

## **Political history of Eritrea before colonisation (1865-1885) - the example of the Blin people -**

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Until today the greatest focus of classical historiography in the region laid on the centre of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom. Local history, however, deserves more attention - and I personally find the history of borderlands, of peripheries, especially interesting. Lying between bigger powers, politically their situation is often rather a precarious one; culturally they are crossroads of cultures. There are few works on such regions until today; Alessandro Triulzi with his book on the Beni Shangul has certainly done a pioneering work. Borderlands often combine traits of more than one dominant culture, and develop creative political responses to threats against local stability. In a sense, the Erythraean area is such a region<sup>1</sup>. In the second half of the 19th century it is was subject to a most dramatic reorganisation of local political structures, which preceded and to some extent prepared later Italian colonisation. In my thesis I try to combine historical anthropology with political history. International interferences (in the framework of rapidly growing imperialistic interests) responded to local developments (within the very ancient local ethnic groups) and vice versa. To locate sources (e.g., diplomatic reports from Massawa, letters of local leaders, reports of European settlers) archives and libraries in Eritrea, Ethiopia, France, Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany, among others, had been visited; in field research I also got access to oral tradition.

To write a "History of Eritrea" before the foundation of the Colonia Eritrea in 1890 would certainly be anachronistic. But it makes sense to describe the pre-colonial history of this Red-Sea-region in another sense: This area had been, for centuries, a periphery of both Ethiopia and its Arabic neighbors, e.g., the Ottoman Empire. Not in a modern national sense, but in the sense of a range of interconnected borderlands it has an old history for its own; and then, after the cession of Massawa to Egypt in 1865/66 by the Sublime Porte, a phase started, in which large parts of today's Eritrea became successively part of one larger administrative unit.

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<sup>1</sup>To avoid confusion with today's Eritrea: The term "Erythraean area" describes the culturally closely interconnected and simultaneously very diversified borderlands between the core of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom and the Red Sea, the "Mare Eritreo" (as sometimes called in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian) or "Bahre Eritra" (in Ge'ez); "Erythraea" already appeared as a geographical term for the lands at the Southern Red Sea in the 1870s, such as "Abissinia Eritrea" in the 1880s..

Most significant roles within the Egyptian unification of traditionally autonomous regions and ethnic groups were especially played by Hamasen<sup>2</sup>, Akkele-Guzay, the Bogos lands (the country of the Blin<sup>3</sup>) and Barka. The Blin have been studied by scholars since the 1850s<sup>4</sup>, and should, therefore, be well-known today, but in fact the knowledge on them is fragmentary and sometimes confused. This is also due to the fact, that they, as a rather small ethnic group in the Northern Eritrean highlands (max. 100,000 members today - a number which is including non-Blin-speakers, who still identify themselves as Blin), had always close connections with the dominating neighbors, diverse Tigre groups and Tigrinya speakers, and became less "visible" behind these dominating cultures.

Since the 1850s they were not only studied, but also became a focus in international politics in the Red Sea area. Virtually every report of the diplomatic representatives of France or Great Britain, residing in Massawa, contains information on the "Bogos lands". As a number of Bogos chiefs report in a letter to the French government in the 1860s, they had been living isolated and in peace for about two hundred years, after they got separated from the Christian Ethiopian kingdom due to its loss of power and territorial extension<sup>5</sup>. They complained about having lost peace due to the recent establishment of the Egyptians in the Sudan.

The internal political structure of the Blin seems to have remained intact for centuries; their traditional law preserves characteristics of the ancient law of the Ethiopian kingdom, which, in its turn, had been borrowed from the Byzantine Empire in late antiquity. Christianity was remembered, but there were almost no priests to transmit knowledge on the doctrines of the Church. Political leadership was in the hands of chiefs of kinship groups, who acted autonomously. However, in assemblies, visited by representatives of all Blin groups, questions of law and other matters of mutual concern, were discussed.

Egypt under Mehmet Ali had become a regional power in the early 19th century, virtually independent from the Sublime Porte. The Sudanese kingdoms were subsequently annexed; in 1840 Kassala (today the Sudanese bordertown on the road to Eritrea) was founded by the

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<sup>2</sup>Its leader ras Woldenki'el in the 1870s for some time allied with the Egyptians.

<sup>3</sup>Often "Bogos" has been used as a synonym for "Blin"; strictly spoken, this is not correct. The northern Blin are the inhabitants of Halhal, the southern Blin those of Bogos (with Keren as their main city). To find a term for the area of the Blin in the 19th century, Europeans started to call it (and adjacent regions) "Bogos lands".

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Werner Munzinger, *Ueber die Sitten und das Recht der Bogos*, Winterthur 1859; Giuseppe Sapeto, *Viaggio ai Mensa, ai Bogos e agli Habab*, Milano 1857.

<sup>5</sup>Letter to Emperor Napoléon III., 21 April 1864, in which they also formally asked for becoming a French Protectorate (more on this curious episode see underneath); reprinted in Sven Rubenson, *Tewodros And His Contemporaries 1855-1868*, Lund 1994 (Acta Aethiopica vol. 2), no. 145 (= p. 236-37).

Egyptian administration. Barka, mainly populated by the free Beni ‘Amer herders and diverse Tigre groups, was officially included into the province of Taka with Kassala as its administrative centre. This annexion stayed rather theoretic, as the Beni ‘Amer did not submit. However, in regular raids, the Egyptian troops in the 1840s and 1850s even reached the areas of the Blin. Harrassed also by raiding neighbors, especially the Beni ‘Amer, the pressure on their habitat in their agriculturally extensively used, fertile highlands was growing. The northern group in Halhal succumbed and converted to Islam.

To clarify the diverse ethnic (self-)denominations of the Blin (in Western tradition *Bilin*, in Tigrinya *Bilen*, *Bileyn*), which are sometimes confused in the literature, I shall now go into some details: In local terminology the Blin inhabitants of Halhal were called, after their ancestor, *Ta’a-qur*, 'the children of [the apic ancestor] Ta’a'<sup>6</sup> (also *Ta-qur*, or, in Tigre, often adopted by the Blin themselves, *Bet Tawqe*, *Bet Taqwe*, or even *Beni Ta’a*). Their southern neighbors, the Bogos<sup>7</sup>, with their centre in Keren, mostly stayed nominally Christian, but got under similar pressure. They were called *Bet Gebre Tarqe* (or, in pure Blin, *Gebre Tarqe qur* or *Tarqe-qur*). When the Ethiopian Empire was extended again under the reign of atse Yohannes IV (1872-89), raids by ras Alula, the new governor of Mereb-Mellash (central Eritrea), increased the pressure on the political and economic stability of the Blin.

A closer look into the involvement of the Blin in international politics reveals some interesting details, which illustrate well the preparation of late 19th-century-colonisation: The arrival of a French-sponsored Catholic mission in the early 1850s in Keren had a lasting influence on the future of the Blin, especially those of Bogos. The French, trying to answer to the British's influence in the Red Sea area, already in the 1840s sent a consul to Massawa; their friendship seemed attractive to the Blin. When Blin elders complained over attacks by Muslim neighbors from Egyptian territory<sup>8</sup>, the French managed to pressurize the Egyptian government to an extent, that important sums were paid as a recompensation. The raids were not stopped, but from now on the Blin used the services of the Christian powers present in the area; once also the British were their advocates for an Egyptian recompensation.

Religion traditionally was identified with political alliance. The conversion to Catholicism of many inhabitants of Keren and surrounding villages led to a growing identification with French influence; in a letter, the Blin leaders even call their territory a "*devlet fransa*"

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<sup>6</sup>Leo Reinisch, *Die Bilin-Sprache*, 2: *Wörterbuch der Bilin-Sprache*, Wien 1887, 24.

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Mikael Ghaber, *The Blin of Bogos*, Baghdad 1993.

<sup>8</sup>Chiefs of Bogos to Vice Consul Lejean, 1 January 1863, in: Sven Rubenson, op. cit., no. 119 (= p. 204-05).

(Ottoman Turkish for 'French province'). French settlers arrived and cultivated tobacco. The French government de facto accepted a weak protectorate over them, managed by the French consul in Massawa. Simultaneously, however, the traditional leader of Hamasen, from the local Deqqi Teshim dynasty, still regarded the Bogos lands his dependency. A curious, but interesting expression of their ambiguous political status is the fact, that in the late 1860s the leader of Hamasen appointed a local French settler as governor (a post which consisted mainly in the collection of taxes). To summarize: The Blin, guarding their age-old local political autonomy, from the 1840s had to accept their quasi-incorporation into the Egyptian province of Taka, but simultaneously stayed a dependency of the Christian province of Hamasen; to this they added the establishment of a French protectorate. Starting with the French "protection of Oriental Christians" (here: Catholic converts), this status, as can be observed in the French documents written in Massawa over the years, successively changed into "our protectorate over Bogos".

France never decided to actively use the mission, the French settlers and the converts to establish a true colony; and they disappeared from the scene after the defeat of France by Germany in 1870. New insecurity occurred, followed by a need for a new "protector". Soon, in 1872, the Blin were occupied by large Egyptian military forces from Massawa and formally included into East-Sudan. The Egyptian governor, who was responsible for the operation, curiously was one of the scholars, who had first described the Blin in the 1850s, had then married a Blin woman, and now changed into a local "Erythraean" politician: Werner Munzinger, the son of the former Swiss Head of State Joseph Munzinger.

Unknowingly, the Blin acquired a certain prominence in European debates on international politics in the Red Sea area and more than once contributed to hectic exchanges of diplomatic notes by the European powers on the "Bogos question". For a short time, the area was ceded again to the Christian Ethiopian State under Yohannes IV, following the belief, that this would contribute to more stability in the region (1884/85). However, shortly thereafter the Italians took over Massawa (1885) and after establishing alliances with a number of local ethnic groups like the Tigre-speaking Habab in Sahel (1887), they annexed Keren (1888), the Blin thus again changing their political affiliation.

The Blin illustrate well the situation of borderlands in a specific case: Their constant changes of alliances, even of religion, helped them to preserve their inner cohesion and their local cultural traditions in a framework of growing involvement in regional conflicts<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>The latest publications on the Blin from the point of view of social and historical anthropology are: Abbebe Kifleyesus, "Bilin, Speaker Status Strength and Weakness", in: *Africa, Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto Italo-Africano* (Roma), no. 1, 2000, p. 69-89; Wolbert Smidt, "Bilin ethnography" - "Bilin history", in: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1 (A-C), Wiesbaden 2003.