ports were centralized under imperial administration, transforming the Afar from historical custodians into marginalized subjects.

Afar leaders responded with political engagement, petitioning the Haile Selassie government for either autonomy or equitable integration. Their proposals were grounded in historical precedent and aimed at preserving Ethiopia's unity while recognizing Afar rights. The imperial government's refusal to accommodate these demands deepened Afar alienation and catalyzed resistance movements. Afar participation in liberation struggles, supported by figures such as Sultan Ali Mirah, reflected not separatism alone but a demand for historical justice and political recognition.⁵⁹²

The Derg regime's decision in 1987 to declare Assab an autonomous Afar region marked a brief acknowledgment of Afar historical claims. By recognizing Assab as a political center for Afar society, the state implicitly conceded that Ethiopian access to the Red Sea had always depended on Afar cooperation. However, this recognition was undermined by authoritarian governance and subsequent political developments, leaving Afar marginalization structurally intact.⁵⁹³

In historical perspective, postcolonial Ethiopian access to the Red Sea was achieved not by restoring indigenous coastal governance but by consolidating colonial spatial arrangements that excluded the Afar from decision-making over their ancestral territories. The Afar were central to

⁵⁹¹ Nesbitt, *Exploration of Abyssinian Danakil*, 301–302; Thesiger, *Danakil Diary*, 65.

⁵⁹² Abdalla, *The Afar: A Nation on Trial*, 58–62.

⁵⁹³ *Ethiopia's Negarit Gazeta*, 47th year, no. 16 (Addis Ababa, 18 Sept. 1987).

the maritime history of the Red Sea, to Ethiopian state survival during periods of foreign domination, and to regional trade networks spanning Africa and Asia. Their marginalization was therefore not an accident of geography but a product of deliberate political choices that privileged centralized control over historical legitimacy.

Understanding Ethiopia's Red Sea question without centering Afar maritime culture, port histories, and political authority produces an incomplete narrative. The Afar were not merely witnesses to the making of the Red Sea world; they were its architects. Their exclusion from postcolonial governance represents one of the most enduring contradictions in the modern political history of northeast Africa.

Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated that the Afar people occupied a central and enduring position in the political and economic history of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa from antiquity through the modern era. Far from being peripheral actors, the Afar constituted a sophisticated coastal polity whose decentralized institutions—rooted in sultanates, clan-based governance, and customary law (*mad'a*)—effectively regulated trade, mobility, and security across one of the most strategically significant maritime corridors in the world. Their authority over ports, caravan routes, and littoral zones enabled them to function as indispensable intermediaries linking the African interior to the wider Indian Ocean and Mediterranean systems. In this capacity, Afar political organization embodied a form of practical sovereignty grounded not in territorial centralization but in control over access, negotiation, and exchange.

The findings further underscore that the relationship between Afar polities and inland states, particularly the Ethiopian highland kingdoms, was historically structured through negotiation rather than domination. Access to the Red Sea—vital for commerce, diplomacy, and state survival—was secured through cooperation with Afar authorities who retained the power to grant or restrict maritime engagement. This system of interdependence fostered a regional political order characterized by plural authority, where pastoral, coastal, and agrarian systems coexisted and interacted within a shared framework of mutual necessity. Such an arrangement challenges conventional state-centric models of sovereignty by illustrating the durability and effectiveness of decentralized governance in structuring long-term regional stability.

However, the advent of European colonialism marked a decisive rupture in this historical trajectory. Colonial powers imposed a rigid, territorial conception of sovereignty that systematically undermined indigenous political systems. Through treaties, protectorates, and the partition of Afar territories across emerging colonial states, Afar authority was delegitimized and recast within subordinate administrative hierarchies. This transformation was not merely political but structural: it severed Afar control over maritime resources, disrupted established trade networks, and fragmented a historically cohesive polity into marginalized populations within multiple national boundaries. The case of Djibouti illustrates this process with particular clarity, where colonial demographic engineering and institutional restructuring displaced Afar political dominance and embedded enduring patterns of exclusion within the postcolonial state.

The postcolonial period did not fundamentally reverse these dynamics. Instead, newly independent states largely inherited and reproduced colonial administrative frameworks, further consolidating centralized authority at the expense of historically autonomous regions. In Ethiopia, the incorporation of Afar territories into imperial and later socialist state structures absorbed indigenous systems of governance without restoring meaningful political agency. Similarly, in Djibouti, the transition to independence resulted in the reconfiguration rather than the redistribution of power, marginalizing Afar communities despite their foundational role in the territory's history. Efforts by Afar leaders to assert political recognition and autonomy must therefore be understood not as separatist impulses but as historically grounded claims for the reintegration of legitimate authority into modern state systems.

Economically, the dissertation has highlighted the adaptive and integrative nature of Afar production systems. Combining pastoralism, maritime activity, and participation in long-distance trade, the Afar sustained ecologically resilient livelihoods while facilitating regional economic integration. Their regulation of trade routes, mechanisms of redistribution, and systems of dispute resolution contributed to both economic productivity and social cohesion. The marginalization of these systems in the colonial and postcolonial eras was not the result of inherent inefficiency but of deliberate political and spatial reconfiguration that excluded Afar actors from the economic structures they had historically shaped.

A comparative perspective reinforces these conclusions by demonstrating that Afar marginalization was neither inevitable nor culturally determined. Rather, it emerged from a confluence of external interventions, shifting geopolitical alignments, and state-building processes that privileged certain forms of social organization over others. While other communities in the Horn of Africa were able, under specific historical conditions, to convert their socio-political structures into enduring influence within modern states, the Afar experience was characterized by dispossession from both political authority and economic resources. This divergence reflects broader patterns in which colonial and postcolonial systems systematically favored sedentary, agrarian, and urban-centered models of governance, while undermining pastoral and coastal societies despite their historical significance.

The decline of the Afar-Adal political tradition as a dominant regional force must therefore be situated within the transformation of the nineteenth-century Red Sea world. European colonial

expansion, coupled with shifting imperial alliances, dismantled the maritime foundations upon which Muslim coastal polities depended, while simultaneously enabling the consolidation of the Ethiopian highland state through diplomatic and military support. In this altered geopolitical environment, the persistence of the Awsa Sultanate represents not institutional stagnation but strategic adaptation—an effort to preserve autonomy through accommodation in the face of overwhelming structural constraints.

In conclusion, this study calls for a fundamental rethinking of the political and economic history of the Horn of Africa. Re-centering the Afar reveals a historical landscape in which pastoral and coastal societies were not marginal but foundational to regional connectivity, governance, and exchange. The systematic exclusion of the Afar from contemporary political and economic systems represents a profound historical contradiction: states that once depended on Afar-controlled networks now deny their legitimacy and relevance. Addressing this contradiction requires not only scholarly reassessment but also a reconsideration of governance frameworks in the region. Recognizing the historical agency, institutional sophistication, and strategic significance of the Afar is essential for constructing more inclusive and accurate narratives of state formation, as well as for informing more equitable approaches to political integration and economic development in the Horn of Africa.

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3. Oral sources

List of informants

No.	Name of informants	Age	Date of interview	Place of interview	Remarks
1	Ahmed Alimirah	65	8, August/ 2025	America	Current Sultan of Awsa sultanate
2	Abdu Haysama	50	14 June/2024	Logia	Sultan Abdu Haysama is the current Sultan of Bidu (Girrifo). He holds the highest authority within Burili customary law, known as Burili Mad'a. His jurisdiction historically extended as far as the Buri Peninsula and the Dahlak Islands, which are considered an extended part of the Buri Peninsula.
3	Abdukkaadri hummed	60	11, January/2018	Tadjoura, Djibouti	Former Sultan of Tadjoura.
4	Seko mohammed said	60	10, October/2024	Awash-7 Woreda, Afar Region,	A tribal leader and former politician who also speaks Somali, Oromo, and Amharic. He has deep knowledge of the Afar–Somali inter-ethnic conflict, and his father was killed during such a conflict in the period of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.
5	Aramis Hummed sulle	60	7, January/2025	Djibouti	An author, researcher, and historian in Djibouti. He has deep knowledge of Afar history, particularly the impact of the French colonial period on the Afar people.
6	Dr.Mohammed hassen	50	18,january /2024	Djibouti	Director of a language institution in Djibouti and an author on Afar culture, language, and history.
7	Mohammed awwal	65	10,Obtober/2024	Samara	Vice Head of ARDUF (Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front) and a cultural expert. He has deep knowledge of Afar politics and culture.
8	Ibrahim said	65	9,december/2016	Awash	A prominent elder in Awash 7 Wereda who has deep knowledge of Afar culture and history and also speaks Somali, Oromo, and Amharic.
9	Ousman Ibrahim mohammed	60	10,december/2016	Abala Woreda, Afar Region, Ethiopia,	A member of the family of a local chief in Abala Wereda and an advisor to the regional council. He has deep knowledge of Afar–Tigray relations during the reigns of Emperor Yohannis IV and Haile Selassie, and his grandfather was a victim during the time of Emperor Yohannis IV.
10	Habib mohammed yayyo	85	08,june/2024	Aysaita	The son of former Sultan Mohammed Yayyo of Awsa, he served as the former head of Awsa Awraja, Chief of Security of the former Assab Autonomous Region, and

					head of Kallu Awraja during the Derg. He has deep knowledge of Afar history.
11	Hummed barkat siraj	80	19,january/2024	Djobouti	Head of the tribal council of the Tadjoura Sultanate, with deep knowledge of the Tadjoura and Rahayto Sultanates.
12	Ali Tosh	65	19,January/2024	Djibouti	An author, historian, and writer in Djibouti.
13	Ambassador awwal wagris	60	11,Sptember/2025	Addis Ababa	Ambassador Awwal Wagris Mohammed is the former Vice President of the Afar Region. His career includes:State Minister, Ministry of Federal Affairs and Pastoralist Development, FDRE ,State Minister, Ministry of Transport, FDRE ,Consul General of the Ethiopian Mission, Kingdom of Bahrain ,Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of FDRE to the Federal Republic of Nigeria ,Head of the Ethiopian Consulate in Beirut, Lebanon,Deputy Head of Mission, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Sultanate of Oman. He has deep knowledge of Afar history, culture, and politics.
14	Hassen gura	70	10,October 2016	Amibera wereda	A family member of Abober Pasha of Zeila, former Djibouti Prime Minister Ali Arif, and Nagaddaras Mohammed Abubekr, former local chief of Dire Dawa during Menelik's reign, and a tribal leader. He has deep knowledge of the trade routes between Zeila, Tadjoura, and Shewa, as well as Djibouti politics.
15	Abdella kaamil	70	10, janury,2018	Djibouti	Former Prime Minister of Djibouti during the transition from French colonial rule to independence and a prominent Afar politician, he has deep knowledge of the French colonial period and Zeila.
16	Allo yayyo yayyo mohammwed	50	11, sep./2024	Aysaita	Grandson of the brother of former Sultan Mohammed Yayyo of Awsa, he is an author with deep knowledge of the Awsa Sultanate.
17	Fitawrari malo seko	70	December 10/2016	Ada-ar wereda	Former local chief of Adadar Wereda and tribal chief, he was eventually appointed to the position of Dajazmach during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign. He has deep knowledge of Afar history during the Haile Selassie and Derg periods.
18	Ahmed zakaraiya	70	10,October/2025	Addis ababa	Former Assistant Professor at Addis Ababa University and an intellectual specializing in Ethiopian history and Ethiopian Islamic history.

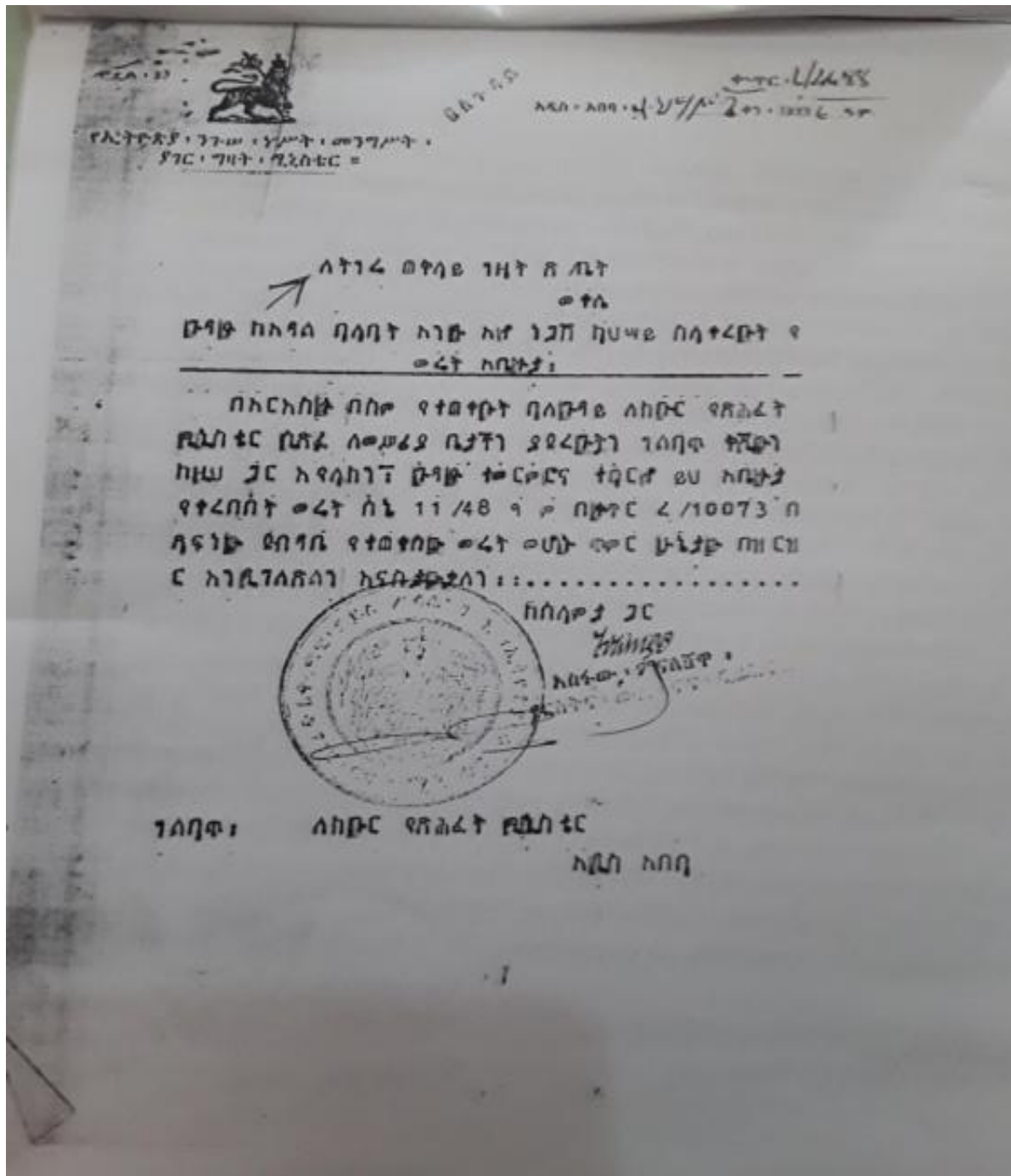
19	Tashome birhanu	70	11, oct./2025	Addis Ababa	Writer and author on the Islamic history of Ethiopia, with deep knowledge of Ethiopian history, especially the Adal Sultanate.
20	Mohammed gumhed nur	48	12, oct./2025	Addis Ababa	Eritrean diplomat in Addis Ababa and author on Afar history and culture, with deep knowledge of Eritrean history and the Red Sea coast.
21	Mohammed Ahmaddin	60	6,julay/2021	Samara	Former museum expert at the Culture and Tourism Bureau, with deep knowledge of Afar history and culture..
22	Abdalla Abdalla Adou	65	9,February/2024	Samara	Afar intellectual and author, and a victim of the Afar-Issa conflict. He has deep knowledge of the history of the Afar Triangle and has written about Eritrean history, Djibouti politics, and Ethiopian history
23	Colonel mohammed Ahmed	65	10,February/2024	Samara	Former Ethiopian diplomat in Yemen and member of the military wing of the Afar Liberation Front during the Derg period. He has deep knowledge of Afar politics and culture.
24	Saalih mohammed	45	5,Februray,2025	Djibouti	A member of the Goobad Sultanate family, with deep knowledge of the history of the Goobad Sultanate in Djibouti.
25	Ali Abdukkadir	44	26, january/2025	aysaita	A member of the Goobad Sultanate family, with deep knowledge of the relationship between the Goobad Sultanate and the Awsa Sultanate, as the Goobad Sultan Hummed Laoita married the sister of Awsa Sultan Mohammed Hanfare. Ali Abdukkadri is linked to both sultanates through this political marriage bond and has also written more than five books and articles on the Afar language.
26	Hamad yaasin	60	10,June /2025	Logiya	An Eritrean refugee now living in Sweden, with deep knowledge of Eritrean politics.
27	Akadar ousman	45	9, august/2025	America	An Eritrean Afar refugee living in America and a member of the American Afar diaspora, with deep knowledge of Eritrean politics.
28	Said ahaw	50	7,march/2023	Teeru wereda	A member of the Bidu Sultanate family and former Vice Head of the Culture and Tourism Bureau, with deep knowledge of the history of the Bidu Sultanate.
29	Abdukkadri mohammed Isse	70	8,September 2018	Bidu wereda	An Elder and have deep knowlegde about history of bidu sultnate
30	Ousman filladeero	65	1,Decemebr /2016	Konneba wereda	An elder with deep knowledge of Afar–Tigray relations during the reigns of Emperor Yohannis IV and Haile Selassie.

31	Mohammed ibrahim	44	10 oct.2024	Samara	A member of the family of the Abala traditional leader, relative of the wife of Emperor Yohannis, and former Vice President of Samara University, now a PhD candidate in India, with deep knowledge of the history of the Afar Northern Zone.
32	Ali mohammed	44	11 oc.2025	Samara	Afar politician and former head of the Afar Culture and Tourism Bureau, with deep knowledge of Afar culture and politics.
33	Gaddo hammooloo	50	12 oct.2025	Samara	Vice Head of Afar Peace and Security Bureau, with deep knowledge of Afar–Issa conflicts.
34	Ambassdor kaddafo mohammed (PhD)	40	10,April /2024	America	Author, writer, and former advisor to the Awsa Sultan, as well as an eyewitness to the relationship between Sultan Alimirah and Haile Selassie. He also served as Ethiopian ambassador to Sudan, Nigeria, and Kuwait, and has written several books and articles about the Awsa Sultanate.
35	Mohammed gorbais	60	8,December 2016	Teeru wereda	An elder with deep knowledge of the Afar–Wajirat conflict in Teeru Wereda.
36	Momin asbara Adan	61	11 december/2016	Sifra wereda	An elder with deep knowledge of the relationship between the Warabbabbo and the Afar.
37	Kamal hajji kamaro	45	10, may/2025	Afambo werea	Wereda administrator and son of the prominent religious leader of the Awsa Sultanate, Hajji Kamaro. He has deep knowledge of the Islamic history of the Awsa Sultanate.
38	Shek mohammed Abdalla	60	28 december/ 2016	Afambo wereda	Clan and religious leader, with deep knowledge of the history of the Adal Sultanate in Awsa.
39	Mohammed taahiro	65	June, 10/2020	Gawwani wereda	Former Vice President of the Afar Region and now the local traditional chief of Badu. His father, Fitawrari Tahiro, was a prominent chief during Haile Selassie’s reign. Mohammed Tahiro has deep knowledge of Afar history and politics.
40	Ouna mohammed oumer	65	3 december /2016	Xalol wereda	Traditional leader whose father, Dajazmach Oumer, was a prominent chief during Haile Selassie’s reign. Ouna Mohammed Oumer has deep knowledge of Afar–Tigray relations and the relations between the Afar Hadu clan and the Irob, from the reign of Emperor Yohannis IV to Haile Selassie.
41	Siyyum tashoome	45	Julay 2025	Addis ababa	A member of the Irob advocacy, with knowledge of Irob–Afar relations and Tigray politics.
42	Tasfaye Weldemariam	60	9,Augsu/2025	America	Tesfay Woldemariam is a GIS Research Associate with the Global Restoration

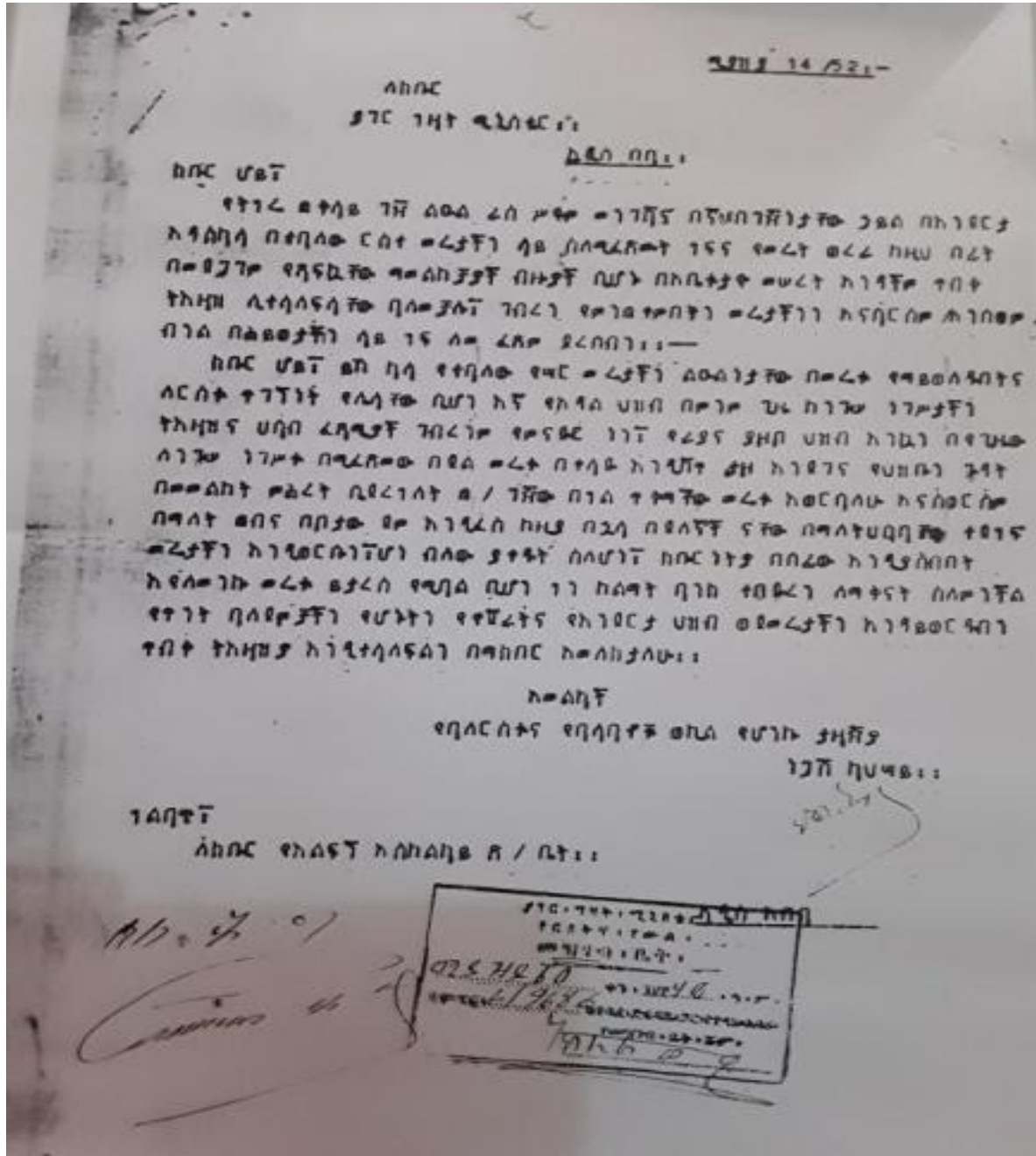
					Initiative at the World Resources Institute (WRI), Washington, DC. He is Originally from the Irob region, he is a Saho-speaking native with profound firsthand knowledge of the Irob community and its surrounding environment, as well as deep understanding of Irob–Afar relations.
43	Negash kahsay Abbay	70	13 April/2018	Addis Ababa	Negash Kahsay was the son of Kahsay Abay and Mayram Addowe, the daughter of the Abala Loca Afar chief. His father also married a daughter of Ras Seyum Mengesha. Although raised in his father's homeland between Adwa and Temben, Negash grew up aware of the grievances and injustices faced by his mother's Afar relatives. After his mother's death and upon reaching adulthood, he engaged directly with his maternal kin in Afar to assess the broader political and social conditions. With his dual familial ties, Negash was well positioned to mediate between the two sides and pursue a balanced approach to the dispute.

Appendices

1. A letter sent by the central government to the Tigray Regional authorities describing the land dispute between an Afar local chief and the Tigray governor.



2. A letter sent by the central government to the Tigray Regional authorities describing the land dispute between an Afar local chief and the Tigray governor.



3. Letter from John Killick, Esq., Chargé d'Affaires a.i., to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 663/IA/48, July 27, 1956.

No. 663/IA/48
the 27th July, 1956.

My dear Mr. Charge d'Affaires:

I refer to the Ambassador's Note No. 130 (1038/4) of the 20th July, 1956, regarding a police action which occurred near Erer during the first week in February.

With regard to the suggestion in the Note under reference that British Protected Persons were killed or injured in the police action, there is absolutely no evidence that British Protected nomadic Issa had penetrated so far into the territory of Ethiopia beyond the grazing area and were consequently involved in the incident. The incident took place approximately 100 kilometres from the frontier and at nearly as great a distance from the nearest point in the grazing area.

The Imperial Ethiopian Government therefore reject the Note under reference.

I have to add, my dear Mr. Charge d'Affaires, the expression of my regret that the Note under reference, with its extraordinary contents and language, should only have been brought to my attention more than six months after the events referred to.

In view of the language employed and in view of the six months that have passed since the police action in question, it has become necessary to inform you of the contents of the Ministry of Interior's report prepared shortly after the incident and based on the reports of the police detachment at Afdem and the resulting detailed inquiries. The report indicates that the Issas had conducted a raid on the Adal and had stolen a large number of that tribe's cattle. A small police detachment from Afdem proceeded to investigate the reports of the theft, and in the course of their investigations were fired upon by members of the Issa tribe who were resisting arrest. Two police officers and two police constables were wounded. Police reinforcements were sent from Afdem to make the necessary arrests and to arrange the return of the stolen cattle, and they in turn were attacked. In the course of completing the arrests and returning the stolen cattle, a number of police casualties in the tribe resulted. No police reprisals were taken and no unnecessary force was employed.

For all of the above reasons, the language of the Note under reference in respect of the conduct of the police is unjustified, uncalled for, and certainly not conducive to maintaining confidence and collaboration between the two Governments.

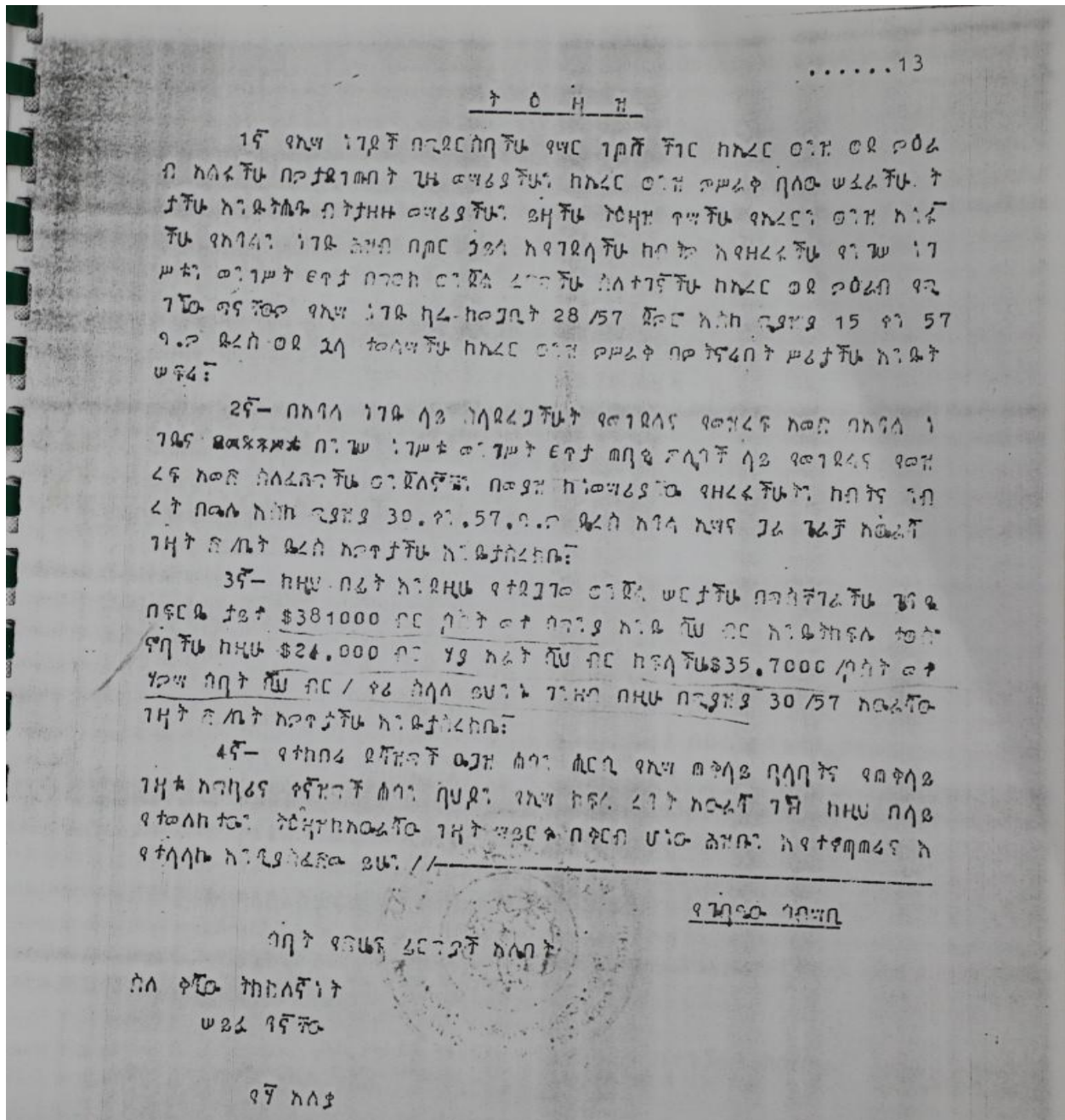
I avail myself, my dear Mr. Charge d'Affaires, of this opportunity to renew the assurance of my high consideration.

Minister

John Killick, Esq.,
Chargé d'Affaires a.i.,
Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy,
Addis Ababa

የኢትዮጵያ ገንዘብ ሚኒስቴር
የውጭ ጉዳይ ሚኒስቴር
የጋዜጣና የግልቃወቂያ ክፍል

4. These archival sources describe the decision made by the central government regarding the Adal/Afar-Issa border conflict along the Erer River.



[illegible]

6. A letter from Wolde Michael, Regent of Adal-Issa and Gara Guracha District to Ras Imiru Haile Selassie describing the escalated conflict between the Afar and the Issa-Somali, Oct.1957 E.C.

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ሀ / አጥሪያች ወገህለኞች በግንዛቤ ያወሰኑ አባታት በሕገ መሠረት ልባቸውን የሚገኝ ለተገባቸው አባላት ግንዛቤ ለሕግ አጥሪያች ወገህለኞች ይገኛል፡፡

ለ / ዓገህ/ ንባታች ከአባሪት ሳይ ዘርፈው የወሰዱትን የተገደ ከበትና ገ-ለገ በገና
የዓለ ሁሉ አገላለጽ ማድረግ ይ

ፈ / በሁለት ዘግቃች ውስጥ ሳይ ተይዞ ተጠቅሞ በነበሩት ቦታ በኒ ወታደሮች በሰረዘገደ ደርጅት ጋር ሥልጣኑን በተገኘ ቦታው ሳይ ከገባላቸው ግደገዳ ግደገዳ ሆኖ

[illegible][illegible]

የክልሉን ጋራ ጉልቻ በዘጠኝ ወሀ ሁሉ በጥቂት ያላቸው ቀረታና ፕሮ ከላይ አገሪቱን
በሙሴ ሲገኝ ቀረታው ለጥቅም ጥቅም ላይ ይውላል ብለው አገራቸውን ከተፈለገ፡-

Ս / ՈՊՅԸՆ ԸՄԲ ՈՂՁՈՂԻ ԻՆՊ ՉԸ ԻՆՎԵՍՏԻՄԵՆՏ ԳԵԼՆ ։

ለ/ የክፍል 9 ሃገራዊ የህልውና ጥበቃ ምክር ቤት ምክር ቤት ምክር ቤት የሚሰጠው ምክር ቤት

... / ...

7. Sultan Mohammed Hanfari, letter to Giovanni Branchi, Italian Consul at Assab, 30 December 1883, in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. IV, document no. 151.

الى حضرة الاكرم المكرم العزيز المحترم قنصر عصب هداه الله تعالى في كل وقت وحين
وان سالتكم وعن بلوذا بنا فانتا بخير وعافيه ولا نسال الا عنكم صدارة الاحرف من محروسا ووسه
وكل علم خير والحقا تجدون بلسان الواصلين اليكم كفاية ونفايه ومما اعزكم يا عصب وصلوا عند
مشتكين منك بعض عربان قبايل موديتك لان قنصر عصب وصل من الحبشة بالسلامة والكرام
ولم غير الله عليه حال من الاحوال لكن بعد ما رجع من عندك اسبابا بن بكسر الجبال ومجفر
البر في كل مكان قالان يا محب لا ينبغي لك تعدي في حق غيرك وانت الزم مكانك ولا تاذي
العربان الذين اكل القبايل في مملكتهم لان انت اوقف في بقعتك الذي اشتريت من قبايا
انكاله وانت قدري قدما اشتريت وكذلك قبايل انكاله يدرون قد رما باعوك طول وعرض
لا ينبغي لك التعدي على حق الناس التعدي على حقهم فهذا افساد عظيم وضلال لا سبيل لك في
الحذر والحذر في حق الناس ايها يا محب لان سلطان منلك طلب مني الطريق لكم فقبلنا منه
ومر حيناله من عصب الى شوى والواسط بيننا وبين الكل شيخ عبد الرحمن الذمام بن شيخ يوسف
قبل هذا سعي بيننا وبينكم شيخ عبد الرحمن الذمام بن شيخ مع كنت انت نلى الى شوى وبين سلطان
منلك طريق من عصب الى شوى هذا عرفناكم

من عند سلطان
محمد بن سلطان
حنقري

تاريخ يوم الجمعة في
شهر صفر الخير على سنة
١٣٠١
من الهجرة

الى حضرة الاكرم المكرم العزير المحترم قنصر عصب هداية الله تعالى امين
 ان سالم عنا وعن يلوذ بنا فانا بخير وعافيه ولا نسال الا عنكم وعن احوالكم التي هي غايته القصد
 والراد من رب العباد صدرة الاحرف من محروس سنكوه وكل علم خير وعافيه فاصدرة الورقة لاجل اعلام
 الحال وتعرفونا بما انتم فيه من الاحوال وبما وصلكم من الجواب وصل اليها جوابكم المكرم وفهمنا وقرأنا ما بيننا
 وعرفنا ما بينه فحدث الله تعالى على صحة عافيتكم وبلغنا انك وصلت من الجبهة من سلطان كاسا بابوز
 سلامة والكرامة ولم غير الله عليك حال من الاحوال انست بسلا منك من الغربة وادامك الله بالسرك
 ايضا يا محب لان قبايل الدناكل الذي حوائكم يكون عليكم فلا تنكوه واحسنوا لهم بالارحسان منكم للحيث
 انهم راع المواشي في اراضيهم فلا تتعدوا في حق الدناكل وارضكم ليكنكم وارض حقكم الذي اشتهر بتموه مع
 معلوما طولا وعرضا من كلومة الى بويته ومن واما من جناب بيتنا وبين قبايل عيسى ما نغيب منكم
 المعروفة منه نحن نكفيه جيشنا وحال التارخ جيشنا بغرة عيسى وغر اقبل وصول خطكم اليها فله
 ينصره قنصر عزير وان بدلكم حاجة او خدمة تقضاهم بحسب التعريف
 وبما اعرفك يا محب من جناب شيخ عبد الرحمن الذمام بن شيخ يوسف فهو ذمام الكل فعلم بيننا وبينكم وكذلك من جناب سلطان
 منلك ذمام واسط الجيعة فلا تقبلوا كلام الخارجين من اهل عصب ومن اهل مركبلا الا كلام عبد الرحمن الذمام بن شيخ يوسف
 وكلنا معتدين بقول شيخ عبد الرحمن الذمام ايضا كيف سكت عن بيت شيخ عبد الرحمن الذمام الذي في ربيع بلا اختيار
 عند ابو بكر باشه عليكم باخراج بيته عن يد الظالم القاهر والسكوت فيكم من بيت عبد الرحمن الذمام عار وشم عار عليكم
 الله الله باخراج البيت من ربيع فهو خادمكم وخادمنا والساعي من عصب الى شوي لحاجتكم كيف يعدم بيته وانتم في الحيات
 ايضا قبل ان تفصل عصب من الجبهة فوفا سلطان برهان في رحته كما سمعت وخلف سلطان برهان عيال كما تعلم انت
 والوزير محمد بن محمد سلطان ديني والوزير وروين سلطان برهان ابو بكر كبيرهم وانت قم بينهم بالصلح وانا ارسلت مع شيخ عزير
 اصلحوا بينهم وحمد بن لعيتة كذلك تعلمه واصل اليكم وانت انظرهم بعين واحد ولا تميل على احد وكذلك في ارض سلا
 لاملين رحيتة نزل فيه ابو بكر باشه عساكر الترك في آلت عيلا وانت عاونهم بما امكنتك هداية فناك

118a Arabic text

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 مع اللطائف محمد بن احمد حاكم عنتري مملكة الحلاليا كل الذي يسافر من غزاية اسب
 مدينة تشوا في محلة عنتري غافية وخراس
 الاول
 اموجيا والسلام لا يدعي في والي اسب المحلة عنتري وكل جمعة من اهل الدار
 يدبر رايه
 والثاني
 من التتيت الاطراف يوالو كل واحد واحد في اي الذي يخلص الشروخ
 الثالث
 محل عنتري دامن وغاف للكل الموصوفين في البدر وفي الباحة دامن وغاف مملكة الحلاليا
 والرابع
 محل عنتري يتخاف من المثنى بين الدناك ويتخطاه ليوم وكن ويسافر والاهل
 والحلب بلا حرم وكن ويطيهم الزقية
 الخامس
 محل عنتري يلحقه ابيه واحد محل للموصوفين يتزايد فيه لجال الذي جامن
 والسادس
 مملكة الحلاليا
 واليها كل واحد في الدينوا يجلس واحد على اليمين واليسار
 والسابع
 كل اهل الحلاليا اتوجاريين والسوا جيبين بسا فر واعي ما حلقهم في كاجينهم
 ويمة وينتمهم محل عنتري في مملكة الحلاليا تحفة ونخر وس اهل كل الدناك
 والسادس
 وجميع محل عنتري في الباحة
 والبايوم الحلاليا كل ومئة في طم في الباحة تحروس جصحت محل عنتري وديعة
 فية حل محل الدناك
 والسادس
 وهذا الشروخ في اريد ملك مملكه عنتري في يد كونت انتونياني
 والاشرا
 هذا الشروخ مكتوب في الوفا
 الثلاث لغوا في عربي وفي الحبشي
 وفي الحلاليا في والسام ختام
 في اسنهر جومان الثاني
 في السنة ١٣٠٨

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فتح الشروط

بن الخاضعين لاسم اديناه سعادة ابوبكر امير زيلع ومقر الزيلع في قنصل الدولة
فرنسا وفيه في هرر وزييلع وتوايها فقه تشارطو وحقوقي الاتفاق للحماية المذكور لاسر
اية حقوق سعادة ابوبكر امير زيلع وايضا الاتفاق المذكور متأكد على الاسباب التي ستعرف

انه قبل ان يولد له الصير اخذت البلاد يدعى في عام ١٨٧٥ كانت بنه زيلع وتوايها تحت
لم سعادة امير ابوبكر وزييلع ان بنه زيلع لم يملكها احد من الدول الاجنبية وحيات
الك لا اله دولة فرنسا ولم تستل له دولة العثمانية في شأن قتل قنصل فرنسا
ست لا نسير في عام ١٨٥٩ فان الدولة العثمانية قد اذكرة بضمانتها واعترفت
بنه زيلع وتوايها لم تكونت طاعت كمنه متغيا والحق يقه ان الدولة العثمانية عقلت
رياسته من بنه زيلع عقلت وحيات ان بنه زيلع ابوبكر امير زيلع لربا عنة الخليفة وللشاه
بشانيه.

بنه زيلع واد امير زيلع لاد الدولة العثمانية في تركت رياستها
في الاخير في بنه زيلع وتوايها وحيات الرياسته المذكورة له دولة الخ
ويم الامير زيلع في بنه زيلع وتوايها وحيات الرياسته المذكورة له دولة الخ
الاثنين والاثنين حلت بها الدولة الاطليانية والبند الثالث حل به الدولة
بمرطانية من غير ان تقوم عليهم الدولة المصرية وايضا ان الخديوي المصري قد تركت
حقوق رياستها على بنه زيلع لا خلا للجيش الاجنبية حل بها ومن حيث اد الجيوش
مخرجون منها فحق ان تحل بها دولة اخرامها ومع في صومع وبيالول وبربر و
لهذا الحال ان حقوق الامير ابوبكر على رياسته زيلع وتوايها التي ترجع له تكونت
ضرور من ويكسر وبهم اهل الشريعة فلا جلا ذلك ان سعادة امير ابوبكر عا ولا
على قده حقوقه التي له في رياسته زيلع وتوايها اعترف انه جعل تحت حماية الدولة
الفرنسا وفيه بنه زيلع وتوايها بالحق ود التي كانت قبل ان يولد له الدولة المصرية

والدولة الفرنسية بالجمهوريه من طرفها اعترفت انها اعطت حمايتها لبيتها الامير
ابوبكر وبنه زيلع وتوايها على الشروط المذكورة في الاتفاق اديناه ٢

الفصل الامد

ان بنه زيلع وتوايها دخلت خاصة في حماية الدولة الفرنسية ٢

فيكون وكيل فرنسا ويبريغ لاجل تقديمه بخصوص ان يبريغ ونوا ببعالحت مما
الدولة الفرنسية

الفصل التاسع

ان الله وول فرنسا ويرسل الى يبريغ خطا بطه عربيته الذي يكون متكلف بقرنيه
لجيوش الوطنيه وتلكم عليهم

الفصل العاشر

ان الامير ابوبكر لشكره من الله وله فرنسا وية مما فعلت معه من الجميل
اعترف على نفسه ان يبدل غاية نفوده مع شيوخ القبائل الذين هم دخل
وفريقه لاجل تامين الطرق هرو وطريق بلاد الجبال وطرق الحبشة ويا
مده ونحى وتحاي تجارة الفرنسية وية داخلا فريقه بواسطة معاشرته
ومناسبتهم مع شيوخ القبائل

الفصل الحادي عشر

ان الله وله فرنسا وية تفكر بجل لا بما تحمي وتساعده تجارة اهل بلادهم
في رسوم بضائع الاجانب

الفصل الثاني عشر

يقضى في المستقبل بعد رضا الدولة الفرنسية وية قوايين في شان زبير
امور العامة ان يكونو مجتولين بين المير ابوبكر والويل الفرنسية باتفاق
واحد

الفصل الثالث عشر

ساعة ابوبكر امير يبريغ التزم على نفسه الله يرفع كل مناسبة او مشروط
مع دولة واحدة او كثير من الاجانب فان يكون معلوم ان الشروط او المنا
سبة قيمهم مصالح البلاد لا يتم بدون رضا وسماعية الدولة الفرنسية

الفصل الرابع عشر

فان الاتفاق المذكور يصير من ابتداء اليوم الذي يستخوفيه الطرفين لاجل
محو منافهم المشتركة ولا تكن من اليوم هفت الاتفاق المذكور يتقدم على
كل شرط الذي ساعة ابوبكر سيقدر يجعله استقبالا هفت اليوم مع
اخر ارجح

الفصل الخامس عشر
أيضا على الدولة الفرنسية ان ترتب ما هيده لكامل ابوبكر و ابراهيم ابوبكر
لكل واحد منهم مائة ريال في كل شهر وعلى المذكورين يعاونون دولة فرنسا و
في تشجيع القوافل الذي تتم في طريق الجمعات التي في حماية وحلم دولة فرنسا
وعلى هذه الواجبين كما هم ادناه اعترفوا و اكدوا ان الاتفاق المذكور قد
فتمت برضا كل واحد منهم و التزموا ان يحفظوا مانه الاتفاق المذكور
وبله هذه وضوا اسماهم و ختموا ختمهم وعلى عادة علم الاسطلاحات
يكون امض الفرنسي هو مشهود و مصدق و الحكم بينهما

در مقام ترجمه ۲۰ عشرین اگست ۱۸۸۵
محمد امیر انوید

یہ سب سے پہلے

A circular postmark from New York is visible in the upper left corner of the document. A handwritten signature is written across the middle of the page.

شرط ما بين دولتنا و سلطان بنه وبيننا اننا لا نرد تمذبات ابوك يا مود
 زنا و نعتيه و صبح الشرط المذكور حسب ارتداد قبول تلبه و على جميع
 المشايخ الدوله تحت
 الشرط الاول
 يستوي بين دولتنا و سلطان بنه و نعتيه و سلطان بنه و نعتيه
 و كما في اخوانه ما في
 الشرط الثاني
 عهد لعتيه يتعلم على نفسه للقواني الفزارية او كلاً من على المامونه و يساعدهم بحه
 بقدرته في شرواءه و حان و يقول و كلما يقيم لهم من ما كونه و يا امر على اهل
 بلادهم يا انهم لا يا اخذوا في شئ من الزنوم من احد زياده من الشرط الثالث
 في التبه الثالث من عهد و ابوك الى قومه ابوك ارضي فزاريه و تحت حكمها
 الشرط الثالث
 عهد لعتيه مع خصم يا اخذ من القواني في كل جبل و لا يحد من كل ارجم با و يحد
 الشرط الرابع
 مع الفزاريه المار في ارضهم اعتمد على الشرط الثالث مع الله كسبت من خصم يا
 لو ان اي بير الذي يحملوها في الضيق يا اخذوا منه حشا او اكان و اودهم يحفر
 بيار و خصين و لا يقيم من العرايد شئ
 الشرط الخامس
 عهد لعتيه يساعده الفزاريه في و تراخي من الله و ملكه و المستزير يقره يفعل فيها ما يحرم
 و خلاصه و يحفر بيار و اخوار صغار لا ايجل من راعه و خلاصه يا يصالح ليلك و

الشرط السادس

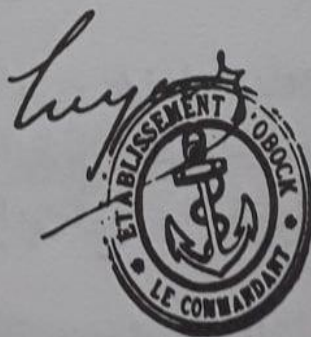
إذا استقر بين فرنسا وبين أحد من أهل بلادكم تكليف اليمين تنفذ من
في مملكة الدول الفرنسية وأن يسلح بينهم وأولم يسلحوا فكلنا الحكم
الفرنسي أن يتدابع السلطان في الجوار الحكم الأجنبي بين المحسوبين

الشرط السابع

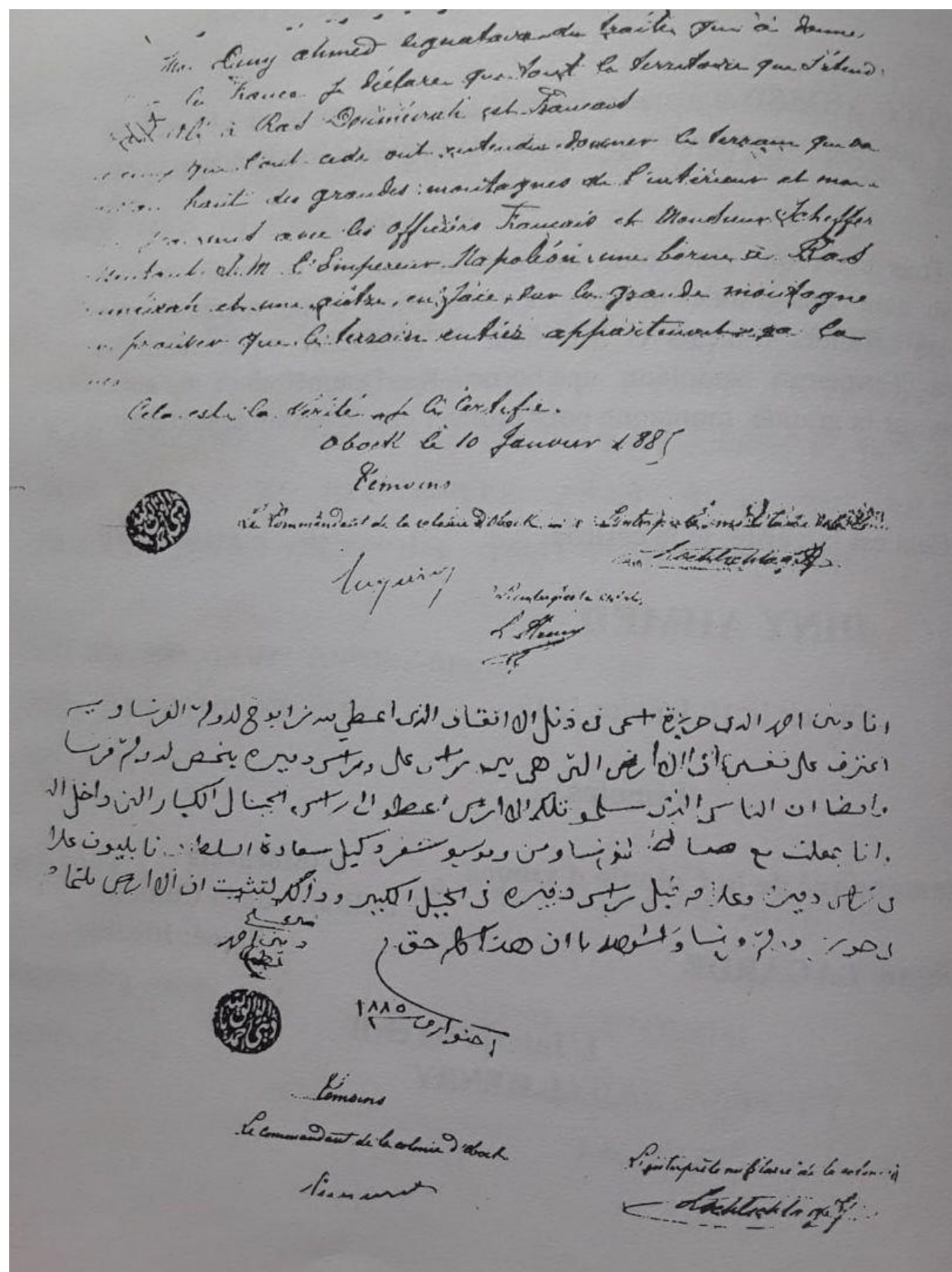
لتزم السلطان على نفسه بأن ما تراه من شروط أو يختم به دون خصم من
أبوكم وأد اخصم من القعدة أن يكون شروط فيكون القعدة أن يكون
سحبكم في الشرط

الشرط الثامن

إذا سار اختلاف بينكم فكلنا المكاتب الفرنسية هي لأحكام بينكم
معاهدة كلفت في أبوكم
مجلس
29 أتم في 17
مصادق
شاه



12. Agreement between the Rahayto Sultanate and France, 10, January 1885, cited in Hashim, *Almanhal* (2007), doc.no.14.



الى سعادة الاكبر المكرم الامجد الابد الكامل الاكل الاجل الجليل الاحشم المحشم العزيز المحترم
 صاحب الحليم سعادة منسري سدر الاعظم السلطان تليان حرس الباري من الاكدار ذاته وجماه
 من الاضرار صفاته ولازال في بارح المجد والاجلال وشايع العز والاقبال اما بعد فالباعث التحير
 ذريعة الاخلاص هو السؤال عن صحة ذاتكم السنية واعتدال اوقاتكم الزكية اللتان هما الامل من حضرة
 عالم الازل لا زال الجناب في اكل الخير والسرو ومحبكم الحقيقي من كرم الله تعالى في اتم الخير والسرو يسال
 عن حال الجناب بالغدوات والبكوس ثم لا يخفى محترم الجناب بالاعتبار والمشي حقنا مع وكيلكم كنت انت نلي
 الى اوسه ومع كالة السلطان متلك وعساكره الى عند السلطان محمد بن السلطان حنفي ومشافي الطريق بايسر طريق
 بلا تعب ولا نصب ومع طيب القلب وقبلوه بالعز والناموس والاكرام غايت الاكرام ونعرفكم في جوابات الذي
 كتبنا لكم اثين حقنا انه مشكلة الطريق صلحنا بحضرة كنت انت نلي بالمجة حقنا واقفة بالقلب الطريق مفتوح
 بالطيب واشغالنا استوا بالكبير والحين حتى يصلح ويتم المجة حقنا حتى لا يخرب انا وسلطان محمد نطلبكم تحكموا الذي
 كانت تفارق بيننا وبينكم وهذا الكلام سلطنة حتي في مركيله والان الشرط الذي كتبنا ان العالم سبيته ما كنت
 نعرف ان بلاد مركيله في داخل الميلىن ولا ذكرنا اسم المركيله وانا اأحلف بالله اني ما كنت اعرفكم قد الميلى
 وعلى هذا تخالفنا والان نقل لكم انكم تخرجولي الحق وتردولي مركيله حتى تدوم المجة وبالقلب الطيب ونعرف
 ان حكومة التليان ما يرضا علينا ضرره هذا عرفناكم

تاريخ جماد اول ١٢٠٣هـ

شهر سوا ١٦ ١٨٨٢هـ

سلطان برهان

بن سلطان محمد

صحيح

15. Sultan Burhan Mohammed, letter to Bir Sahib, in Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. IV, document no. 45.

نخسلطان برهان والي رحيمه الغنيه بر صاحب دلي عصب بعد الام نفركم نخا وانتم كننا
صحا ولا كن فلتو كلامنا وكنو كلام الكذابين ونخاندو لكم اصلاح اشين الذي شايحيب
لم بطاله مارضا وانتم شوفو كلامي وكلام الكذابه الذي قال لكم والذي تشوفونه اصلاح
شوفيه واما انا مارضا لكم بضره غير ما تشوفو اصلاح وعرفتو لنا ان الغبه
لهم نخا بغيرا عليكم اجر اير ما بغيرا عليكم الغبه واما اذ كان تقول بلاد سلطان برهان
في حيتا سيتوي واما البيع فهو اجر اير فقط واما اصحبه اذ فلتو انتم انا
اقدرا فلت وانتم كلام قيسو كلام الناس واهد نفركم كلام

م الم
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PROVISIONAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT OF ETHIOPIA
Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
የዕርዳታ እገዳት ሥርዓት

We Need Your Help.

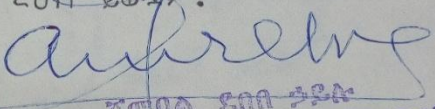
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447/1 ሲጽፍላቸው የመዘገበልን ንፅገኛ ደርሰናል፡-

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ረሀብ ይውጣ፡

ገምገሙ ደበበ ገብረ
የአስተዳደርና ጥቅም አገልግሎት መምሪያ ኃላፊ

ንፅገኛ /
ለወሎ ክፍለ ሀገር አስተዳደር ጽ/ቤት
ደገ፤
ለባለቃ ወንድሙራይ በዓነ
የአውባ አውራጃ አስተዳዳሪ
ባቲ፤

በክፍሉ ውስጥ የተጻፈው የጥቅም አገልግሎት መምሪያ ኃላፊ የሆኑት ሰዎች፡
5/11/፡ ግዛት፡ ሚኒስቴር፡
፡ መዝገብ፡ ቤት፡
1 ፡፡ ፡፡ 9. 1967
የደረሰበት ቀን፡
የመዝገብ ቁጥር፡ 34781
የደረሰበት ቀን፡

[illegible]

18. Letter written by Menelik to Abubaker Pasha of Zeila, 14 October 1876 (source: Rubenson, *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. III, document no. 186).

የተላከነ፡ ከ ገረሃ ሠፊ፡ ነገሥት፡ ምኒልክ፡ ዘኢትዮጵያ፡
ዲድረ ስ፡ ከሐጅ፡ አቡ ቦክር፡ ባሻ፡ የሐጂ፡ አብራ
ሂም፡ ሻሂም፡ ልጅ፡
እኔ፡ ደኑ፡ ከረምህ፡ :: እኔ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡
ዲመከገገ፡ ደህኖ፡ ነኝ፡ ሠራዊቱም፡ ሁሉ፡ ደህኖ፡
ነው፡ በዘዴላ፡ ከተማ፡ የተዳረ፡ ፎቱም፡ ወረቀ
ትህ፡ ደረሰኝ፡ :: ያንተን፡ የወደጀን፡ ምክ
ር፡ የማረርከበት፡ ምን፡ ጉዳይ፡ አለኝ፡ አቶ፡ አር
ኑስንም፡ ለመሰነዝ፡ ለሰቃውም፡ ዳዲነተኛ፡ አድ
ር፡ ሰደድሁ፡ ገብረ፡ ተክሌንም፡ አሽከረን፡ ሞ
ት፡ አሰ፡ መታመም፡ አሰ፡ ላይ፡ ስለዚህ፡ ነገር፡ ሁ
ሉ፡ በከጓቱ፡ እንደደበላሽ፡ ላይ፡ እንደጠባበቁ፡
አድርጌ፡ ሰደድኳቸው፡ ደግሞም፡ ለሁሉ፡ ነገር፡
መሐመድን፡ አቶሰይ፡ ላይ፡ አሁን፡ አንተ፡
ሠላህ፡ ምን፡ የሚቻል፡ ነገር፡ አሰ፡ አስታርቀህ፡
አስማምተህ፡ ሰደዳቸው፡ እኔ፡ አንድ፡ ጊዜ፡ የተኖ
ገርሁትን፡ ቃል፡ የምሰው፡ አደደሰሁምና፡ እር
ሱ፡ ያፍርሰው፡ እንጂ፡
ነገር፡ ግን፡ ስሰ፡ ምሐንቶ፡ መታመኛ፡ እንደሆነኝ፡
ከጠኝ፡ ቢሰኝ፡ ከእስማኢል፡ ባሻ፡ የመጣ ሐኝን፡ ደ
ብዳሁ፡ ሰአቶ፡ አርኑስ፡ ሠጥኼው፡ ነበረ፡ አሁንም፡
አንተ፡ ተቀብላህ፡ መሐሰህ፡ ሰደድሐኝ፡ ወደአቶ፡
አርኑስም፡ ደብዳቤው፡ ስጥ፡ ላይ፡ ድረአሁ፡
አንተም፡ ከእስማኢል፡ ባሻ፡ ሂደ
ህ፡ ባሻነት፡ መሆንምህን፡ አማሁ፡ እጅግ፡ ደስሐኝ፡

ደ ልቁ ገም፡ ከሐኔ፡ ሁኔህ፡ ከምሥረ፡ ገሥ፡ ከእ
 ከማኢ ሐ፡ ባሻ፡ ጋራ፡ መነጋገር፡ ህ፡ ማሳተ ምህንም፡
 መ ከጠቅህ፡ ኦከልክ፡ ደከ፡ ኦከኝ፡
 የአባ፡ ዋጠውንና፡ የጅማ፡ አባ፡ ጅፋር ገም፡ ነገር፡
 ኋላ፡ የምሥራ፡ ገሥ፡ የኦከማኢ ሐ፡ ባሻ፡ ደከማ
 ቢ፡ ሲመጣልኝ፡ ምላሹን፡ ሁሉ፡ ኦከፋሁ፡ ኦኔ፡ ወ
 ዳጅ ነቅን፡ ከመፈላገ፡ በቀር፡ ሌላ፡ ጉዳይ፡ የሐኝም፡
 ከሐኔ ም፡ ከኦከማኢ ሐ፡ ባሻ፡ በረከቅ፡ ኦንዳመህ
 ሐኝ፡ ከማሁ፡ ፡ ፡ የጥርኝ፡ ድመቅ ም፡ ኦከፈ
 ሐጋሁ፡ ኦከማኢ ሐ፡ ባሻ፡ የመፈቅዱትን፡ ነገር፡
 ሁሉ፡ ኦደር ጋሁ፡ ኦኔ፡ የምፈቅድውን፡ ነገር፡ ሁሉ፡
 ባንተ፡ ደከማ ቢ፡ ሐኔ፡ ኦንዳደከሁ ሐኝ፡ አየሁት፡
 ቲደን፡ ገዝቶ፡ የሠጠህን፡ ገንዘብ፡ ሁሉ፡
 ከኢጣልያ ም፡ የመጣልኝን፡ ክርቶኸ፡ የነአባ፡ ማከየ
 ከንም፡ ሠጥን፡ ሁሉ፡ ሌላም፡ ሪቃ፡ ደግሞ፡ መጥቶ
 ሐኝ፡ ኦንዳሆነ፡ ካንተ፡ ያሐ፡ ሪቃ፡ ሁሉ፡ የኔ፡ ኒውና፡
 ቶሎ፡ ጠላት፡ ከደድሐኝ፡

ሠፈር፡ በመጣ፡ ጊዜ፡ ሐከ፡ ባሻ ነቅ፡ ሹመት፡ ከሐመ
 ቀበልህ፡ ደከቅ፡ የምሥራቅ ህ፡ ኦከጅልሃሁ፡

በ፲፱፻፱ ዓ.ም.
 በጥቅምት ፳፻፲፱ ቀን፡
 ቅዳሜ ቀን፡ በፊቼ፡ ከተ
 ማ፡ ተጽፏል፡



20. Letter from Minilik to Ismail Pasha of Egypt, April 1, 1875, in Sven Rubenson (ed.), *Acta Aethiopica*, vol. 3, document no. 126.

የተሳካ: ከንጉሠ: ነገሥት: ምኒልክ: ዘኢትዮጵያ:
 ደድረክ: ተከበረው: ከታረረው: እከማኤል: ገዢ:
 ንጉሠ: ምሥር:
 እንደሆነ: ነዎ: እጅግ: ጉንደር:
 እኔ: እግዚአብሔር: ደመስገን: ደህና: ነገ: ሠራዊቱም:
 ሁሉ: ደህና: ነው:
 ምሥር: ሀበክ: ድምበረ: ጥቅ: ጥቅው: እንጥቅ:
 ር: ብላው: ደብዳቤ: ለደውልጃ: ነበር:
 ደኸም: ነገር: እኔ: ጣራ: ጠጃ: እጅግ: ደከ: ብላው: ጥቅ:
 የዚህ: ነገር: ውል: የሚቆርጥ: ጥቅ: የማምነው: የም
 ወደው: ጉላ: ብላ: ነገር: ምስጋና: ደረክ: ለድ
 ጂዎሐም: በመካከላቸው: ጠብ: እንደደረሰ: ድኃ: እንደ
 ደበደበ:
 በ፲፰፻፷፯: ዓመት: እምልደት: እግዚአብሔር: ለደረሰ: ለደረሰ:
 በወርሃ: መጋቢት: በ፳፬: ቀን:
 በወረኢሉ: ከተማ: ተጻፈ:

