

Indigenous Governance among the Southern Afar (ca.1815-1974), Ethiopia

Mohammed Hassen¹

Abstract

The Sultanate of Aussa among the Afar has been vigorously implementing its indigenous governance. It was the incorporation of the Sultanate into the Ethiopian central government in 1974 that ushered the demise of its independent existence. The question that naturally follows is that how the centralization of power degenerated, in relative terms, the non- hierarchic system of indigenous governance? The objective of this paper is to identify the elements of indigenous governance and the mechanisms of how this indigenous governance kept peace and stability in between 1815-1974. It also attempts to investigate how the *status quo* was affected by the internal and external factors that withered the dynamics of indigenous governance which resulted in the frequent occurrence of conflict. The data for this work are qualitative and taken from a review of published and unpublished historical, ethnographic and sociological materials. Relevant conceptual framework related to the subject is also used to interpret and analyze the literature consulted. Based on the data, the paper argues that the incorporation and subordination of Aussa in favor of imperial centralization has a negative consequence on the indigenous governance of the relatively stable Afar communities. The result demonstrates that the indigenous system of governance works to the best of the interest of its peoples, provided that it is given proper protection and respect that in turn promotes peace and stability.

Key words: *Indigenous governance, Sultanate of Aussa, Emirate of Adal, imperial centralization, Conflict, structural functionalism*

¹ Lecturer, Department of History and Heritage Management, Haramaya University. Currently PhD student in the Department of History, Addis Ababa University

Introduction

The Afar are one of the most ancient and indigenous peoples in North East Africa belonging to the Cushitic language family. The Afar first appeared in the literature in the 13th century writings of the Arab Geographer Ibn Said (Lewis 1955: 155). Even though the extant literature do not reveal the meaning of the term Danakil, it appears more probable that it is the name of one of the clans, Dunkulu found in northern Afar. The Afar are called Adal by the Amhara, Taltal by the Tigreans, Danakil (Singular: Dankali) by the Yamani Arabs and Udali by the Somali. But they call themselves Afar, which does not exist in the literature. The term Afar, according to some of the sources is inherited from a clan name called Almafra, found in Yemen (Jamaladin and Hussien 2007: 34).

There are different traditions tracing the genealogy of the Afar. One of the most articulated and widely spread myth which is also common among some Muslims of Ethiopia claims that the Afar were descendants of their earlier Arab migrants. This tradition alleges that the Afar, especially the *Asoimara* trace their descent from *Hare-el-Mahes*, a Yemeni Arab who landed among the Afar close to Tajura at a place called Dammoho and was said to have had four sons. These are *Adiali*, *Sambul Lak Ali*, *Modaitu* and *GuraliIsa*. (The latter are the ancestors of the Issa Somali who through time became the implacable enemy of the Afar) (Cossins 1973: 10; Jamaladin and Hussein 2007: 34).

However on the basis of linguistic and other evidences, Lewis challenged the foreign origin of the Afar. He hypothesized that the Afar along with their close relatives, the Saho were indigenous to Ethiopia and the Horn. The Afar came to occupy their present habitat as a result of the population movement from the southern part of Ethiopia (Lewis 1955: 155). But there is no clear indication of the specific time for their movement northwards. Neither the direction of their movement was clearly traced.

The Afar are essentially pastoralist herdsmen living in an infertile and hostile environment of desert, lava streams, volcanoes and salt depression included into three sovereign states: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. (Ayele 1991: 10-20) Although they are extended over parts of artificial boundaries, they naturally form well defined arid geographical location which has been reinforced by more or less homogenous indigenous socio- cultural and political institutions. Linguistically they are also mutually intelligible. (Trimingham 1965: 8)

In Ethiopia, until the recent establishment of the Afar National Regional State under the Federal Government of Ethiopia, they were divided among the administrative regions (*Kifle hageres* during the *Darg* regime) of Tigray, Wallo, Shoa and Western Hararge. The present Afar National Regional State, located in Northeastern part of the country, consists of a total area of 85,410 square

kilometers (CSA 2008:5-6) and shares borders with the Regional States of Oromia in the south; Amhara in the west; Tigray in the northwest; as well as the sovereign states of Eritrea and Djibouti in the north and east respectively

According to the population census report of 1996, the total population of the Afar was estimated to be 1,106,383 of which 92% live in the rural areas. Based on the same source for 2007 population and Housing census the total population is found to be 1,411,092 from which only 13.4% is urban (CSA 2008:5-6). This figure comprises both the northern Afar groups (*Sabul alkali*) who are living along the borders of northeast Tigray and Southern Eritrea; and the southern Afar clans (*Modaitu*), who are living along the lower and middle valley of the Awash river). Indeed, this kind of geographical demarcation does not exist among the Afar who claim that there is no difference in Afar land and they move freely as all land belongs to them.

The Afar economy has essentially been based on pastoralism with pasture land being communally owned. But since the 1960s, the Afar economy and traditional land ownership was threatened by a combination of internal and external factors. Most important among these were: An increase in both human and livestock population, the advent of commercial mechanized farming, recurrent drought, the construction of *Qoqa* dam and the establishment of the Awash National Park with population displacing effects. These factors dwindled Afar grazing lands and aggravated inter and intra ethnic conflicts (Siseraw 1996: 88; Ayalew 1997). It was this economic transformation that primarily resulted in the intervention of outside forces in the internal affairs of Afar indigenous governance and an internal dynamics in favor of centralized political power.

From the vast Afar range lands it was the southern Afar which is profoundly affected by such economic transformations. Southern Afar, the subject of this paper has tried to address these challenges through its own indigenous socio economic and political institutions for which the Afar term is *Finna* (Yacob 2000: 30). In fact such types of institutions seem to be more common among the different pastoral communities like the Oromo *Gadaa* system.

The indigenous socio economic and political organization of the Afar was basically the byproduct of their pastoral way of life. Necessity of resources and freedom of individual herds were common. This in turn was featured with the competition for scarce grazing and watering resources to the extent of aggression among groups of herders. On the other hand, if external groups like the Oromo or the Issa come, they organize and unite themselves to resist. This is explained by the Afar segmentary lineage structure. This structure comprises of a series of articulated social units and provides a view of political organization in a situation where there are no hierarchies of political chiefs or rulers to organize social life. Perhaps this segmentary social organization could be viewed as instrumental for

the relative political stability and order through the resolution of conflicts by balanced opposition of segments at various levels (Siseraw 1996: 88).

The purpose of this article hence is to identify the elements of indigenous political organization and traditional governance and the mechanisms of how this indigenous governance operates among the Afar. This indigenous governance has been in place and was vigorously implemented by the Afar until the effective physical incorporation of the Sultanate into the Ethiopian central government in 1944. Since then the Afar chiefs retain their authority among their people, and the government recognizes them as *balabbats* and uses them for the administration of this desolate area where the provincial administration maintains only a nominal presence (Markakis 2006: 371). As a result the Afar lost some of the indigenous mechanism of conflict resolution which may erupt at ethnic and clan levels. Besides this, the paper has a grand objective of imparting historical knowledge on the hitherto untreated areas and aspects of the peripheral communities like the Afar who have been neglected and marginalized in the Ethiopian Historiography.

This work is basically an attempt of fulfilling the existing knowledge gap. Hitherto, inter and intra- clan competition and conflict over scarce resources, conflict resolution mechanisms, the intervention of the central government and its subsequent impact on resource accessibility of the Afar pastoralists and other related issues are addressed in the literature (Ayalew 1997; Getachew 2001; Kelemwork 2011; Tadesse and Yonas). However, the much neglected and yet worth to be treated is the issue of historicizing the change and continuity in competition for resources and the struggle for power in the Sultanate of Aussa from 1815-1974. In addition, while the northern part of Afar is treated much in different scholarly works, southern Afar did not get that privilege. The present work is also an attempt to redress that geographic (spatial) imbalance.

Methodology

This work is fundamentally a historical research and qualitative in nature with a narrative approach. The materials used in this study are secondary sources like books, monographs, journal articles and travel accounts collected from different libraries. The evidences presented here in support of the discussions are utilized for a reinterpretation of the existing literature with new insights. The sources consulted are collected mainly from the IES (Institute of Ethiopian Studies) Library in Addis Ababa University.

Attempts are made to deal with all the extant literature related to the subject at hand. However, there were some problems with regard to data collection. One of the limitations in making use of some of the materials is their inaccessibility since

some of them are produced in non- English languages. Moreover, space precludes that grand mission. However, an attempt is also made to deal with the most pertinent sources and I do believe that this article would have its modest contribution towards the comprehensive study of the subject.

In this paper two theoretical frameworks are applied since the paper addresses two fundamental issues that need to be treated in any historical writing: Change and Continuity. In order to grasp the basic social structure of the Afar people, I prefer a structural functionalist approach. Since this approach, for a variety of reasons, fails to explain the essence of both internal and external dynamics, I utilized the conflict theory for any change observed in the Afar people since the 16th Century.

It is known that structural functionalism was mainly concerned on societal functions in large scale social structures and institutions with society, how they interrelate and their constraining effects on actors. Scholars in social sciences developed the idea of roles into collectivities of roles that complement each other in fulfilling functions for society. Some roles are bound up in institutions and social structure. These are functional in the sense that they assist society in operating and fulfilling its functional needs so that society runs smoothly. Indeed, social scientists never spoke about a society where there were no conflicts or some kind of “perfect equilibrium.” A society’s cultural value system was in the typical case never completely integrated never static and most of the time in a complex state of transformation.

Contrary to structural functionalism, the conflict perspective assumes that social behavior is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups for scarce resources. Such conflict need not be violent; it can take different forms of non violent method.

The periodization in this study is from 1815-1974. The rationale for the selection of the period 1815 as the beginning for this research goes with the fact that the Aussa Sultanate for the first time got its Afar Sultan after long years of non Afar Sultans, whereas, the period 1974 indicates the end of the sovereignty of the Sultanate with the incorporation into the Ethiopian state.

The Social Structure of the Afar

It is noted that [social] structure does not necessarily indicate lack of change. Those features of a society or any other social group that are regarded as parts of its structure are always generated by dynamic processes (Safra and Aguilar-Cauz Encyclopedia Britannica 2005: 365a). The social structure of the Afar people, like any other society, has been experiencing historic changes due to internal and

external factors. Thus, in dealing with the social structure of the Afar, we are in a way discussing both its features of permanence and its dynamism.

The rationale in dealing with the social structure before the discussion of the traditional governance of Southern Afar is that their indigenous political organization i.e. traditional governance is strongly influenced by their social structure. Besides, the different levels of social units like ethnic and clan have certain political role as will be seen elsewhere in this paper.

The social structure of the Afar is characterized by an agnatic kinship relation. Groups of people trace their descent from their patrilineal lineage. The social organization has at the top what may be called the present sense of Afar “nationalism” which indicates the whole society as one distinct ethnic group, different from others on the basis of language, way of life etc. (Kassim 1985: 331; Awol 1999: 10). Following this the society is generally divided into two main groups. The *Aisomara* (Red men) and the *Adiomara* (white men). While tradition traces the *Asiomara* descent from the three sons of *Harel-Mahes* mentioned earlier, the *Adoimara* trace their descent from the fourth son of *Harel-Mahes* i.e. *Gurali Issa*. Although the question of how the Issa and the Afar came to speak different languages awaits further investigation, the process of fusion and marriage between the Issa and other Somali clans might have resulted in the Issa’s speaking Somali language (Lewis 1955: 156; Trimmingham 1965: 173 ; Cossins 1973: 10).

Traditions vary in their explanation of the dichotomy of the Afar into *Asoimara* and *Adoimara*. Trimmingham and Lewis explain it in terms of status differentiation as the *Asoimara* were the nobles, the upper and ruling class while the *Adoimara* were considered as commoners and subservient (Lewis 1955: 156; Trimmingham 1965: 173). Likewise, Thompson and Adloff (1968: 24) held the view that there is color difference between the two groups, which according to them emanated from the colors of the soil these people live on. Hence, the *Asoimara* took the red color of the soil of the Awash River while the *Adiomara* took the cream colored sands of the gulf of Tajura in Djibouti. In fact the majority of the Afar in Djibouti are the *Adiomara* (Issa) while those found in the southern parts of the Afar (Modaitu) are *Asoimara*. And the tradition of superiority and dominant position is still said to have been maintained and reflected by the royal *Idu-Hissu* (*Adahisu*) clan of the *Afek’ ek Ma’d* clan within the *Asoimara* group.

However, it appears more probable that the present fact and realities nullified these explanations. Both groups are highly mixed through marriage both at tribal and clan levels and there are not any social divisions based upon the traditions. Moreover, some of the tribes like the *Henkeba*, *Kui*, *Dodda*, *Indegoli* and *Hishantuare* are found in both groups (Ayele 1986: 55). As a result it is almost impossible to physically differentiate between the two groups. Savard (1966: 89-98) extensively discussed marriage alliances between *Asoimara* and *Adoimara*. As

an example he mentions the marriage alliance forged between the *Ayilela* clan of the *Asoimara* and the *Modayitu* clan of the *Adiomara*.

Below these general groupings, the Afar are divided into various “tribal”² groups for which the Afar term is *Khido*. A tribe consists of people descending from a common patrilineal ancestor. For the Afar tribe is the highest and territorially localized social organization that comprises a number of clans. The chief of the tribe is called *Makabantu* (Ayele 1986:57; Siseraw 1996:105). Incidentally, there is some kind of semblance in the activities and naming between *Makabantu* and *Mekuannint* (the Political title commonly used in Amharic speaking Ethiopian feudal state) which probes one to create any analogy. However, the validity of the analogy appears to be highly questionable and needs further inquiry since the Afar have for long tribal chiefs before they established a close relation with the Ethiopian government in the late 19th century.

Although, the Afar lands are divided into a number of *khido* territories called *Dinto*, access to pasture and water in a territory is obtained by reference to a tribal membership. But tribal territories are not static, they change as the power of the possessor changes and the use of natural resources at any season is rarely opposed. The Afar have a grazing system where no firm title was attached to land. In relation to this, Siseraw (1996: 105) claims that “... an Afar is free to graze his livestock anywhere in the Afar country.” This implies that the Afar have a tradition of collective proprietorship of land which is informally shared and besides other factors like marriage, it is an important basis of Afar cohesion. Indeed, inter *khido* conflicts and blood feuds are a feature of Afar life. But conflicts over grazing occur either on conservation or access to temporary grazing rights not for their permanent control.

The tribal social unit is followed by clan for which the Afar term is *Mela*. The clan leaders are called *Khido Abba* (Head of a clan). Unlike tribes, a clan

² The word “Tribe” is European invention and has a negative connotation. The European creation of “Tribe” was intimately connected with the racial thinking common in Germanic times and colonial administrators believed that Every African belongs to a tribe just as every European belonged to a nation. (John Illife, A modern History of Tankanyika, pp.323-324. Accordingly, in this work an indigenous term describing the characteristics of “Tribe” is applied i.e. *Khido*. Alternatively “Ethnic group” is also used.

lacks a territory of its own as an independent unit and does not control resources of any sort. Recognized *Mela* boundaries do not exist and all clans have equal rights within tribal boundaries to which they belong. Hence, ownership or control of resources such as pieces of land was never a dispute for Afar clan. Membership belongs to a particular clan through descent reckoned by the patrilineal line. The real and actual social system of the society is expressed and carried out at clan level. Therefore, for the Afar, it is more preferable to identify themselves as members of specific clan than tribe (Ayele 1986: 44; Assefa 1995: 43). There are various reasons for this: (1) It is through his/her clan membership that an individual gains acceptance in the society; (2) An individual seeks and gets assistance first from his clan members regardless of their geographical distance. In such cases like when a man marries or at times of killing for revenge or at times of manmade and natural disaster such as loosing livestock an individual first gets help from his clan members (Savard 1970: 238; Ayele 1986: 44 ; Assefa 1995: 43).

The level below the clan is the lineage for which the Afar term is *Gulub*. The lineage is composed of the local community. The patrilineal descent members are the basis of the lineage. But members are also recruits through affinal ties and patrilocal residence. In the case of affinal ties, an individual can marry either from his father's side or his mother's side. Accordingly, a man can marry the daughters of his father's sisters for which the Afar term is *Absuma* (Plu. *Abusa*) while a girl can marry the sons of her mother's brothers for which the Afar term is *Abino*. This cross cousin marriage is the most preferred and the first choice of an Afar, that provides membership into a lineage. Since the Afar identify themselves with their paternal clan, this type of marriage precludes the couple from belonging to the same paternal clan (Savard 1966: 89-98). The fact that cross cousin marriage is the most preferred type of marriage could be explained with ecological factors. Living in an inhospitable environment, the homogenous group needs this type of marriage to access to production resources and mutual support among the parties and consolidate material benefits. But it is practiced to the extent of one wife. No matter how an Afar could marry more than one, he should look for a second wife from another local community.

Another form of marriage that guaranteed membership of the lineage through affinal ties is marriage between two individuals of the same clan, but outside of the same extended family and outside of a cross cousin arrangement. Members of a lineage could also be recruits through patrilocal marriage. This implies that a woman married could be taken to the house of her husband's father and his locality hence establishing a form of patrilocal residence (Awol 1999: 26).

Below the lineage is an extended family for which the Afar term is *Dahala* (*Budha*). It comprises the father, his wife or wives, their children and the wives and children of his sons. This social unit of the Afar appears to have descendants from a grandfather in the male line and he has a supreme authority over the members (*Awol 1999: 26*).

At the bottom of the social organization of the Afar society, there is a household or family for which the Afar term is *Burra*. It constitutes a minimal or nuclear family where strong solidarity between all members is seen. It is the basic and smallest social unit of the society, characteristically grouped into hamlets and comprises a husband, his wife and his children. The husband is the head of the household and had an important position as a sole decision maker of the family such as when and where to migrate, which stock to sell, etc. The wife is precluded from such affairs. She does not participate in the council meetings of associations (*Siseraw 1996: 32*). Thus, looking at the Afar social organization superficially it reflects the principal aspects of masculine identity which is also reflected in the political sphere. Women represent themselves through praising their men. Parker's collection and translation of Afar songs indicate the way women chant about the heroism and masculine qualities of their husbands (*Parker 1971: 219-287*). However, Afar women still have an important social position and are highly respected. A matrilineal descent plays an important role. Indeed, political groupings, alliances and oppositions are not necessarily determined by the agnatic descent, though it plays a fundamental role. In substantiating the role of Afar matrilineal lineage, Ayele says: "... the affinal links provide a useful subsidiary social bond and often give rise to political obligations... one gets help from matrilineal relatives, since they do not compete for paternal inheritance... one gets help from matrilineal group in case of murder or other issues" (*1986: 60*).

Indigenous Governance among the Southern Afar

Before the establishment of the Sultanate rule in Aussa, in the sense that power being exercised by the Afar, the socio political system of southern Afar was based on kinship system. Even after its establishment, the tribal chiefs continued to have important political role though not as strong as before. In this kinship system traditional Afar leadership starts at *Khido* level. The position is held by a *Khido* chief i. e *Makabantu* (*Siserwa 1996:87*), whose powers were relatively limited. His role was not as such an order giving one but served as an arbitrator of intra tribal disputes and represents the tribe in intertribal arguments

Below the *Makaban* are the clan leaders or *Khido Abbas* (Heads of the clan). Their main role is serving as an initial arbitrator in clan disputes and sometimes

serves as assistants to the *Makabans* of their respective tribes. They also sit in the house of a clan member during mourning and receive guests. The lineage groups below the clan have little apparent authority in addition to performing marriages and leading burial sites (Cossins 1973: 13-14; Ayele 1986: 57; Siseraw 1996: 89)

The *Makabans* and *Khido Abbas* were also responsible in leading tribal and clan assemblies. In assemblies mediations between individuals or groups in conflicts are carried out. Collective decisions on matters of *Khido* and clan issues are also made. These assemblies are open to all and were usually held in sheds of big trees. But the chief (*Makabantu*) does not have a supreme authority. Decision making rests on the general assembly (*Mabilo*) (Ayele 1986: 58). As a central institution of the pastoral Afar, it is a manifestation of a fairly loose non hierarchical political structure. This implies, in a situation where there is no central government to run the pastoral affairs, the Afar developed a political institution by which opposing social beings contend through the medium of verbal communication democratically in public and try to reach an agreement.

The *Makabans* and *Khido Abbas* are also responsible in interpreting the Afar customary law that is *Mada*, which is entertained in the assembly. One of the most important issues which is commonly discussed in an open assembly chaired by the *Makabans* and *Khido Abbas* is crime. According to the Afar, crime is the perpetration of an act forbidden by the Afar customary law. Though the existing literature does not reveal whether there was an external influence, crime acts are divided by this customary law into five: Killing, body injury, looting, adultery and insults (Jamaladin 1973: 2). Since there was no executive or police to enforce the rulings of the *Mada*, the responsibility of the criminal is shared by all members of the clan or the tribe since crime is a collective responsibility. In this the respective clan and tribal leaders have a great role in persuading clan and tribal members in the assembly for the payment of the compensation in any one of the crimes listed above. Of course, it is murder that requires the highest payment in cattle and in cash. Failure to pay blood compensation would result in revenge from the clans of the deceased (Jamaladin 1973: 3-4).

But the question which is not unanimously discussed and shows lack of consensus in the existing literature is the source of the political power for the clan and tribal leaders. Cossins (1973: 12) emphasizes the role of inheritance in the male line with occasional elected elder group. On the other hand, Siseraw (1996: 107-108) gives due emphasis to the ability in superior skill in public speaking as a key to political power. According to him public oratory plays a very crucial role in Afar politics. It is an important instrument in political authority among men who are politically equal. He further claims that persuasion through words in Afar politics is more than wealth and birth. Corroborating Siseraw's argument, Ayele has the following to say: "The social groups of the poor (*tudegoite*) and [the] rich

(geddali) differ in wealth but not necessarily in political power and religious merit ... the large herd owners are not necessarily political leaders...currently a person with oratorical gift and knowledge has access to power, but not necessarily those with hereditary positions in wealth” (Ayele 1991: 10-20).

Taking the disparity into account which should not be ignored, it is important to speculate the sources of the difference. It is apparent that there is a temporal variation for those who have investigated the subject during which there has been a political transformation among the Afar. It is also more probable that the office may be inherited by certain families like the *Aydahiso*, but public oratory is a necessary instrument for the official. Hence, the one who has inherited power through time needs to become an effective orator, who could efficiently persuade people during meetings.

The Establishment of the Sultanate of Aussa

Formal power structure in the form of Sultanate was introduced to the majority of the Afar people since the 16th Century. With the establishment of the Sultanate of Aussa, different social groups of Afar involved in power struggle to secure the office of the Sultanate. Since then the political history of Afar indicates that there were conflict and rivalries over authority among clan chiefs of Afar.

The 16th Century wars of Ahmed *Grag*n (alias *Imam* Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi) against the Christian highland kingdom were the decisive turn in the history of the Afar. Though the Afar made the main fighting wing of *Grag*n’s army as a result of its defeat, the retreating Sultanate of Adal culminated in establishing the Sultanate of Aussa in the arid zone of the Afar (Merid 1974: 241). This assured the emergence of the sultanate pattern of administration among the Afar.

There are two conflicting views concerning the emergence of the Sultanate of Aussa. The first attributes its establishment to a certain Arab coming to the area from a place called Yamu in Yeman (Cossins 1973: 25), while the second considers its establishment as a result of the collapse of the Islamic Kingdom in the Harar plateau. The latter is corroborated by Trimmingham and appears to be a plausible argument. He says “Imam Mohammed Jasa a member of *Grag*n’s family ... thus begins the miserable history of the Imamate of Aussa” (Trimingham 1965: 97).

Though the location of the Sultanate was in Aussa, in the present day southern Afar territory, the office of the Sultanate remained for at least three centuries in the hands of none Afar. It was Kedafo Aydahis from the royal Aydahisu clan that successfully maneuvered *Imam* Salman and transferred the office into the hands of the Afar in the first half of the 19th Century. Hence, Kedafo Aydahis became the first Afar Sultan. His grandfather Aydahis was said to have been a strong tribal

leader and an influential man who has emerged during the time of *Imam Umar*, the father of *Imam Salman*. The royal clan name, *Aydahisu* was also said to have been named after him and the office of the Sultanate became hereditary on the male line and was confined to this clan (Dahilo 1985: 5).

In fact there were many Sultanate and chiefdoms which emerged as contemporaries to the Sultanate of Aussa like the Sultanate of Raheita, Tajura, Biru and Goba'd (Trimingham 1965: 175; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 441; Tadesse and Yonas). But it was the Sultanate of Aussa which remained to be the most important with a considerable influence over its neighbors and has kept its suzerainty for a long period of time from the control of the Ethiopian government. The major factors that contributed to its relative strength were its strategic location along the Assab –Addis Ababa highway which remained to be the life line of the Ethiopian import and export until recently. Moreover, its agricultural potential along the Awash River gave it a solid advantage (Harbenson 1978: 480).

With the transfer of the office of the Sultanate into the hands of the Afar in the first half of the 19th Century the power of clan leaders and tribal leaders became more symbolic and more informal. It was limited to a co-coordinating role. This state of Affairs was strengthened even more during the reign of Ali Mirah as we shall see later. With this, we see the loose and decentralized political structure of the Afar traditional governance that has manifested some signs of centralization.

The office of the Sultanate was organized by different new offices together with the older traditional governance. Structurally the office has some major components. These were the Sultan, the council, the tribal chiefs and the army.

1. The Sultan: He was at the top the tribal leadership and symbolizes the traditional post. The degree of the power and influence of the Sultan had varied depending on the time and personality of the man. The office was hereditary and it was only the members of the *Aydahisu* clan who could take this office. According to Dahilo (1985) there were twelve Afar Sultans. While Cossins makes them thirteen without mentioning their names, Jamaladin and Hashim (2007: 458-493) also mention the names of some of the Sultanates of Hausa but the ordering appears less plausible as there were some Sultans who were totally overlooked and left unmentioned. The twelve Afar Sultans Dahilo mentioned along with their reigning periods were:

1st. Kedafo Aydahis Maska r. 1815-1820 7th. Mohammed Aydahis Hanfere. r 1898-1900

2nd. Hanfere Kedafo. Aydahis. r. 1820-1822 8th. Ali Mirah Mohammed Hanfere r. 1900-1902

3rd. Mohammed Kedafo Aydahis r. 1822-1831 9th Hanfere Mohammed Hanfere. R. 1902-1910

4th. Aydahis Mohammed Kedafo r. 1831-1843 10th Yayo Mohhamed Hanfere r. 1910-1927

5th . Hanfere Aydahis Mohammed r. 1843-1958 11th Mohhamed Yayo Mohammed r. 1927-1944

6th . Mohammed Hanfere Aydahis (Ilalta³) r. 1858-1898 12th Ali Mirah Hanfere Aydahis r. 1944-1975 (Dahilo 1985:8-9)

The major source of income for the Sultans was livestock breeding. Besides, revenue from the long distance trade that passed through the Sultans' territories was also an indispensable source of income for the day to day running of affairs. This was common until the 1960s when Ali Mirah was supplemented by the prospects of large scale commercial farming. The Sultan has thousands of cattle at his disposal which were not personal property. He was only to make use of them to run the affairs of the Sultanate and if he dies or deposed, it would not be inherited by heirs but transferred to the next Sultan (Dahilo 1985: 20; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 458-493).

Among the Afar it was believed that the era prior to Mohammed Hanfere, popularly known as *Illalta* (which literally means center, where many people gather and equivalent with the king of kings) was not significant time in the history of the Sultanate of Aussa. The reign before him was the time of loose administration. Illalta's reign was not only the longest but he also extended the autonomy of the Sultanate more than any other preceding Sultans of Aussa. By consolidating his power, *Illata* brought the traditional chiefs under his control (Dahilo 1985: 9; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 461) and centralized the more decentralized Governance of the Sultanate.

Humad La'ayata was one from among the chiefs who lost his power. As a result it was said that he fled to Djibouti and later allied with the Egyptian expeditionary force led by Warner Munzinger which was wiped out in the Afar desert (Trimingham 1965: 172; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 333-336).

³ *Incidentally there is a school by the name Illalta near the gate of Assaita town*

2. The Council: By origin was an assembly composed of representatives of various tribes and clans at which important decisions concerning the society at large are made. The council at both the tribal and clan levels have the responsibility of making policies, arbitration and passing verdict. There are certain tribes that form the council while others can only be represented by one of these tribes which are members of the council (Dahilo, 1985:29). However, the extant literature does not reveal those tribes which were not represented and the reasons why they were not represented.

The council was composed of representatives from eight main tribes known as *Bahra-ka-ada* which means the eight pillars. These were: *Afke*, *ma'ad*, *Arapta*, *Assabakri*, *Uluto*, *Waadima*, *Henkeba*, and *Kii'u*. There were also *Khido* which were traditionally assigned to carry out particular job. A good example was the office of the supreme judge which was always reserved for a certain tribe and army leadership to others. Nevertheless, this was curtailed by Ali Mirah who made his own loyal appointees for all offices (Dahilo 1985: 30).

3. The Tribal Chiefs: They were representatives of their respective clans and tribes. They have important roles in the administration of the Sultanate like arbitrating disputes between clans and tribes, chairing general assemblies, enforcing the implementation of the customary law (*Mada*). Later, however, with the growing power of the Sultan, especially during the reign of *Sultan* Ali Mirah, their influence decreased and their function was restricted only to representing their respective clans and tribes (Harbenson 1978: 480).

4. The Army: Before the emergence of the Sultanate in Aussa, there was no idea of any organized army in a modern sense. Whenever there was a need, all able bodied men come together and fight. In fact, the pastoral ecology of the Afar made them fight for survival amidst dire resources. With the coming of the Sultanate, however, it became necessary to have certain armed forces that could guard the Sultanate and execute his orders. It was believed that the army was organized and strengthened more during the time of *Dajjasmach* Yayo Mohammed. But more significant developments were seen during the reign of Sultan Ali Mirah. The hierarchy of the leaders of the army before Ali Mirah was: at the top the army leader, with the title "*Mirah*", followed by *Mahadi Abba*, second in command and lastly the commander in-chief of the army (Dahilo 1985:34). However, none of the literature consulted on this subject reflect the meanings of these indigenous terms and their relation to each other.

The Structure of the Sultanate of Aussa during the Reign of Ali Mirah (1944-1975)

The structure of the Sultanate has shown considerable changes during this time. These changes were the results of both internal and external political dynamics. Internally, after a stiff power struggle, Sultan Ali Mirah emerged victorious and had consolidated his power at the expense of the council and tribal chiefs. Externally the imperial government, by using the popularity and legitimacy of Sultan Ali Mirah, extended its heavy hand on the region. It is important to underscore here that the region has experienced considerable power struggle and domination since 1944-1974. Consequently, conflict has become the driving force behind this power struggle and domination.

Sultan Ali Mirah was the last and strong Sultan of Aussa who came to power in 1944 and reigned for more than three decades. Ali Mirah came to power as a result of power struggle followed by the involvement of Emperor Haile Selassie who was assisted by Yayo Humed (Lewis 1955: 157; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 490-491). After an apparent small scale upheaval in Afar, Ali Mirah became the strongest Sultan because of his real and solid economic advantage which in turn was the result of his active participation in commercial agriculture in the lower valley of the Awash River.

According to some writers, Ali Mirah was inspired to join the land acquisition of the traditional grazing lands of the Afar because of the beginning of cotton plantation in the lower valley of the Awash with the coming of the British based firm called Mitchell Cots. The Firm opened the Tendaho Plantation Share Company (TPSC), in Dubti town with its 51% share while the Ethiopian government has 38%, Ali Mirah 7% and the remaining 4% being in the hands of some individuals from the government personnel (Bondestern 1974:423-439).

Ali Mirah as a share holder in TPSC acquired lands and extended his possession bordering on the cotton plantations as a means of preventing its possible expansion. Moreover, the opening of the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) in 1962 to coordinate and organize the use and utilization of the Awash valley gave him a solid advantage to instigate his people by explaining the danger of losing their traditional grazing lands (Bondestern 1974: 423-439; Harbeson 1975: 17).

Thus, Ali Mirah used his traditional authority to create a considerable modern economic strength. Some writers claim that Ali Mirah had around 20,000 hectares of land and was considered as a land lord. On the other hand, some writers considered him as alms giver, holy man, educator, judge, etc. (Bondestern 1974: 423-439; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 493), which, imply his popularity. But it

remains an open issue for further historical investigation to find out the exact feeling and attitude of the natives.

Whatever the case may be because of his economic strength new functions and post of the Sultanate's office were added. Thus, the structure of the office of the Sultanate of Ali Mirah became a composite one of the old and the new. Especially, the old was seen at the initial stage of his rule. Generally the office had the following structure:

Sultanate - the economic growth of the Sultan significantly decreased the power and role of the traditional institutions. In the area of administration of justice, the Sultanate became the supreme judge of the land. But he seldom directly involved in resolving disputes which are dealt with at different lower levels except the most significant ones (Harbeson 1978:482).

The Council - the Council of Ali Mirah was composed of individuals who were the personal choices of the Sultan appointed to carry out certain activities of the Sultanate. At the initial stage of his rule, the structure was simple with limited activities. With the new economic development however, the function of the Sultanate became broader. New activities which were not in existence before required new officials. Among others were the financial chief, head of agriculture (who was in charge of land and water distribution), the palace guards, commander in-chief of the army, the supreme justice and chief of all adult brotherhood (*feema*) (Dahilo 1985: 30). Here what is important is the fact that the majority of the officials who were given posts of the aforementioned offices were not from the royal *Aydahisso* clan who could potentially claim the throne and hence a threat to the Sultan.

The Tribal Chiefs - the sultan greatly reduced the power and role of the tribal and clan leaders. The limited role of the *Makabans* and the *Khido Abbas* in the internal government affairs of their community had given them the independence to serve externally as mediators with the Ethiopian government result, in many instances the central government system was said to have imposed upon the chieftaincies with the new title. The *Makabans* were called *Ballabats* and the *Khido Abbas* as *Chikashume* (Harbenson 1978: 482; Dahilo 1985:32). However; it appears less convincing in applying these terms to the Afar chiefs since they were not relatively speaking autonomous in the internal affairs of the Sultan like possessing certain amount of land which was the case among the *Ballabats* in other parts of the country.

The Army - though a modern army preceded Ali Mirah, the army of Ali Mirah which was called *Au-el-kal* (literally means escapee catchers) has shown significant development. The army was the power base of the sultan. They make defenses, fight, serve as body guards, etc. Members were said to have been recruits from *Afke-k-Ma'ad* tribe. While liberated slaves and those who fail to pay blood compensation and given asylum by the sultan could join the army after compensation being paid by the sultan (Dahilo 1985:33).

By avoiding the previous hierarchies of the army leadership, the sultan made Yayo Hamadu as the sole commander –in-chief of the army while the Sultan retained the title “*Mirah*.” The army also enjoyed some economic privileges. They were well fed, well dressed, given certain amount of land and were paid monthly salary (Dahilo 1985:33). Explaining some of the major changes within the army by Ali Mirah, Cossins said: “... the Au-e-kal whose techniques include many of the elements of modern infantry fighting, the use of protective trenches and fox holes and tactical backup for advancing and so on against which the fierce rabble fighters are severely disadvantaged” (Cossins 1973: 32).

One can ask whether there was an external influence in such military transformation among the Afar or not. Hussien discussed that the Italians sent agents in 1894 to deal with the contemporary Aussa Sultan and the Sultan was said to have been supplied with modern arms by the Italian agent Abd-al-Rahman. B. Yusuf who was an Afar from Tajura (Hussien 1988: 573). Though this provides an inkling in to the existence of foreign influence, this is too scanty and early in terms of time to substantiate to the reign of Ali Mirah to introduce such highly qualified army reforms which also remains a contentious issue as it did not feature out in the literature consulted for the purpose of this paper.

Relations between the Sultanate of Aussa and the Imperial Ethiopian Government

The Sultanate of Aussa has maintained its practical independence for a very long period of time. Its desert has to some extent contributed for its relative isolation and inaccessibility from the Ethiopian raids. But most of the travelers like Plowden have described the Afar as fierce fighters and war like who could assault any foreigner to their land. Nesbit has also described the Afar in the same manner (Plowden 1868: 12; Nesbit 1934:79). But generally Aussa has had a good relation with the kings of Shoa who in turn wanted to maintain the safety of the trade route that passes through the country of the Aussa. However, in 1894 Emperor Menilek discovered that the contemporary Sultan was secretly dealing with the Italians through their agents captain Persice and his successor Gianni. In view of the Italian subversive activities in instigating *Sheik* Talha who was supposed to make pre-

Italian uprising among the Raya and Azabo, the Sultan's dealing with the Italians would be dangerous for the Emperor who realized the situation (Hussein 1988:574). As a result, Menilik's army invaded the sultanate of Aussa in 1895 and made the Sultan tribute paying to the central government. But even then, the central government did not actively involve in the internal affairs of the Sultanate of Aussa. On the other hand, some writers claimed that the Emperor used the Italian issue as a pretext to occupy Aussa land (Nesbit 1934: 68-69; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 391-393). However, such interpretations may imply the danger of overlooking the external threat the Emperor was facing.

Since 1895, the relation of the Sultanate with the central government has gone through various phases. Besides, the economic advantage, it gets from Aussa the central government has occasionally involved in the succession problems of the Sultanate. In fact succession problems have always been a matter of much concern in Aussa. The first of its involvement was during the reign of *Illalta*. When the Sultan aged, power struggle among his children who were born from different mothers cropped up. *Illalta* has sent a message to Emperor Menilek, who temporarily resolved the problem by imprisoning some of the sons of *Illata*. But conflict for succession continued even up to the reign of Ali Mirah (Dahilo 1985: 10-11; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 458-493).

It was in 1944 that a significant step happened in the relation of the Sultanate with the central government. Because of internal power struggle, Emperor Haile Selassie was assisted by his close friend and very powerful chief, Yayo Humad, who came to Addis Ababa along with Ali Mirah by escaping from Sultan Mohammed. It was said that Emperor Haile Selassie appointed the twenty four years old Ali Mirah as the Sultan of Aussa, since it was he, not Yayo who belonged to the royal *Aydahisu* clan (Dahilo 1985: 18; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 424). Cossins substantiated this point by saying:

For the first time in its history, the selection of the Sultan was not entirely an Aussa affair. But was also determined to a considerable extent by the opinion of the Ethiopian Emperor... The office eventually passed to the present *Bitewded* Ali Mirah, a kinsman of the deposed Sultan, who has ruled more or less uninterruptedly until the present time (Cossins 1973: 12)

After Ali Mirah acceded to power with the help of Yayo Hamadu, the old Sultan was brought to Addis as a prisoner. And Ali Mirah was referred to as "Chief *Ballabat* of Aussa". Moreover, the Sultan who was a strong traditional as well as spiritual leader (Islam providing him an ideological backing among the Afar), maintained a direct relation with the central government (Kasim 1985: 342). He was even bestowed upon a much coveted dignitary title *Bitawadad* (Be loved of

the Emperor) (Kassim 1985: 342), which was not earned by any of his preceding Sultans.

In general, succession problem could be considered as one of the major internal factors that weakened the sovereignty of the Sultanate. In its relations with the central government, the Sultanate has always remained subordinate to the central government since power contenders were looking for help from the former.

In subsequent years, the influence of the central government escalated and had serious repercussion on the Sultanate. For example, with the growth of commercial agriculture in the middle and lower Awash valley, the Sultanate of Aussa was more integrated with the central government than before. The two have maintained an amicable relationship. The Emperor was aware of the political developments in the horn and wanted to culminate the semi independent status of the Afar and what was then the French Territory of the Afar and Issa in which the Afar were the majority (Djibouti Miscellaneous 1975: 314-318). Indeed Ali Mirah was on good terms with Ali Aref, who was the leader of the territory of the Afar and Issa, renamed from the French territory of Somali in 1967.

The Sultan on his part tried to maintain a satisfactory working environment with the Imperial ruling class to the extent of granting large tracts of land to members of the royal family like Asfawosen (Harbenson 1978: 482; Dahilo 1985: 37). Ali Mirah also secured a safe passage of the caravans along the highway by traversing his country. He prevented the Eritrean Liberation movements from operating on lands under his jurisdiction. In addition to all these, he was aware of the role the Emperor could play in normalizing succession problems as was seen with the deposition of Sultan Mohammed Yayo and his own appointment (Kassim 1985: 342).

As a result of such strong relation, the Ethiopian flag was said to have been introduced into Afar land during the reign of Ali-Mirah (Dahilo 1985: 39). Apparently in one of the significant national forums organized recently by the EPRDF government, Ali Mirah who was in exile since 1975 was reported to have said:

(እንኩዋን እኛ አፋሮቹ ግመሎቻችን ሳይቀሩ የኢትዮጵያን ባንዲራ ያውቃለን።
(Tilahun 1996: E. C. 56-57)

i.e. Let alone we the Afar, our camels know the Ethiopian flag.

This statement may not amply demonstrate the real motive and interest of the ordinary Afar and irrespective of the real motive for Ali Mirah the statement implies that the Sultan has had a strong Pan Ethiopian Sentiment. On the contrary, relations with the governors of Wallo *Kifle Hager*, in which Aussa as a *warada* was administered and the sultanate was subordinate, the sultan was said to have a

loose relation. He was reported to have been reluctant to accept instructions from Dessie (Djibouti Miscellaneous 1975:314-318).

One of the major consequences of the incorporation of the Sultanate of Aussa into the Ethiopian central government was that it weakened the authority and political power of the Sultan since decision was made by the central government. Besides, the traditional institutions and their functions were weakened. One such function was the traditional conflict resolving mechanisms. The Afar used to resolve most cases of intra-clan conflicts through their indigenous institutions on the basis of customary laws. After the intervention of the central government, the Afar were forced to recourse to the modern systems of state courts where conflicts were addressed in a more rigid manner and adjudication was based on largely standardized and uncontested rules (Kelemwork 2011: 41). Moreover, the procedures and the standards of the court were not readily comprehensible to the Afar. The laws and regulations were proclaimed and imposed on the Afar by the higher central body that could be sensitive to Afar customary law and values; they may entice lack of confidence in its resolutions. Lastly, the court personnel itself is largely composed of outsiders, for whom the Afar don't want to disclose sensitive issues pertaining to their families or property (Jamaladin 1973: 2-5; Kelemwork 2011: 41).

The End of the Sultanate of Aussa and the Disintegration of the Sultanate

In this section we will focus on the external pressure the Sultan has experienced that ultimately resulted in the demise of the Sultanate. The year 1974/75 was a critical time in the politics of Southern Afar. It was characterized by a tense struggle between Ali Mirah and the Awash Valley Authority (AVA). Ali Mirah denied access for the Awash Valley Authority in the lower valley of the river whereas in the middle Awash specifically at Amibara, both have exerted an equal force against each other by agitating their idea that they were working for the welfare of the Afar (Harbenson 1978: 485). However, the literatures consulted for the purpose of this paper do not provide any inkling on the position and the feeling of the natives.

As a result of such conflicts, the tribal leaders were divided into two, one supporting the case of Ali Mirah and the other supporting the AVA. Ultimately, it was Ali Mirah who gained the upper hand because of his traditional power base and his good relations with the government (Harbenson 1978: 486; Dahilo 1985: 42).

In the mean time the Ethiopian revolution proclaimed land as a public property. Now the main contenders were the *Darge* and Ali Mirah. The former considered the latter similar with the other land lords and wanted to isolate the

Sultan from his people. The Sultan on his part publicly agitated that the new government was intending to take their land, linking it with the previous case of the AVA. He further claimed that the change was totally against their interest and of Islamic faith (Djibouti Miscellaneous 1975: 314-318; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 493).

For the *Darge* the issue was sensitive since the political atmosphere for the independence of the French Territory of Afar and Issa was becoming hot. The government realized the role Ali Mirah could play in persuading the Ethiopian Afar in their move to create a separate Afar state (Djibouti Miscellaneous 1975: 314-318).

In view of the interest of Ali, who wanted to create a separate territory of Afar from the French territory of Afar and Issa, this would be a difficult matter for the *Darge*, because the same movement would set in motion among the Afar of Ethiopia. That was why Ali Aref was invited by the *Darge* and was highly honored and discussed the political future of Djibouti (Djibouti Miscellaneous 1975: 314-318; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 426).

On his part, while trying to appease the *Darge* by actively involving in some famine rehabilitation problems in Wallo, Ali Mirah had maintained underground relations with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and other Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Somalia. Ultimately Ali Mirah left Asaita, his capital, in the night of June 2, 1975 going to Djibouti and then to Saudi Arabia (Kassim 1985: 342; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007:427), where he started to live as a refugee. Hence, the revolution which brought to an end the reign of Ali Mirah, also epitomized the end of the Sultanate of Aussa.

After the end of his reign, and subsequent civil war with heavy casualties, different political parties were formed. One of the strongest which was founded by the son of the last sultan was the Afar Liberation Front. It aimed at reviving the power of the Sultan with an independent state. The other was the Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM), founded immediately before the revolution. The ALF and the ANLM created a temporary alliance which did not last long, because of their divergent objectives. Later on with the proclamation of national self determination of the peoples of Ethiopia, the ANLM stopped fighting and the Afar remained in Ethiopia as this party has got the support of the majority of the Afar people (Kassim 1985: 345-347; Jamaladin and Hashim 2007: 426-427).

Conclusion

Among the Afar the indigenous social and political organizations start from the highest social unit i.e. tribal level and move all the way down to the smallest social unit i.e. nuclear family. In these social units political leadership was decentralized and rests in the hands of tribal and clan leaders whose powers were largely derived from inheritance. Of course, these indigenous governors had a reputation for their quality of persuasive speeches and capacity of oratory. Both the social and political organizations of the Afar were manifestly dominated by patrilineal lineages. Descent to a certain clan and tribal groups were traced through patrilineal kinship. But matrilineal lineages have also important place in the social and political life of the Afar.

These indigenous Afar political and social organizations have shown considerable transformation with the establishment of the Sultanate of Aussa. The Sultanate was strengthened during the reign of Ali Mirah who curtailed the power and role of the khido and clan leaderships, whose reign was characterized by more centralized feudal type of governance with a strong relation with the central government. However, with the 1974 revolution and the subsequent flight of Ali Mirah the Sultanate of Aussa was doomed.

The Afar case was an indication that indigenous system of governance works to the best of the interest of its people. When alien forces come and internal political developments work against the indigenous social structure it fails to work properly. That in turn results in the prevalence of instability. A lesson that could be drawn from this experience is that the “know it all” approach of the center cannot serve the interest of the indigenous people. The diversity of peoples should be given due respect and responsibility in running their own affairs if we want to bring peace and stability in societies like the Afar whose cultural values were not given proper attention.

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