

# Effects of Sixteenth Century Upheavals on the History of the Horn

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Islam as we know, is a religion that found its most complete expression in an urban setting, but at the same time was spread by nomads in the course of their vast movements; while peasants, because of the religion's Arabian background, were just strangers to it at the beginning. Therefore, when Islam rose in Arabia, its triumph was the Prophet's success in uniting the Arab desert tribes, hitherto fragmented, under the Islamic banner which centered in an urban setting.

Thus Islam brought about one of the greatest urbanizing processes in the world prior to the European Industrial Revolution from the eighteenth century onwards. As a result of this, many different pastoral tribes such as the Turks and the Moguls found expression in Islam by using its influence in building great empires. The effects of Islam on the tribal organizations in the Horn of Africa was not less significant than those in the other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup>

It's no wonder that the first Islamic State was established in Shoa by members of the Mukhzumite, an Arab migrant tribe in the 9th century, in 1289. It was overthrown by another kingdom, Ifat, whose effects on political, economical and social lives of the peoples of the area were greater and more durable.<sup>2</sup>

It was that kingdom, Ifat, which extended its rule from Shoa to the coastal lowlands down to Zeila. We can attribute its success, longevity and influence, to the fact that the founders of the dynasty of Walasma were native of the area they controlled. Umar Walasma, the first to reign, according to the Harari historian, Sheikh Abibakr Ba-Alawi Ashanbali, was a descendent of Sheikh Yussuf Al-Kowneyn. If we accept this, then, we can confidently say, that the Walasma Family, unlike the Mukhzumites, were accepted because of their native and family background.<sup>3</sup>

After a period of consolidation and expansion, that emergent Islamic state evolved into the most dynamic and powerful Muslim State in the Horn of Africa. It was with the emergence of Ifat, that the Christian-Muslim confrontation began.

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1. Holt P.M., K.S. Lambton and B. Lewis, (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol 2 B, London and New York, 1980, pp. 443-468.

2. Pankhurst (ed.), *Travellers in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, pp. 1-3.

The passage is taken from the famous, though of unknown authorship, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*.

3. Fathi Quath, *Islaam Walhabasha Cabra Taarikh* - (Islam and Abyssinia through the ages), Cairo.

It was natural, though the two communities co-existed in peace for a long period, as a result of religious and economic considerations, animosity between the two sides reigned in the area for the three centuries that followed its establishment. It was under Ifat that Muslims started to consolidate their control of most of the trade routes. On the other hand, the Christian kings were to try to exact more tributes which in turn created an atmosphere of resentment and bitterness within the Muslim ranks and in the end it evolved into a Jihad.<sup>4</sup>

It was during the reign of the Christian king, Ishaq (1414-29), after his army was trained and equipped by members of the Mamluks who fled from Egypt, as a result of a power struggle within the Mamluk ranks, in about 1418, that the Muslims, under Sultan Sa'addudin, were decisively defeated. In addition to that, they were followed to Zeila where the Christians killed the Sultan himself to be buried at an Island off Zeila which still bears his name. To the Muslims, Sa'addudin was a martyr and a saint who is still venerated by the Zeilis. It appears then, that Sa'addudin was one of the greatest Muslim leaders who succeeded in mobilizing a great army comprising many sections of the Muslim society. In commemoration of this resounding victory, Christians composed an epic song in which, for the first time, the name Somali, was mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

Why historians failed to account properly for the exact meaning of the word, Somali, must be due to their failure to look into the etymology of the word « SOOMAAL ».

Prior to this event, many writers and geographers, mostly of Arab origin, did not use this name, Somali, in relation to any ethnic group in the Horn of Africa. The name Berber, which had been in use from early times persisted well into the 14th century when Ibn Batuta visited both Zeila and Mogadishu.

There is no doubt, that the Somalis as an ethnic group, like their Afar and Saho brethren were the first of the Kushitic stock to reach the lowlands along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coast. For that reason, we can accept the fact that their presence in the area must have antedated Islam, but why this name escaped those writers notice is a question only a few of present day historians tried to answer. To come up with a convincingly logical answer, we must make use of the etymological side of the Somali language.

In those early days, writers on the area of our subject, Arabs or otherwise, depended on travellers or merchants, whose knowledge about the cultures, languages and ethnic composition was very limited. Besides, those merchants and travellers made their contacts briefly at the coastal towns about which they made their impressions in vague. Because of that, their reports were either fragmented or exaggerated, lacking both details and insight into the lives of the inhabitants about whom they were trying to write. Only Ibn Batuta who visited the coastal area

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4. Sheikh Ahmed Abdillahi Rirash, *Kashful sudduul can taarik A-Soomaal* (Lifting the curtain of the Somali History), Mogadishu 1974.

There is a photocopy of the Harari Historian's manuscript at the end of the book. The genealogy of Umar Walashma, the founder of the Muslim State of Ifat is given as follows.

Umar Bin Dunyahur, Bin Hamud, Bin Mohamed, Bin Sheikh Yusuf, Bavaktle (Baratle) (Aw Barkhadle).

Sheikh Yusuf's tomb at a place twenty miles east of Hargeysa is annually visited by many Muslims, for an annual service.

The same manuscript has been annotated and translated into Italian by the Italian Scholar, E. Cerrulli.

5. Fathi Qayth, *op. cit.*

gave us a first hand information, of some detail and insight, about the coastal towns he visited. But his stay in Zeila was very brief; and of its population he said nothing of importance. His impressions about the inhabitants of the town were confined to their complexions of which he said were black, their religion, he tells us was a Shafite Sect of Islam. But he failed to say anything about their ethnicity, culture and language. At the same time, there is no doubt that both the Somalis and Afars were dominant in the area.

Therefore, we can speculate on the fact that these names were occupational ones rather than being used for ethnicities. The composer of the Christian epic song in commemoration of their victory over Muslims who mentioned the name, Somali, in early fifteenth century and Shahabudin, the chronicler of the Imam Ahmed in the sixteenth century, who often referred to the Somalis as a major component of the Imams army, were, unlike their predecessor writers, insiders and had greater knowledge about the societies they wrote about.

Therefore, they could refer to a certain group by their ethnic, occupational or tribal names. As result of this, we can conclude that both the name Afar and Somali were local names.

Still in Somali, a group of people are referred to by their occupational names. Peasants or farmers are known as *Qotto* or *Qudaal*, while hunters are known as *Dabatto*. In this connection the Somali word, *Maal*, is used as a component of compound noun, for words to refer to a group's profession or mode of life. If we take the word *tum*, (to beat ... Iron for example) and *Maal* together, we have compound name *tum-maal* (*tumaal*) for the letter « m » in the first word *tum*, has been eliminated. Then we have, *Tumaal*, a blacksmith or a man whose profession is to do all metal works.

In line with this hypothesis, the name *Soomaal* is having the word *Maal*, as component showing that it originated as an occupational name for a group or a reference to their mode of life. If we accept the notion that the word *Maal* is used with that connection then we have to solve the riddle of the first part, *Soo*. Keeping in mind that the mode of life of the Somalis is predominantly *Pastoral*, then, we can speculate on the fact that the part, *Soo*, could come from *So'* (Meat) or *Soof* (herding or herds). If we combine the word *So'* (meat) with *Maal* we have a compound name *So'maal* which could refer to a group whose main diet is meat, but there is nothing professional about it for a hunter can have meat for his meals every-day.

For that reason we must fall back to the second word for an explanation. The word *Soof* is used when a herder takes his herds out for grazing and sometimes a herd is known as *Soof*. Therefore, if we combine the two words *Soof* and *Maal* together, we can come up with a new compound name, « *Soofmaal* » which can give us a wider sense — a *Soofmaal*: which can mean a professional herdsman or a group of people whose mode of life is to rear, bread and live on livestock, and if we assume that the letter « f » could disappear as time went for convenience, we have the word *Soomaal/Somal*. This is more appropriate because in the first combinations we have *So'* with a short vowel and *Maal* with a long vowel, while actually the word, *Soomal/Somal*, is made up of two parts with two long vowels oo/aa: therefore, *Soofmaal* can be more suitable for our hypothesis as to the etymology of the name « Somali ».<sup>6</sup>

6. The two words *So'* (meat) and *Soof* (herding or herds) are not often used in the common Somali;

The post-Sa'addudin period saw a gradual revival of the Muslim power. His two sons, Sabrudin (1418-1425) and Mansur (1426-1436), after their successful return from Yemen, rekindled the spirit of Jihad against their Christian enemies. Though their fortunes in the struggle had their ups and downs, they never suffered from the same humiliating defeats that resulted from the death of Sa'addudin. The area under their control was renamed after the martyr Sultan to be called Barru Sa'addudin and the Sultanate's seat was moved from Zeila to Dakar and then to Harar further inland.<sup>7</sup>

It was during that period, in about 1430, when came from Hadramaut, a group of forty-four religious leaders or missionaries and met at a place called Siyaro or Awliyo Kombo. Among them, was Sheikh Ibrahim Abu Zarbay who found his way to Harar where he established a center for Islamic learning and propagation. The rest of the group found their ways to different points within the Islamic State and founded their own centers for the same ends.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible, therefore, that this group revived and promoted Islamic teachings in such a way that its impact was to be felt in the early part of the sixteenth century, when a religious movement succeeded in changing the course of history in the Horn of Africa region by producing the great Jihadist, Ahmed Ibrahim El-Ghazi (1506-1543). The one hundred years that followed the death of Sa'addudin (1418-1518), saw a period of growth, prosperity, political and dynastical stability. But in about 1518, two events that caused a great instability befell the Muslim state. It was the effects of those events that paved the way for the great events that shocked the Horn of Africa.

One of these calamities happened when the Portuguese pirate, Saldnah, raided Zeila, burned it down and took five hundred, who survived their massacre, to be sold as slaves, while at the same time the Muslim army who were out for a Jihad against the Christians were badly defeated.

As result of this double calamities, there started revolts in which the traditional power holders of the Sultanate were undermined. In the process Ahmed Ibrahim, Ahmed Guray, emerged as the undisputed leader of the Muslim state. He went out for a decisive showdown with the Christian kingdom. He won brilliant victory against them. But his victory was turned into a disastrous defeat.<sup>9</sup>

The countdown to the disaster began when a Portuguese expeditionary force of four hundred, lead by Christopher de Gama arrived in Tigre.

Galawdewos who knew of de Gama's arrival came out of his hiding and joined what forces he could raise with the incoming Portuguese one. Initially, Muslims were beaten, but the Imam who after being wounded, miraculously escaped captivity succeeded in defeating the Christian alliance by killing two hundred of the

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the following two verses taken from a long poem of Mohamed Abdille Hassan, can give us the best illustration as to their meaning (a) « Ma sabaan ka sabaan baan, So' yaqaanka dugaagiyo, haadda aanu sabaynayoo — soominoo qadinno »

(For a long time we have starved the carnivora and kept the birds of prey unfed).

(b) « ma sabaan ka sabaanbaa, raggaygii la sadqeeyoo, Soofkaygii la xaraashoo — Sed yaa iiga cesha aan subax noolba lahaa » (For a long time my men were being slaughtered and my animal were being auctioned, begged for compensation but to no avail). For the complete poem, see Sheikh Jaamac Cumar Ciise, Diiwaankii Gabayadii Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan, Mogadhisu - 1973 Collection of the poems of Mohamed Abdille Hassan pp. 146-160.

7. Lewis I.M., *A modern history of Somalia*, London, 1980, p. 25.

8. Sh. Ahmed A. Rirash, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

9. *Ibid.*

Portuguese soldiers including their commander, Christopher de Gama. He thought that he rode out of the storm and wrongly sent the Turkish force back to Yemen. This unwise decision caused him his life and that of his movement. Shortly after the Turkish troops departed, the Portuguese regrouped and a sniper among them succeeded in slaying the Imam.<sup>10</sup>

Amir Nur Bin-Mujahid who succeeded the Imam, in 1551, succeeded in regrouping and bringing back some sort of stability. After a period of consolidation he undertook an invasion against the Christian Kingdom in which he killed, Galwadewos, the king, in 1559.

But other fatal problems in the form of famines, epidemics and the Oromo (Galla) invasion appeared on the horizon.

In the end we have a social pattern very different from what we have before the sixteenth century upheavals. Since all other modes of life were brought to an end, pastoralism became the pre-dominant one. As a result, the name, Somali, which was only an occupational name prior to Jihad, evolved into an ethnic name.

As we have already mentioned, the whole social set up which we described earlier was put upside down by the disastrous effects of the sixteenth century upheavals which decimated whole groups and tribes and effected a major regrouping and the emergence of new ones out of the ruins of previous ones. The two groups referred to by Shahabudin, constituted a major component of the Muslim society, (the Harla and the Al-Malasay), and ceased to exist as independent entities, but some groups that still bear their names constitute parts of the other clans. The remnants of the clans of the Somali group who took part in the Jihad are all represented within the Harar Province, but most of them either remained minorities or even got assimilated by the Oromo Qotto.<sup>11</sup>

Of all the disastrous upheavals that brought about these social and economic disruption to the Muslim state in the sixteenth century, the Oromo invasion proved to be the worst. For a long period they dominated the Muslim traditional territory from Berbera to Aussa driving what remained of the Muslims either to the extreme east in the case of the Somalis or to the extreme north in the case of the Adal's (Afar). As it happened, when the Islamic religious centers had been destroyed, Islam remained just nominal. There were no longer, the Fuqahaa to whom all legal problems were referred. The vacuum created by their disappearance was to be filled in one way or the other.

What we have to assume, then, is that, the « Xeer » customary law, emerged or re-emerged. We can speculate on the fact that the « Xeer » which took its main themes from the Islamic Sharia, began its growth and development after the Oromos were defeated.

The Ali-Kalageeye - Aale Boore episode and the victory of the former on the latter, marked a historical turning point in concluding the Oromo predominance.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the west-bound push, triggered by Ali-Kalageey's victory have been sustained ever since, therefore, that psychological frontier and the memory of the Oromo devastations, necessitated a close cohesiveness within the Issa pastoralists.<sup>13</sup>

10. *Ibid.*

11. Sh. Ahmed A. Rirash, *op. cit.* See the photocopy at the end of the book.

12. Abi Ishaq Ibrahim Bin Ali, *Al Muhathab fi fiqh e shafi*, Vol I Surabaya, pp. 195-217.

13. Sh. Ahmed A. Rirash *op. cit.*, pp. 36-68.

A long passage written by Sheikh Ali El Qaduni, has been quoted here intact. It depicts, though

What made their particularism more distinct is the uniqueness of their « Xeer », which, unlike, those of the other Somali clans, have been codified in an oral text with a beautiful alteration, a factor that ensured its survival and continuity as a living legal code with all its extremely democratic ideals.<sup>14</sup>

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fragmented, the events that lead to the defeat of the Oromos and the death of their leader, Aale Boore. He wrote it out of his memory about the Oromo invasion. In fact, it gives a very good picture of how the Muslim of the area lost in touch with their past, for the author brought together Sa'addudin who was killed in Zeila in early 15th century and Aale Boore who definitely belonged to the post-16th century era.

14. An Issa clansman takes pride in his *Xeer*. He is convinced of the fact that his existence would have been meaningless without the *Xeer*, which gave his clan a sense of direction. This quotation, « Eebahayna xugunbuu iga abuuray aabahayna Xeer buu iidhigay », (Allah created me from sperms, and my father formulated for me a *Xeer*, gives the best illustration to that effect).