

## **Chapter IX**

### **The Entry of Islam into Eritrea The Rise of the Islamic Principalities of the Coast and the Amhara Habashite Kingdom**

#### **The Entry of Islam into Eritrea:**

In Chapter VII, we touched upon the entry of Islam into the regions of north and west Eritrea via the Arab merchants and scholars who settled among the Bega kingdoms and around the gold mines in Hagar and elsewhere since the ninth century A.D. In this chapter, we will treat the early relations of Islam with this coast since the seventh century A.D.

As a result of repeated pirate raids on Jeddah in 630 A.D. and 640 A.D. from Adutis, the administrations of which had reached a stage of disarray as a result of the Roman - Persian struggle, which involved Yemen and Aksum in long wars, the Omayyad Arabs were forced to seize the Daklan Islands and the coast of Adulis and Massawa in 84 (Hijri) (702 A.D.). There, the Omayyads built fortresses and castles and secured the trade routes. The land prospered and the Arabs were encouraged into settling the region and building it.

By virtue of its position on the coast racing the southern Arabian Peninsula, the region became a vital compass for the groups which left the Arabian Peninsula for the purpose of commerce and in quest of a livelihood or to flee the atmosphere of terror which dominated the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic world on account of the apostasy wars, then the Omayyad Abbasid wars and later the Abbasid-Alawid wars as we indicated elsewhere in this book.

The three centuries which succeeded the seventh century A.D. were a period of intermarriage between the Arab migrants and the Beja tribes which overran the region and the old Cushitic tribes. Through intermarriage and commerce, Islam spread to the extent that the Italian historian, Count Russini, points out the establishment of flourishing Islamic Arab states on Dahlak and the Eritrean coast in the eighth century A.D.. The author of the "Atlas of Islamic History" also points out this fact (see map).

It is believed that the Danakil tribes in Southern Eritrea and the 'Samhar' in the suburbs of Massawa were the oldest converts to Islam among the inhabitants of Eritrea. Islam also spread among the Sano tribes which inhabited the region stretching from the Gulf of Zula to the highlands of Akkele Guazi in the fourteenth century by means of Arab religious families, the most famous among which is the 'Beit Sheikh Mahmoud' family which lives in Zula and claims the ancestry of Al Zubair Ibn Al Awam. As for the tribes of the coast and the Bani Amer, Islam spread among them starting in the tenth century A.D.

The Venetian merchants in the fifteenth century mention the Beit Muala tribe as an Islamic tribe which lived on the coast of northern Eritrea, which is its current habitat besides its expansion into the Baraka region. The family of 'Add Sheikh Hamid Wild Nafotai' had a great influence in spreading Islam among Al Habab and Bani Amer tribes. This family belonged to the aristocracy of Qureish, and it came to Eritrea via the Sudan. It still maintains a centre for religious teaching in 'Zacca Sheikh' in the province of the coast and has another

center at Imbermi, 15 kilometres north of Massawa. This village abounds in the graves of saints from this religious family.

During the nineteenth century, a number of Tigre speaking Christian tribes were converted to Islam. Among them were the Maria, Mansa, Belin, Beit Juk and Al Habab tribes with its three branches, Beit Asqudi, Add Teklis and Atmaryam. These were ruling families which had migrated from the Hamasein plateau to the northern highlands and imposed its power on the numerous Tigre tribes. In Al Gash valley, the Baria tribe, which had been pagan, embraced Islam. The same applies to some of the Al Baza tribe.

The conversion of these tribes is due to the efforts of Al Sayyed Mohammad Othman Merghani, the founder of the Khitmi rite, who had been sent by his Sheikh, Ahmad Ibn Idriss, from Mecca in 1817 accompanied by Al Sayyed Mohammad Ali Assanusi, the founder of the Sanusi rite. They split after their arrival in Egypt; the first headed southward to the Sudan and then to Eritrea, and returned to Mecca after spreading Islam and the Khitmi rite, leaving behind a number of sons who resumed his work. The second headed for North Africa, where he established his rite.

There were other religious families which established centres for the teaching of the Quran and religion in the various parts of Eritrea. Most famous among these are 'Add Sheikh' on the coast, 'Add Syyedna Mustapha' in Baraka, 'Beit Darqui' and 'Add Mualem' in northern and western Eritrea, 'Beit Al Sheikh Ibrahim Al Khalil' in Teio, Dankalia, and the 'Kabiri' family in the Eritrean plateau, which had originally lived on the Dahlak islands.

All of these are religious houses which used to inherit the teaching of religion and the Quran, devoting themselves to their mission eking out a precarious living and depending on the grants of Moslems in general and the rich among them in particular to support their students. They claimed kinship with the Arabs. Among them and among Moslems in general, scholars displayed talent in learning and the Arabic language and went to Zubeid, Medina and Al Azhar for further study. Zula village was known for its centres for religious teaching from which a number of scholars graduated.

Islam spread on the Eritrean plateau among people who were known to profess commerce and who were called (Al Gabarta) which was a word given to different places and different peoples in the Middle Ages. Ifat, in the heart of the Shoa plateau in Ethiopia, was called Al Gabarat. Zeila' on the Somali coast was also called by this name. Sometimes, this name was given to all the Moslems of Habasha. In Al Azhar in Cairo, there's an ancient gallery called 'Al Gabarta Gallery'. Al Heimi, in his book, "The Story of Habasha" 1665 A.D., said that he met the leader of 'Al Kabiri Saleh' in Andretta on the Tigray plateau, and said that his family works on the spreading of Islam throughout Habasha.

Thus, Islam spread on the coasts of Eritrea and its northern and western parts and in a part of its plateau through Adulis and Bade, which is the same route through which Christianity had entered. There was no friction or religious wars between the adherents of the two religions.

The people lived in the tolerance they had been known for and under their unity of origins and of commercial, agricultural, and pastoral common interests. They coexisted peacefully according to the motto, "Your religion is yours, and my religion is mine", until foreign powers

(Turkey and Portugal) interfered in the sixteenth century and drew the people of the country into confessional wars.

It is noted that until now the inhabitants of Eritrea who embraced the two religions, Christianity and Islam, retain many old pagan relics. This is due to the proliferation of ignorance and the confinement of religious teaching within few groups, especially as most of the Moslem tribes are pastoral, which renders the establishment of fixed educational centres difficult.

Actually, no centralized authority developed in Eritrea in the middle Ages except for the Beja kingdoms of pastoral origins and the small principalities on the plateau. On Dahlak, a mercantile principality arose.

However, the spread of Islam was not confined to the Eritrean coast, but extended across Eritrea into Habasha until seven Islamic Arab kingdoms were formed. These were known as the lands of the Islamic mode (i).

(i) These kingdoms are Ifat, Dawra, Arabini, Hadivaa, Sharkha, Bali and Dara. They stretched from Zeila on the Somali coast in Aden Gulf into the heart of Shoa (Ifat) and to the Arusi lakes. Details of these kingdoms are to be found in Arabic history books such as: "The Range of Sight in the Kingdoms of the Land" by Ibn Fadlallah Al Umari and "The Knowledge of Moslem Kings in Habasha" by Al Makrizi.

Ullendorf, in "The Ethiopians", attributes the rapid spread of Islam among Hamitic - Cushitic peoples on the coasts of Eritrea and within Ethiopia to the Arusi lakes which is near the current Kenyan borders to the desire of those people to escape enslavement. The slave traders were extremely cruel, and Islam gave these people safety as it forbade the enslavement of a Moslem. Trimmingham, in "Islam in Ethiopia" adds that embracing Islam gave them a sense of belonging to a universal brotherhood without having to divorce their environment and their customs which the missionaries of Islam were tolerant with.

### **The Flourishing of Dahlak Islands**

The principality of Dahlak acquired a great commercial significance in the Middle Ages. Its Sultan became independent of the ruler of Yemen after he had been his vassal, except for gratifying and placating him by sending presents of slaves, honey and wax.

He expanded his possessions until they included the island of Bade and the regions of the Eritrean coast, and forced the neighbouring tribes to pay tribute to his viceroy in Bade (Massawa).

The economic revival was accompanied by a kind of cultural revival. Scholars settled in it and a centre for teaching religion and language was established. The beautiful Kufi scripts which are widely engraved on shrines, graves, mosques, and places reflect the cultural revival.

Both Al Massoudi and Ibn Hawkal indicated the flourishing trade on Dahlak islands, especially the infamous slave trade. The inhabitants of Dahlak presently speak a corrupted Tigre dialect mixed with words from Danakili, Arabic and Tigrinia, reflecting the historical relation of the islands with the neighbouring provinces and the movement of the inhabitants and their mingling for purposes of trade, wars and education.

### **The Regions of Islami Eritrea as**

## **Described by Ibn Al Fadl Al Umari**

The famous Arab historian, Ibn Fadlallah Al Umari, in his manuscript "The Range of the Sight in the Kingdom of the Lands" of which a photocopy is preserved in the Egyptian library in Cairo, points to the narratives related by Sheikh Abdullah Zeila'i about the Sultanates established by Moslem Arabs on the coasts of Eritrea, the Somali coasts and south Habasha. He says that all the Moslem kings in Habasha stand in awe of the ruler of Ifat and are subordinate to him at times. He adds that the road to Ifat from Egypt is a branch of the road going to the Amhara land and the rest of Habasha.

Al Umari describes the provinces which make up modern Eritrea: "Near this land are Bade, Sawaken and Dallak, all of which are Moslem. Its land is the least negotiable because of its many high mountains and its great entangling trees. So that if its king wants to travel to one of its part, he is preceded by people devoted to the improvement of the road with took to cut down the trees and by setting them on fire to burn them down.

These are numerous people and they are the only kind of people in this land, because they are the toughest Hamites and the most experienced in penetration the jungle and forcing their way through it. They have always been invaders and avid hunters of wild animals. The strength of their horses is shown in the fact they do not wear anything or dress their horses in war. Though they are known for their courage, they accept mediation and forgive crimes. It is their tradition that whoever throws down his weapon in war is not to be fought. Though they are one race, they speak many languages.

Their country is from the undulating eastern side to the northern side, the Indian Sea (he means the Red Sea) and Yemen, and the western side to the land of the Tekrur. Its first part is a depression called Baraka valley which leads to a province called Saharat. The dress of the natives of this land in winter is the same in summer; the notables and the soldiers wear silken cloth and Indian capes and the like; the commoners wear a woven, unsewn cotton dress, each having two such dresses. Their weapons are bows and arrows, swords, knives and lances. Most of the natives deal in bartering sheep, cattle, grains, etc... The food utensils are earth-ware. Their fuel is wax and their lamps are oiled with cow fat".

This accurate description gives us a complete picture of the social conditions and the way of life of the people of Eritrea which are worthy of study.

## **The Rise of the Amhara Kingdom**

After the defeat of the Aksumite rule of Yemen at the hands of the Persians and the Yemenites, the Persian hegemony over the Red Sea and the recession of the Roman influence in Adulis and the other Red Sea Ports, the power of Aksum began to decline.

What added to its isolation was the advance of the strong Beja tribes and their spreading from the kingdom of Nubia and the Nile valley to the coast of the Red Sea where they appreciated the pastures. Then they penetrated the plateau of Eritrea and the Tigrai. The kingdom of Aksum had no power to face them, so they advanced on Aksum occupying the Hamasein region on the way.

The people of Aksum were compelled to migrate to the south. With the Arab Moslem occupation of the Red Sea coasts, Egypt and Syria, and with the defeat of the Byzantine Roman Empire, the ally of Aksum and the source of its material and spiritual wealth, before the Arab advance, Aksum's link with the world was severed.

In the eighth century A.D. Aksum could no longer manage to preserve its independence except in the Tigray province and its southern parts, where the strong Agau tribes lived, to which they had to immigrate.

The Aksumites spread their language, Geez, and their Christian Orthodox religion among these pagan tribes and mingled with them. These were originally Cushites. The mingling through three centuries produced a new element which developed its own language called Amhara. This element occupied the provinces of Tigray and Lasta, which had been called the Amhara, Shoa and Ghojam province. Therefore, the Amhara are a people produced by historical intermarriages between the Aksumite people of Semitic-Cushitic origins with people who were racially and culturally Cushitic. They are, therefore, a hybrid people of a predominantly Semitic culture.

Since that time, what we may call the real state of Habasha as distinct from the extinct state of Aksum started to develop and acquire its own character. This hybrid mixture (Al Amhara) is but the outcome of the interaction of a class of Semites with the Hamitic natives, among who were the numerous Agau tribes. There were many languages and groups in this new kingdom, but the Semitic languages, Geez, Amharic and the Christian Orthodox religion were predominant.

In the middle of the tenth century A.D., the Jews found the opportunity ripe to assume the rule of the land after the conditions worsened with the isolation of the kingdom of Aksum from the outside world and its destruction. A Jewish woman called (Esther or Judith) who was the queen of the Jewish Falasha tribe, of the Agau element in the region of Samin in Northern Habasha, which had been a zone of Jewish influence since ancient times, arose and advanced at the head of Jewish rebels.

She was aided by herds of the Zague tribe, which was a subgroup of the Cushitic Agau. The queen invaded the country, burnt down cities, ruined churches and occupied the kingdom of Aksum. She massacred all the Christian rebels entrenched in the castles of Dambo and installed herself queen of Habasha. Her dynasty was called the Zague dynasty, and it ruled the country for almost three centuries after its kings had embraced Christianity. Its most famous king was Lalibela, found the famous church built into a mountain in Lasta. It still stands as a beautiful historical piece.

The reign of this house was terminated at the hands of Ykunu Amlak, who founded what was called the Solomonid dynasty - in relation to the prophet Solomon the Wise - in 1270, in cooperation with father Teklahima Nout in return for granting the church one third of the lands in the country.

## **Chapter X (p 145)**

### **The Amhara Kings Aspire to Control the Eritrean Coast**

#### **The Intervention of Portugal and the Turks and the Religious Wars**

##### **The Causes of the Hostile Amhara Attitude towards the Principalities of the Coast**

The reign of the Zague Dynasty was an age of peace for their neighbours of the kingdoms of the Islamic mode and the kingdoms of the Eritrean and Somali coast from Zeila' to Sawaken.

However, once Ykunu Amlak acceded to the throne of the Habasha kingdom, he started a series of religious wars which were the first of their kind in Habasha and were aimed at the states of the Islamic mode. Al Shater Bussayli says in "The History and Civilisation of eastern and central Sudan": "The hatred displayed by Ykunu Amlak was not rooted in religious reasons. First and foremost it was because of Moslem control of trade inside Habasha and abroad and also of the ports and the caravan routes. "

Abdul Majid Abdeen says in "Between the Arabs and Al Habasha":

"The bad relation with the principalities of the coast was affected by the old wars between Aksum and Yemen. These principalities that arose in Bade (Massawa), Daklak, Zeila' and Sawakin represented the Arab state, the state of Himyar, and the wars between it and Aksum. The Habashite kingdom of Amhara launched campaigns just as the kingdom of Aksum had launched its campaigns in the past against Himyar and considered them as hostile Arabs".

Whatever the motives, the hostility displayed by Ykunu Amlak led to grave results and entailed wars that lasted for three centuries, which left negative effects on the nature of the relationship between the two sects from which the country still suffers. These wars climaxed with the intervention of Portugal and the Turks.

The sultans of Egypt interfered to conciliate the Moslem states and the Habasha Kingdom, sometimes exploiting the patriarch of Alexandria to influence the Amhara kings. Also, the kings of Habasha sometimes interfered to improve the lot of the copts of Egypt, as they did in the reign of some Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt.

The Raid of King Isaac on the Eritrean Coast in 1420, the hords of king Isaac, the son of David, raided the Eritrean coast and destroyed the villages of Harkiko, Zula and Bade and looted shops, sheep and cattle. A great number of people moved to the islands near the coast such as the islands of Sheikh Said and Nora. Others moved to the islands of Dahlak which were the seat of the ruling prince.

The Amharic army retreated a week later under the effect of the intense heat which routed many of its soldiers and the blows of the Beja tribes which rallied its masses to face the invaders.

When his endeavours failed, Isaac made his sole concern forming alliances with the kings of Europe and arranging a comprehensive attack on Jerusalem and Mecca and controlling the Red Sea, but he discovered that his reliance on sending his emissaries during the pilgrim season in Jerusalem did not help him to realize his aims in view of the long journey in a certain period of the year and the perils of travel across the regions of the Saho and the Beja with whom he was at enmity. So he chose another route across Egypt.

He picked a Moslem merchant named Nur Eddin Al Tabrizi, about whom Al Makrizi says that he was a Persian Merchant who made empty boasts. Nur Eddin sought to buy arms and horses for the Amhara king. In 1428 A.D., a Jabarta in Egypt betrayed him to the viceroy who ordered his arrest. Correspondence of the Habasha ruler was found on him and also foreign clothes. He was tried before a tribunal and sentenced to death. He was beheaded in Cairo. Isaac died without achieving his objective.

### **Zara Yakoub Continues the Endeavours of His Father, Isaac**

Zara Yakoub continued his father's endeavours to enter into alliances with the kings of Europe and control the Eritrean coast. He received a letter from King Alfonso V, the king of Aragon, in 1540 in which he welcomed the formation of an alliance between them to seize the coast of the Red Sea and Jerusalem, control the trade of the East and help the Habasha to appropriate the coast. But the difficulty of communications prevented the alliance from coming into existence.

### **Queen Helena Requests Portuguese Aid**

In accordance with the advice of the Portuguese missionary, Pedro de Covillham, Queen Helena, who was regent over her son, Lubna Dengel, 1508 - 1540, decided to enlist the aid of the Portuguese fleet to seize the coasts of Eritrea and Somaliland. She sent a delegation to King Immanuel king of Portugal, to press that upon him. King Lubna Dengel scored a victory in one of his battles with prince Mahfouz, the prince of Adal and Zeila' in 1516 at the same time as the Portuguese fleet which reached the Red Sea under Lupe Soarez, destroyed the port of Zeila'. Lubna Dengel's hopes of seizing the coasts with the help of the Portuguese were heightened.

In 1520, a Portuguese mission under Rodrigo de Lima arrived bearing taken gifts of velvet and silk but no firearms. The Portuguese mission offered King Lubna Dengel a scheme under the terms of which Portugal would control the coasts of the Red Sea and protect the Kingdom of Habasha against any foreign aggression. The Habashite king saw in this an imposition of protection, especially as the confessional difference Catholicism and Orthodoxism which Habasha professes was no simple matter. The two sides did not achieve any worthwhile agreement on account of their different aspirations. The mission went back to its country via Massawa.

### **The Portuguese Fleet Controls Massawa**

In the early sixteenth century, Massawa was a small village with straw houses except for its mosque and the house of its Balu prince, which were built of stones. Its importance lay in its anchorage which was frequented by some ships from the Arabian Peninsula and Sawaken

and its markets which teemed with trade caravans from the Kingdom of Senar, Habasha, and the Beja province.

When the first Portuguese naval force landed on April 10th, 1520, it did not encounter any significant resistance, as it was equipped with firearms. Father Alvarez converted the mosque into a church in the interest of Portuguese soldiers. The occupation of the port by Portugal resulted in the decline of commercial activity and the escape of Indian and Yemenite merchants.

The campaign was harassed continuously. The natives refused to sell them water, since Massawa was an island without water except for what was brought from the suburbs. It was difficult for them to buy meat and dairy produce which they took by force. Skirmishes characterized the relation of these new invaders with the natives. The Balu Prince of Massawa refused to supply the Portuguese mission with a guide to lead it to the borders of Habesha. When threats did not avail, the commander of the Portuguese fleet, Don Diego Lopez de Sequeira, enlisted the service of an Armenian guide, called Mathew, who knew the trails of the country. He died of a fever halfway along the road and was buried in the monastery of Debr Bezan in Akkela Guazi.

### **Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibraheem surnamed the Gran, Overruns the Kingdom of Habasha**

Lubna Dengel's victory over the sultanate of Adal, which we have indicated, did not last long. This principality which comprised Samalis, Arab half-breeds and Danakils managed to regain its strength. This was after a knight called Ahmad Ibn Ibraheem, who as later known as the Imam and as the Gran, i.e. the left-handed, to Ethiopians, had assumed control of its affairs. By marrying into the family of Mahfouz, the Prince of Zeila', this young man managed to gain control of power.

With the murder of Abu Bakr, Prince of Harar, Imam Ahmad extended his influence over Harar, which was an important Moslem stronghold. When he had accomplished this, he started working to achieve the great goal which he felt was his destiny, namely, to be Imam of all Moslems and to conquer all the parts of Habasha. Soon, he announced his refusal to pay tribute to king Lubna Dengel, which made war between them inevitable. When Habasha moved and attacked the Sultanate of Adal, the Imam challenged it and inflicted a crushing defeat upon it.

Starting with that date, about 1534 A.D., Imam Ahmad won consecutive victories and overran the whole kingdom of Habasha until he made contact with Massawa, Sawaken, the Djin principality in Al Gash basin, and Baraka in western Eritrea. He appointed a prince on Hamsein and he contacted Al Fung Sultan in the Sudan. The events of his battles were recorded by Shibabeddin, surnamed Arab Fakih Al Gizani, in his book, "The conquests of Habesha", as he accompanied the Imam on his incursions.

Those conquests were marked by severe repression against the Habashite Christian institutions. According to Arab Fakih, monasteries, churches, palaces and books were burnt. This left bitter memories in the minds of the Habashites, which are embodied in the distrustful attitude of the Habashites towards Islam and Moslems in Habasha. Arab Fakih attributes the cruelty of the Imam to what the kings of Habasha used to do to the Islamic principalities on which their destructive incursions never ceased. Al Hutti (he means the king of Habasha) had forced

the Islamic principality of Hadiyya to deliver as part of the annual tribute one of the beautiful girls of its princes. He would convert her to Christianity and marry her. Before delivering the girl, her people used to wash her, wrap her in a shroud and hold funeral prayers for her; they considered her dead on leaving their religion. It was an age characterized by religious fanaticism, which does not agree with the aims of religion of spreading love and tolerance among mankind.

### **A new Portuguese Reinforcement Defeats Imam Ahmed**

Under the pressure of the Islamic onslaught, Lubna Dengel, who had become a vagabond running from mountain to mountain for his life, was forced to send Joao Bermudez to Portugal requesting aid. He had consecrated him bishop over his defeated country to win over Portuguese aid, although Bermudez was a Catholic who was partial to the Catholicization of Habasha, but expediency prevailed. Bermudez left by way of Massawa, which was in the hands of the Portuguese in 1535, on a long arduous journey to Jawa in India first then around the Cape of Good Hope to Portugal. The journey lasted for more than a year.

Finally, the Portuguese aid arrived. The Portuguese commander, Moito Gentihion known as Christovamor Christopher, the fourth son of the discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope, Vasco de Gama, landed in Massawa on June 9th, 1541. It was such a hot day that he had to take off his silken clothes decked with precious jewels. He had 450 soldiers under him armed with ten guns and matchlock rifles, the top firearm of its time, which were fired by lighting a match at the end of the barrel.

The expedition penetrated into the Eritrean highlands, where it camped at Dibarwa until the end of the rainy season in September in the hospitality of the king of Dibarwa, Isaac Bahr Negash, who joined the expedition. It was him who later allied with the Turks and the 'Naeb' of Massawa against Lubna Dengel's grandson, as will be detailed later.

Lubna Dengel had died in 1540 A.D. in the worst condition of misery and defeat. His son Claudius succeeded him on the throne and received the Portuguese expedition. He engaged the Imam in two battles in one of which the Imam was wounded and the firearms inflicted heavy losses on his army.

He was compelled to withdraw to his bases in the east. He invoked the aid of the Turks in Yemen, who supplied him with ten guns, some rifles and some cavalry. He attacked again, annihilated half the Portuguese force and killed its leader, Christopher. The Imam then felt the strength of his position and returned the Turkish aid to Yemen for fear that it would control him according to Trimingham in "Islam in Ethiopia".

Claudius and the Portuguese gained a respite in which they their ammunition of local materials, and prepared for the decisive battle which took place in October 1542. They triumphed over Imam Ahmad, who was fatally wounded and later buried near Lake Tana. His war-weary army scattered, and the provinces of Habasha soon proffered obedience once more to their king.

### **The Princes of Massawa, Zeila', Dahlak and Sawaken invoke Turkish Aid**

Besides the presence of local causes which brought about this long historical struggle between the adherents of the two religions, Christianity and Islam, in Habasha, whether these causes were commercial, religious, economic or political, the struggle was not without external factors. Portugal and Turkey, which were the two greater naval powers at the time, aspired to control the trade routes of the Red Sea and to extend their influence over its coasts.

Sultan Selim had gained access to the Red Sea after occupying Egypt in 1517 A.D. It occurred to him to engage the Portuguese who had gained control of most of the famous Red Sea ports on the African coast, Sawaken, Massawa and Zeila'. His son, Suleiman Al Kanuni, inherited his dreams, and his conquests reached Yemen. Then he felt he was able to engage the Portuguese at sea and monopolize the trade of the east.

The princes of Massawa, Dahlak, Zeila and Wasaken did not fail to invoke the aid of the Turks, their brothers in religion at a time when the fever religious fanaticism had reached its highest pitch, to expel the Portuguese. They contacted the Turkish Pasha in Zubeid, Yemen, requesting his help. They also contacted the Spanish Catalan merchants who were keen rivals of the Portuguese.

The Portuguese excelled the Ottomans in ship building. Their discovery of the routes of the Cape of Good Hope around Africa to India motivated them into introducing improvements on their ships to cope with voyages on the high seas. Their size was enlarged, their sails were increased, many improvements were introduced on their design, their building and their armament, which had the greatest effect on their naval superiority and made the Turks delay engaging them.

The Catalan merchants supplied the principalities of Zeila', Sawaken and Massawa with a number of ships, and helped them improve the building of their local ships. However, the hour of reckoning did not come until the Turks had completed the building of their fleet.

The control of Portugal of the Red Sea ports had a reverse effect. Their aim was not to enhance trade in the region but to prevent the transit of trade across the Arab countries. Trade was the source of social and economic activity for the ports of the Red Sea and the Arab countries. This fact is clarified by what was written by the Egyptian historian, Ibn Elias, who says: The harm caused by the European increased and their centres in the Sea of Hijaz (the Red Sea) were supplemented until they had more than twenty ships. They harassed the ships of Indian merchants and obstructed their way in dangerous places and looted their merchandise until linen and rice were scarce in Egypt and other countries".

Thus the Portuguese fleet used to impose a strong blockade to prevent ships coming from India and the East from entering the Red Sea. Their objective was to divert trade routes to the Cape of Good Hope, monopolize them for themselves and impose duties on them. The ports of the Red Sea, Massawa, Suwaken, Zeila', Makha, Al Hadida, Aden, Jeddah, Aqaba and Suez were laid to waste. The flow of European goods also ceased.

By 1538, the Turkish state had accomplished the building of its fleet in Suez having brought wood from the Taurus Mountains in the plateau of northern Iraq and Syria. The Ottoman Turks managed to occupy Aden in 1538 A.D. Then they fought the Portuguese fleet in the Indian Ocean. Finally, Sinan Pasha defeated the Portuguese fleet under Juan de Castro at a battle between Massawa and Sawaken. He occupied Massawa and Sawaken in 1557 A.D.

He expelled the Portuguese finally from the region. Ottoman sovereignty was established along the coast of the Red Sea.

**The Principality of Dibarwa Enters  
Into An Alliance with the Turks  
and King Sarsa Denkal Besieges  
Massawa**

Once the Turks settled in Massawa, they made its Balu prince who invoked their aid against the Portuguese a viceroy of the Ottoman Caliph (i) in the land and he was given the power of managing its internal affairs, overseeing its customs and regulating the affairs of its tribes according to the treaty, provided the Turkish garrison in its castle to protect the country from foreign dangers.

(i) The ruling family in Massawa has retained the title 'viceroy' until the present. The seat of the viceroy was 'Harkiko' and sometimes 'Um Kilo' and not the island port of Massawa itself. 1973, Ethiopian authorities took away the nominal viceroyalty in Harkiko from the current viceroy, Abdul Karim Mohammad Ahmad, and replaced him with one of the citizens as a 'market chief.

Then the Turks thought of expanding their possessions inward, especially as the Habasha plateau with its rainy climate and perennial spring had always tempted invaders. The Turkish forces under Izdimur Pasha penetrated and occupied the principality of Dibarwa, which was the seat of the Bahr Negash, i.e. the king of the sea, who was called Isaac. It was he who had facilitated the arrival of the Portuguese aid to the negus of Habasha, as we have already mentioned.

Isaac had independent power on the Eritrean plateau, and his capital was in the north eastern part of the province of Serae on the outskirts of the province of Hamasein. He was ambitious and aspired to expand his domain to the boundaries of the historic kingdom of Aksum by incorporating the province of the Tigrai. In the interest of this aim, he entered into an alliance with the Tigrai leaders, Hamalmal, Harbu and Fassilo, and also with the viceroy in Harkiko to contact the Turks through him and obtain firearms from them.

In return for that, he allowed the Turks to build a fortress and a mosque in his capital Dibarwa, so he became actually under their protection. The new alliance was joined by the Balu queen of 'Mazjd' who ruled Al Gash basin and whose influence reached the province of 'Walkite' in Tigrai. She was called Ja'wa, and has already been mentioned elsewhere in our discussion of the Djin kingdom.

The allied armies advanced to the Tigrai plateau and occupied the region of Debre Damu. Isaac Bahr Negash wrote the Ethiopian king, Sersa Dengel, surnamed the king of Sajad, a letter expressing his defiance and saying: "My alliance with the Turkish Pasha was not accomplished through ambassadors, but by sitting with the Pasha at the same table and on equal footing".

Sersa Dengel advanced to meet the allied armies which were attacking his country. A bloody battle took place at Tameben on the Tigrai Plateau in 1578 A.D. which culminated in the defeat of the Turks and their allies. Izdimur Pasha, Isaac Bahr Negash, Queen Jawa, and a large number of their soldiers were killed; when the head of the Turkish Pasha and the head of Isaac were laid on a rug before Sersa Denkal, he said spitefully: "This is the way you wanted it, Isaac; to be with the Pasha on the same rug and on an equal footing in life and in death".

Then Sersa Dengel continued his advance to Dibarwa, where he burned the Turkish fortress and its mosque. He also ordered the plundering of the city, which made the people flee to the Eritrean coast, where they were received by the viceroy of Harkiko.

In 1589 A.D., the forces of Sersa Dengel reached Harkiko, which was the seat of the viceroy and the base of the Turkish Garrison. Fierce battles were fought on the hills overlooking Harkiko in which the Turkish Pasha Kadaward, four of the brothers of the viceroy and a large number of his soldiers were killed. The natives were transferred to the Sheikh Said Island and other islands, as was usual in the event of an Ethiopian attack. The gates of the city were closed, so Sersa Dengel besieged it until the two sides agreed to make a truce. The Turks and the viceroy of Harkiko presented gifts to the king which included a thoroughbred Arabian mare with a gold saddle and his forces went back home.

What is striking is the alliance of Isaac with the Turks, who were his enemies in the past, in an age the main characteristic of which was religious fanaticism. We can understand the motives if we realize that Isaac's goal was the liberation of the Tigray province from Amhara control. The Nationalist factor played its role, and the feeling of unity among the speakers of Tigrinya overwhelmed the religious feeling at a time when the Amhara were trying to reinforce their sovereignty on the Tigray province.

## **Chapter XI**

### **The Relation Between Eritrea and Habasha in the age of the Gondar Kings (the Seventeenth & Eighteenth century)**

#### **King Fasilides Makes an Agreement with the Viceroy at Massawa against the Catholic Missionaries**

After the wars which were waged between the Turks and Sersa Dengel, a period of relative quiet between Eritrea and Habasha followed. Agreements were made with the Turks and the viceroy of Massawa to prevent the Jesuit missionaries from stealing into Ethiopia.

With the end of the wars of Imam Ahmad and the skirmishes which followed, the land of Habasha started to return to a kind of calm imposed by war weariness and the elements of weakness and fatigue. Then the Portuguese made a move to catholicize the Christians in Habasha and abolish the Orthodox confession by sending a big number of Jesuit priests. At first, the reception of these priests by the region was so friendly that Father Pedro Paez managed to convince the Emperor Susenyos to embrace Catholicism. The emperor attempted to make his people embrace this confession.

The result was that he lost the allegiance of his people and alienated the Orthodox clerics. Terrible wars in which thousands of people died took place. The emperor went to such an extreme of repression and violence that he cut the tongue of his own brother for refusing to embrace Catholicism. Finally, his son, Fasil (Fasilides 1632 - 1667) forced him into abdication and issuing a declaration of apology for his embracing Catholicism and announcing his return to the faith of his fathers and grandfathers.

This entailed the expulsion of the Jesuits from Habasha. The church of Rome was moved by these events. It attempted to interfere in the struggle and sent some French emissaries. This irritated Emperor Fasilides and made him draw an agreement with the viceroy of Massawa and the Turkish Pasha in Sawaken to execute all priests who attempted to enter Habasha.

Fasilides did not stop at relying on the viceroy of Massawa and the Ottomans, but also worked on strengthening his relations with Yemen by sending an emissary to Al Imam Al Muwahed Billah in 1642 A.D. asking him to expel or kill any Portuguese who passed in his country. He sent another emissary in 1648 to the Imam who succeeded him on the throne, Al Mutawakkel Alallah, offering his friendship and proposing the exchange of ambassadors. This was a hundred years after the Portuguese aid against Moslem conquests.

Ahmad Hassan Al Haimi, the emissary of the Imam, says in "The Story of Habasha" that the intention of the king was to open a trade route protected by Yemen across Dankalia, remote from the positions controlled by the Turks and the viceroy of Massawa, who used to impose exorbitant duties on goods coming into Habasha, Al Haimi states that Sultan Shahim Ibn Kamel, the sultan of Beylul in Dankalia, provided them with guides to lead them into the heart of the Habasha plateau, and that the Danakili sultan and his people had no relations with Habasha except for trade relations.

On his way back, Al Haimi passed through the Principality of Dibarwa. He states that the office of its ruler was vacant with the death of its prince, Bahr Negash. The area was in disarray. He and his companions were almost killed by highway bandits in the region of Hamasein, where, according to Al Haimi, five hundred of them armed with lances and bows and arrows assembled one night, had the Viceroy of Massawa not rescued them with a hundred soldiers armed with rifles.

The emperor of Habasha seemed to be depending on Moslem Arabs to protect his kingdom from western intervention. This was considered a reversal of the conditions in which Habasha depended on the Portuguese to protect it from the Moslems by means of the Portuguese occupation of the Red Sea ports. We now see a new condition in which the relations of Habasha with the western world are severed, and the Moslems become allies of the Christian Habasha against what the Habashites considered a greater danger; that danger which imperilled them and sought to destroy their religious creed from which stem all the national bonds of the Christian Habashite people.

The viceroy of Massawa applied the agreement to the letter. He cut off the heads of many Europeans, missionaries and others, and sent them to the Gondar kings to confirm his pledge. This conduct of his was not without bias; the viceroy hated the presence of these people in his country and was suspicious of them after his country had tasted the bitterness of Portuguese occupation.

## **The Viceroy Moussa Visits Gondar**

King Yasu (1689 - 1706 A.D.) was known for his political skill dealing with difficult problems by diplomatic means and not rushing into war waging. This is why he did not listen to the advice of his counsellors to wage war on the viceroy of Massawa, Moussa from the Balu house of 'Amir Kuna'. This viceroy imposed heavy duties on merchandise belonging to Habasha, King Yasu resorted to prohibiting the transit of Habashite trade through Massawa.

This led to a trade recession which hurt Massawa more than Habasha, which lived in its splendid isolation in self sufficiency except for what was needed for the luxury of palaces such as garments and jewels. Then the viceroy, Moussa, left at the head of a delegation for Gondar passing through Aksum, bearing precious gifts. A reconciliation was effected and agreement was reached on the flow of trade and cooperation to bar the Jesuit missionaries.

## **The Relation of the Eritrean Plateau with the Gondar Kings and its System of Government**

The principalities of the Eritrean plateau headed by their ruler, surnamed Bahr Negash, king of the Sea, could not afford severing their relations with the Gondar kings. The rulers of the provinces used to visit Gondar in search of gain or to reinforce a political position, especially as the leaderships of the different provinces were not on good terms.

The leadership of Sa'ad Zacca, which was the capital of the Hamasein province, tried repeatedly to reinforce its position with the support of the Ethiopian emperor in Gondar, while their cousins, the leaders of Haz Zacca, refused to submit to Gondar and to pay tribute to the Tigray heads, opting for armed struggle with them. One of their leaders, Ras Wild Mikail, was known for his intense struggle with Emperor Johannes until the emperor managed to capture him, after he had him deceived by Ras Alula, who was rewarded by the emperor with the rule of the Eritrean plateau.

Many leaderships in Karanshim, Halai, Sakniti and Dibarwa did not owe each other allegiance but kept their autonomy while recognizing a shade of influence for the Tigray heads similar to the influence which the sultanate of Senar had imposed on the leaderships of Wadi Baraka and Al Gash in the western region.

The system of government in these provinces was consensual. Each village had a council called 'Baitu'. Several villages in the region met according to their racial affiliation and their common interests to form a bigger council to discuss their common affairs, especially in time of war.

Laws were based on local convention which was called 'Sarat', i.e. jurisprudence. These conventional laws were not recorded at first, then they started to record them for the purpose of accuracy and uniformity of administration. The first law to be written in Tigrinia was the 'Lako Jawa' law, named after the region. This was a hundred and fifty years ago.

## **Relations between Al Gash and Baraka, and Gondar**

The commercial caravans travelling from Sawaken to Gondar were monopolized by the Beja tribes which were spread in the Djin basin (Baraka and Al Gash). There were no reasons for conflict except for the exchange of plundering raids between the Beja tribes and the inhabitants of the Tigrai and Samin provinces. The region was ravaged in the reign of Fasilides, who included it in his war-s with the kingdom of Senar. Other than that, the relation was normal according to the Portuguese missionary, Paez. (Cf our discussion of the Djin basin kingdom, Ch. VII).

### **The Danakils Control the Routes of the Trade Caravans to Habasha**

The Eritrean coastal strip stretching from the Bori peninsula to the Gulf of Obuck in the French Somaliland, currently known as the 'Afar-Issa' province, is considered the historical habitat of Hamitic peoples including the Danakils. These people today are the Saho in Eritrea and Somaliland and the Galla in Ethiopia. They are all of the same origin and most of them profess pastoralism, their languages, and though different now, are very similar.

The Danakils, who call themselves Afar and whom the people of Habasha call 'Adal' which is derived from 'Adal', the name of their sultanate in the Middle Ages, spread from their original habitat on the coast of Eritrea to the boundaries of the Habasha plateau until they occupied the coasts of Awsa and penetrated to the outskirts of Shoa province in the heart of Habasha.

Their Hamitic blood mingled with Semitic blood as a result of intermarriages with the inhabitants of the southern Arabian Peninsula and the migrations of Arab tribes to their habitat sometimes. Thus, many of their tribes presently claim Arab ancestry as is the case with most Eritrean tribes.

In view of the importance of the expanse which they inhabited, and which overlooks Babel Mendeb, the Danakils had a great control over the movement of trade to the Central, northern and eastern provinces of the Habasha. Being predominantly pastoral, they owned large numbers of camels which helped them cross the desert and reach the plateau of Habasha with imports from India, Egypt and Persia of swords, copper and cloth needed by the people of Habasha in addition to the salt which was the staple of their commerce.

They extracted salt from the bitter lake of Assal, the saltpan of Bardoli and the saltpan of Taltal south of Massawa. They traded it for the products of Habasha such as cereals, honey, and butter in addition to slaves. They made salt into bars each of which was called (Umula), weighed half a kilogram and its price varied from one silver rival for every hundred 'Umiulas' to one silver rival for every ten 'Umulas', depending on the distance. For example, Umulas were sold cheaply in the Tigrai plateau and Andretta while they were sold for more in Shoa. The quantity of salt Umulas exported from the salt pans of Dankalia in Bori, Toltal and Assal to Ethiopia in the eighteenth century averaged 30 million Umulas per year.

Salt formed a source of fortune for the Danakil tribes and subsequently a source of conflict among them and between them and the rulers of the Tigrai who imposed heavy taxes on salt which provoked wars and rivalries. We see today in the region of Dankali tens of graves built in the form of pyramids some of which reaching a height of ten meters. These are the graves of their knights who died in fighting against the invasion of Habasha.

The Danakils were and still are a tough people who do not submit to a stranger and are suspicious of strangers. The fate of the foreign missions which set foot upon their land was murder. The Egyptian expedition led by the Swiss Munzinger was annihilated. It consisted of four barges which left Massawa for Awsa across the Gulf of Obuck intending to occupy Habasha in 1875 A.D.. The Danakils annihilated the Italian exploratory mission led by Geolotti on May 30th, 1881 near Beylul. It was the vanguard of Italian colonialization. Italy used this as a pretext to occupy the region of Beylul, and later to occupy the Eritrean coast under the pretext of maintaining order and security.

The Danakils were familiar with sea voyages, as they were also familiar with leading caravans in the deserts. Like their neighbours, the Arabs of the southern Arabian Peninsula, they had worked with ships since remote ages and had engaged in diving for pearls, sea shells and shales. In spite of that, no ship building sites were established in their anchor ages which were known for their independence such as Asseb, Ra'ad, Beylul, Barassouli, Tie'o, Ma'adar, etc... Probably, the case of buying ships from sources in Yemen prevented this.

Although the Danakils were not ruled by a centralized government, the Sultanate of Awsa was a symbol of their power. The Modaieto tribe (Assa Mara) managed to consolidate its influence in the oasis of Awsa in the early eighteenth century after expelling the Imams of Harar who had ruled the oasis since 1577. Its mighty sultans established security and stability so it lured merchants and caravan men. A number of powerful sultans succeeded to its reign such as Gaddafo, Yago (Yehya), Gaddafo Muhammed, Eidaheh, Eidaheh Muhammed, and the Haufari, who ruled the sultanate for sixty years and died in 1862 A. D.

After him, the sultanate experienced an internal power struggle which weakened it and it was occupied by the Wima tribe. On account of instability and lack of security, its commercial position declined with the end of the nineteenth century. Zeila was affected by this, and the trade of Shoa kingdom and the Galla kingdoms was diverted to Tagura and Obok. This reactivated the caravan men.

The region of Dankalia has represented the focus of Ethiopian aspirations since the nineteenth century and their schemes for obtaining a naval outlet were directed unsuccessfully at it. Today, Dankalia is one of the nine Eritrean provinces.

### **James Bruce in Eritrea**

James Bruce, the Scotsman known as the discoverer of the sources of the Blue Nile, devoted a part of his valuable book, ("Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile 1768 - 1773 A.D."), to the description of the Eritrean regions through which he passed. From these, historians knew that the conditions of the country in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were like.

Bruce arrived in Massawa in 1768 and stayed there for about six months, trying to convince the viceroy Omar Agha into allowing him to travel to Ethiopia while the latter put him off. He feared that Bruce might be an expert in the manufacture of weapons and would teach the Ethiopians to make them, thus enabling them of invading his country. The viceroy resorted to various pretexts; once, the instability in the region of 'Samhar', Taroua, and Hamasein, which Bruce says was under the authority of the viceroy.

On another occasion it was the break of internal wars among the various Habasha district. The viceroy expressed his sympathy with Bruce which the latter says was stratagem and deception. In fact, Bruce vented his anger on the viceroy in writing with the cholera he was known for. He even said that the vicerealty uniform was ill fitting the viceroy's ugly body.

Bruce described the viceroy's system of government as being based on a class of soldiers commanded by a sardar, a militia commanded by a Kikhia and a council of notables consisting of 38 persons called a Baitu. This is a name given to councils on the Eritrean plateau.

As for commerce, he said that it was in the throes of recession and decline in all the Red Sea area and especially in Massawa because of widespread wars among the provinces of Habasha, lack of security and the spread of disease to such an extent that a plague in the port of Massawa claimed a thousand lives while Bruce was there.

Turkey had no effective presence. It had a small garrison of thirty six soldiers subordinate to the warden of Mecca. The viceroy did not receive orders from anyone.

Turkey used to pay the viceroy 1050 silver riyals a month in return for the protection of trade caravans in the Samhar region and to provide the port with drinking water. He extended his influence to Sawaken and became the most powerful ruler in the Red Sea.

The relation between Ras Mikail Suhul, the ruler of the Tigrai, and the viceroy did not cease inspite of causes of mutual suspicion and distrust. Bruce indicates that the provinces of Akkele Guazi were under 'bahr negash' in Dibarwa. The Pleisa river was the line of demarcation between the bahr negash's kingdom and the kingdom of Ras Mikail Suhul. It is noteworthy that this river is still the demarcation between Eritrea and Ethiopia at present.

## **Chapter XII**

### **The Egyptian Khedivate Imposes its Sovereignty on the Coast of Eritrea and the Rulers of Ethiopia Renew their Aspirations for the Coast**

#### **Muhammad Ali Pasha Extends his Influence from Hijaz to Massawa**

The Eritrean coast and its port of Massawa have been the hub of commercial life in the Red Sea since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Sherif Ghaleb, the viceroy of Mecca, tried to impose his influence on the area. He sent an expeditionary force in 1808, but it was defeated by the forces of the viceroy of Massawa. In 1811, a small Wahhabi fleet tried to occupy it, but it was defeated. The natives maintained the independence of their region.

In the same year, 1811, Muhammad Ali Pasha conquered Hijaz in the name of the Ottoman Sultan after defeating the Wahhabis. A few years later, Muhammad Ali managed to occupy Sawaken, Massawa and the entire western coast of the Red Sea and placed it under

Egyptian Administration. He established an effective administration, and achieved a sufficient degree of security and opened the region before trade with Europe and the East.

Mohammad Ali Pasha incorporated the state of Massawa into Hijaz under the command of his son, Ahmad Tusun. Tusun left a military garrison of 60 soldiers in Massawa. The viceroy expelled the garrison in 1826 because of a disagreement he had with the Khedival authorities about the expense of protecting the trade routes. The garrison, which the viceroy felt its presence was necessary to check the aspiration of the Tigrai rulers, did not return until the financial problems had been settled.

With the propagation of security, the trade movement was enhanced and the population of the port rose from 2000 people to 5000 people and its relation with Hijaz was strengthened. Huge quantities of gold, silver, incense and agricultural products which came from Habasha and also slaves were transported from it. The well-known commercial establishments owned big ships which ranged over the coasts of Persia, India and East Africa. It was just as Adulis had been two thousand years before.

When the Syrian wars and the intervention of the European countries to settle the Egyptian-Ottoman problem forced the Pasha of Egypt to evacuate the Arabian Peninsula and withdraw its forces from it in 1840 A.D., the Sublime Porte regained its direct influence on the provinces overlooking the Red Sea on both its coasts, the African and the Asiatic. The Egyptian administration, however, returned once more. In September 1846, the Sultan of Turkey agreed to place the ports of Sawaken and Massawa under the administration of the Egyptian Khedive for the duration of his life. In 1849, the Egyptian Khedivate was compelled to return the two ports to the Turkish administration for economic reasons.

On May 4th, 1865 A.D., the Ottoman Sultan issued a firman (decree) giving the Pasha of Egypt the districts of Massawa, Sawaken and their dependencies in return for the payment of an annual sum of 17 thousand gold guineas. The Egyptian government sent Ahmad Pasha Muzhar to the coast of the Red Sea to receive these two ports from the Turkish authorities.

In March 1866, the Egyptian government purchased the rights of ownership of the Add province from the Pashtri Brothers Co. for 5834 guineas, so that "the Egyptian government would have a completely free hand on the coast of the Red Sea" Jaa'far Pasha Muzhar, who travelled the length of the coast to Bab el Mendeb in 1867 A. D., allocated salaries to the heads of the villages overlooking the coast. He reconciled the opposing tribes and distributed "insignias and flags" among them to be put up at their headquarters. The natives viewed these flags as a symbol of the "Sultan of Islam".

The region continued to be under the Egyptian administration until 1885 when it was occupied by the Italians as we explained elsewhere.

### **The Turks Burn Down the Villages of Massawa**

The relation between the viceroy, who was the actual ruler of the country, and the Turks was not always harmonious. There were reasons for disagreement, especially as Turkey used to exploit the rivalry among the cousins in the ruling Balu family. In September 1844 the ruling family objected to the succession of Hassan to the vicerealty after the death of his brother, Yehya, and demanded that the latter's son, Muhammad, be appointed viceroy. The

crisis developed into fighting. The Turkish Pasha advanced to the neighbouring villages, but he was forced to retreat.

Turkey was constrained to send a committee that effected a reconciliation and paid indemnities for the losses which the natives suffered during the fighting. It also undertook not to interfere in the internal affairs of the country and not to make secret contacts with the Tigrai ruler.

In 1846, differences arose once more. Three commandos assassinated the Turkish Pasha in his palace on the island of Twalut, having swum there. The new Pasha, Ismail Hakki, confronted the mutiny ruthlessly, burnt down the village of Harkiko, whose people resorted to the mountains, and stationed 500 soldiers there and a garrison of a 100 soldiers in the village of 'Um Kulo'. The viceroy Muhammed became the Pasha's puppet.

### **The Rulers of Ethiopia Renew Their Aspirations for the Eritrean Coast**

Britain has tried since the beginning of the nineteenth century to help the rulers of Ethiopia occupy the Eritrean coast. The British traveller, Henri Salt, who was British consul in Egypt (1816 - 1827) proposed to Ras Wild Salassie, the Tigrai ruler, invading the Eritrean coast on the pretext of opening the gates of Habasha trade before Europe. He also convinced the British government into supplying him with an amount of arms. But Wild Selassie realized the risks of such a venture and was not enthusiastic for the project. He opted to use the British arms shipment in subjugating the Galla Ieju tribes in his province.

Unlike Wild Selassie, Djusmatch Sabakides saw in the expulsion of the Egyptian garrison by the viceroy of Massawa 1826 his golden opportunity. So he wrote the British king requesting aid for the occupation of Massawa. He found what he was looking for in the person of Lord Valenchia, who had lived in Habasha for a long time, and was known for his enthusiasm for Habashite expansionist schemes on the Eritrean coast. In this, he was of the same school as Stafford, who represented the British government in Eritrea in 1948-49-50 and whose plans led to the linking Eritrea to Ethiopia within a federation.

Soon, the British foreign department approved of Lord Valenchia's propositions of supplying Habasha with large amounts of arms enabling it to impose its hegemony on the Eritrean coast. Lord Valenchia coated his propositions with the necessity of protecting Habasha from the Islamic Ottoman expansion at a time when the Ottoman state bore the title of "The Sick Man of Europe" and was living its last days under the protection of European countries.

The British arms shipment arrived in Massawa, where it was impounded by the viceroy of Massawa who realized the risks of its passage to the ruler of the Tigrai. Sabakides, the ruler of Tigrai, was killed in the provincial conflict which were rending the provinces of Habasha in 1831. The viceroy let his successor, Dyusmatch Wube, have only a small part of the arms shipment under British pressures.

Britain did not take a decisive step to support the ruler of the Tigrai because of the conflict between French and British interests. Wube established close relations with France by means of French Catholic missionaries. Encouraged by the missionary Theophile

Lefebure, Wube sent a delegation to King Philippe requesting arms to invade the Eritrean coast and offering France the Gulf of Zula if the expedition succeeded. The delegation came back in 1841 with a limited supply of French arms.

France was not enthusiastic for the project for fear that it would lose the friendship of Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, and it found Wube's promise of giving it the Gulf of Zula rather ironic, as he was promising that which he did not have. Moreover, it refused the relinquishment on the part of the French Nante Bordeau Company of a large area in the province of Add, which was 90 miles long and ten miles wide.

The company claimed it had bought it from the ruler of Tigrai through the French tourist Comb in September 1840. The French government refused the relinquishment on the part of this French Company, because, from its point of view, Comb did not buy the area from the proprietor of legal sovereignty over the principality of 'Amvila', the princess Alia Ito, the sister of the prince of Add, who ruled his state under the protection of the viceroy of Massawa.

In 1834 Wube, encouraged by the Catholic missionaries, made a massive attack on the plains of Samhar with the aim of seizing Massawa and sent a delegation to the viceroy in Harkiko demanding delivery of the impounded British arms shipment. The viceroy did not respond to his demand. In the following year, he waged other raids on the provinces of Bukus (Keren) Al Habab, Bani Amer, Al Barai and Al Baza and returned with many spoils.

Before Ethiopian pillaging and destruction, there was no alternative but to invoke the aid of the Egyptian Khedivate, which sent a force of 5000 infantrymen and 1000 cavalry led by Amin Bey. The expeditionary force passed through the land of Al Habab, where the ruler, Cantibay Jawid, declared his allegiance to Egypt, which he had resisted before preferring the independence of his region. The presence of the Egyptian garrison helped stop the Ethiopian raids, which were resumed in 1849.

The Turkish government sensed the secret activities of both France and Britain to dominate the Eritrean coast, so it decided to impose its influence on the coast without resorting to violence. It sent the Turkish Pasha in Massawa, Porto Effendi, instructions concerning the operation. In accordance with the new plan, the Turkish Pasha enlisted the help of a member of the viceregal family, Ahmad Ara.

The latter induced the people into signing petitions declaring their allegiance to the Sublime Porte by exploiting the Ethiopian threats. He also urged them to hoist the Ottoman flag over the ports of the entire Eritrean coast. Ahmad Ara strengthened his position by his successful campaign against highway bandits, the most dangerous among whom was the knight known as 'Bilal', who terrorized the province of Zula, and establishing security in the country.

Thus, the Turkish Pasha, with the help of Ahmad Ara, managed to raise the Ottoman flag without any difficulty on the entire Eritrean coast, from Zula to Ayat south of Add and on the Dahlak islands.

In March 1862, Princess Alla Ito, who was ruling 'Amvila', announced her acceptance of Turkish sovereignty and the Sultan of Add did the same. As for the Sultan of Beylul and the

Sultan of Arhita, they declared their allegiance to the Sultan of Awsa. The attitude of Egypt and Eritreans towards Lord Napier's expedition against the King of Habasha.

In 1855, Kassa, who had been leader of the highway bandits, crowned himself Emperor of Ethiopia in Gondar under the name Tewodoros III (Theodore) after eliminating all the rival kings and princes.

In 1860, the British Consul, Plowden, was killed by some Habasha tribes. Tewodoros sent Queen Victoria a letter of apology after he had avenged the deed by killing 2000 men of that tribe, indicating the necessity of alliance with Britain to destroy the Turks and concluded his letter by saying:

"I am afraid that if I sent a delegation bearing my gifts to you, they would be seized by the Turks who control the ports of the Red Sea. Therefore, I beg you to tend the safety of my emissaries in all stages of the way. I would like to receive a reply to this letter of mine via the new consul, Cameron, who is bearing my letter to you. See how Islam treats the Christians!"

It happened that one of the British foreign department officials neglected Tewodoros' letter, so he did not get a reply. This provoked his anger (he was choleric to the point of madness; the Armenian translator, Rassam, said of him that he was liquidating the people of Habasha rather than ruling them), and he considered that an insult. The gravity of the matter loomed larger before his eyes when he learnt that Cameron had returned from London to the east of the Sudan to study the possibility of cotton cultivation there.

The Sudan was then the implacable enemy of Emperor Tewodoros in view of the presence of the Egyptians in it, the news of whose preparations to invade Habasha used to reach him from time to time. He swooped on the European missionaries in Gondar, put them in chains, and threw them in jail. The British Consul, Cameron, had hardly returned to Habasha in 1864 when he arrested him and put him in jail with the others.

When Britain was sure the failure of its endeavours to release the consul and the other European subjects peacefully, it mobilized an expeditionary force under the command of Lord Napier, which consisted of 32,000 men, 55,000 beasts of burden and 44 elephants. It disembarked in 1867 at the Gulf of Zula south of Massawa. It set up a huge camp at Zula, two docks for the anchoring of ships. This was the first time that a dock was built in 14 centuries after the extinction of Adulis. It also built two water distillers to make seawater drinkable and a 30 kilometre long railway from the coast to the outskirts of the mountains. It was the first railway ever built in Eritrea.