

# **A Critical Evaluation of Tibebe Eshete's "The Root Cause of the Ogaden Problem -1942-1960"**

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As customary, Wardheernews every now and then treats its readers with scholarly works on a myriad of topics. I read Tibebe Eshete's scholarly article "The Root Causes of the Ogaden Problem – 1942-1960" with immense interest.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset, I must admit that this subject matter has particular import for me personally, lest my own late father, Abdi Roble, and indeed many of his extended family members, were both the leaders and foot soldiers for the two most important historical wars of resistances that Mr. Tibebe's piece analysis – the Geri revolts in 1941-942 and 1948-57.

Although Tibebe's piece skillfully used primary Ethiopian sources and unearthed a lot of archival historical facts about the conflict in the Somali Ogeden region during the tumultuous periods of the 1940s through the 1960s, which is an effort deserving recognition, there are several misrepresentations of said facts. One concept that Tibebe invoked – the Sadaqo-based sharing in the spirit of good neighborliness – is indeed an Islamic tradition which needs to be nurtured in the future to promote good relationship between Christians and Muslims in the Horn of Africa region. It is quite another matter to reduce the entire Somali resistance against Abyssinian occupation to the sadaqo concept. Also, uncritically assigning some administrative missteps by British officers in the Reserved Area in the 1940s as the cause célèbre of the Somali revolt in the region is at best an oblivious posturing to history and at worst a paternalistic attitude towards a colonial complex matter.

When investigating conflicts and revolts, scholars must go a bit deeper into history and raise some critical questions: why is that Somali resistance to Ethiopia so resilient? Why, after so many wars and famines, do Somalis still show remarkable resilience to secure their security and social justice? As shown in the following cursory review of past history, we may try to shed light as to the most immediate and underplaying causes of the Somali Ogaden revolt in the 1940s up until 1960.

## **Introduction**

In the history of the Somali conquest by Ethiopia, the relationship (between Christian Highland Abyssinians and Muslim lowland Somalis) has been characterized by conflict, collective and

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<sup>1</sup> My upcoming article "Conquest, Conflict and Collective Punishment: Identifying Stakeholders in the Somali Ogaden Region," will soon be published by the Horn of Africa Journal (HOJ), Volume XXIX, most likely to be released at the end of August or early September, 2011, a volume I had the honor to be the guest editor along with Dr. Bereket Hebte Selassie. With several other articles, the entire [special] issue of the HOJ will be exclusively dedicated to "looking backward and looking forward" on the question of this region.

cruel punishment often meted against the later. However, the conundrum of this conquest is the resilience of the conqueror to continue its abusive rule unabated, and the equally stubborn determination of the Somalis to seek comprehensive solution to their political problem.

Is the Somali conquest, thus, a colonial phenomenon that defied, if not decolonization, the tools of modern conflict resolution and mediation? Or, is it a case where protagonists to the conflict, i.e., Ethiopia, Somali stakeholders, and Western nations who have vested interest in the security and justice issue in the Horn of Africa region, have not been serious so far, or failed collectively to identify the right path to resolve this conflict? Contrary to the simplification by Tibebe Eshete, Tobias Hagmann throws light on the complexity of the Somali Ogaden question: “The ‘Ogaden problem’ is not new. Political violence involving Ethiopian soldiers, regional security forces.... humanitarian crises triggered by droughts, floods, conflict, and population displacement has haunted the Ethiopian-Somali lowlands for several decades. Until ONLF’s attack on the Chinese oil field in Degahbuur in April 2007, international organizations, Western diplomats and aid agencies have by and large chosen to ignore everyday occurrences” in this conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Origins of the Conflict**

Contrary to Mr. Tibebe Eshete’s what appears to be a politically motivated interpretation of history of the Somali Ogaden problem, to which he attributes to the British colonial rule and its tramping on the 1942 Anglo-Ethiopian treaty, it is a question of conquest rooted in the struggle of a people whose justice and social security have been deprived. As such, one needs to peel off the many layers of history that could throw illuminate for us the actual causes to this nagging conflict.

The Ethio-Somali [Ogaden] conflict goes back to the religious wars of yesteryears. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, with the initial confrontation between Sa’d ad-Din (AD 1386 to 1415), an Islamic Sultanate in the mini state of Adal, most probably an Arabic Sultanate, and Emperor Dawit I of Ethiopia (1380 to 1409), Ethiopia’s Highland Christians have attempted to colonize the Somalis in the east.<sup>3</sup>

But the most remarkable conflict so far took place during the Ethiopian conquest by Imam Ahmed Ibrahim Al-Gaza (Ahmed Guray). In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, well organized Somali forces, mainly drawn from Somali tribal confederacies consisting of Geri, Absame, Marehaan, Issaq, Hawiya, Gurgureh, et al, all united under one leadership, defeated a coalition of Amhara and Tigrean forces and conquered all Christian core regions of Shawa, Tigray, Gondar, Gojam, and some regions that are today in Eretria.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tobias Hagmann, The Political Roots of the Current Crisis in Region 5, September 21, 2007, Crisis in the Horn of Africa, Accessed May 15, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See J. S. Trimmingham, Islam in Ethiopia, 1965, pp74-5, The Colombia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2007, Colombia University press.

<sup>4</sup> Sihab ad-Din Ahmed bin ‘abd al-Qader bin-Sa’lem bin’Utman, Futuhu Al-Habasa,” The Conquest of Abyssinia,” [16<sup>th</sup> Century], translated by Paul Lester Stenhouse with Annotations by Richard Pankhurst, Tsehia publication, 2003.

However, on one eventful Sunday, November, 26, 1531 AD (in the month of Rabi II), with the sudden loss of several important war leaders on the Somali side (most importantly General Matan, who was leading the Geri horsemen, Garad Amuse, Al-Duqali as-Somali), the tides of Ethiopian conquest by Somalis were reversed for good. Somali forces lead by Ahmed Guray had been defeated, and since then Somalis have been on the losing side of history<sup>5</sup>.

The saga of contemporary collective punishment which Ethiopian authorities often exacted against Somalis in the Ogaden region is, therefore, rooted in a conflict shaped by Ethiopia's colonialism over Somalis in the Ogaden- whose most recent painful history started with the expeditionary raids which Emperor Menilik II and Ras Mekonen, conqueror of Somalis and cousin of the Emperor, (also father of Emperor Haile Sellasie), commissioned against the Somalis between 1906 through the 1920s.

These expeditionary campaigns by the highlanders were made to some degree possible by the Anglo-Ethiopian treaty of London of 1897 that ceded significant territories of Somaliland to Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> Somalis in the Ogaden region were not consulted in any of the treaties, which ultimately negatively impacted their way of life for many years to come.

An eyewitness description of the cruel and collective punishment to which Somalis have been historically subjected, that is as far back as 1910 through the 1920s, and indeed the source of the overtly resilient Somali resistance towards occupation, is described by Major Swayne. Major Swayne, one of the earliest travelers to the region, extensively writes about massacres and raids (in Imay, Jigjiga, in the Haud and other localities). He specifically talks about the Geri, Absame, Bursuug (Issaq) and other Somali clans in the region that received the brunt of those Ethiopian raids: Cattle, camel and goats were expropriated from the Somali ownership in huge numbers and at times precipitating famine and starvation to the locals.

In total contravention to modern international and human rights instruments, Ethiopians distributed the bounty among the elite Amhara Christians, otherwise known as Naftenyas (settlers), or used it for rations for the marauding Abyssinian soldiers in the region. Such raids and atrocities against the Somalis in the Haud and Reserved Area continued until the end of World War II and the beginning of armed Somali resistance to the occupation.

In particular, Dajazmaj Afawork's massive atrocities in the Qorahay (Qabridahar) region, as retold by many survivors, represents in the history of this region one of the deadliest atrocities. He is credited to the burning and razing of villages during the wee-hours in the night when both human beings and their livestock observe no more guards for their protection against predators.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 261, Sihab ad-Din Ahmed bin 'abd al-Qader bin-Sa'lem bin'Utman

<sup>6</sup> For a good discussion on the history of Somali Partition, see I. M. Lewis, *Somali Nationalism & Self Determination in the Horn of Africa*, Ithaca Press, London, 1983

## **The Geri Revolts: 1941-1942 and 1948-1958**

The Geri revolts, or “Dagaaladii Geriga” as is often known among Somalis, took place, unforgettably within this political milieu in 1941-1942 and once again 1948-58.

The first revolt was a short but a fierce resistance to the reestablishment of Amhara settlements in the Geri and Jarso land. In other words, Ethiopia, despite the brewing and nascent Somali nationalist fervor that was engulfing the entire horn of Africa region at the time, showed extreme determination to reestablish a feudal economic system in its frontiers by re-conquering the Somalis residing between Harar and Jigjiga. To resist this, The Geri Garad, Garad Ali Garad Dalal, aided by his younger brother as the lieutenant of the war operations, Garad Yusuf Garad Dalal, challenged and almost defeated Ethiopian troops in the Reserved Area of the Somali peninsula.

This particular Geri revolt, perhaps the earliest systemic revolt by Somalis against Ethiopian occupation, a precursor to the foundation of the Somali Youth League (SYL-1942), started in earnest in the summer of 1941 with the burning of several cities and chasing away all representatives of the Ethiopia state machinery, and the accompanying settlers in Koojaar, Jinacsani, and Fayaanbiiro. It set and established the framework and tone for future resistances by Somalis in the ensuing years.

Sylvia Pankhurst writes in detail on this subject matter and how powerful the war waged by Garad Ali of the Geri was; she detailed his near-victory assault on Harar, after sweeping multiple victories in Koojaar, Jinacsani, Fayannibiirro and the entire agricultural belt between Jigjiga and Baabili.

In Tibebe’s view, Major Walsh, governor of Barbera, who gave a speech sympathetic to the Somali cause in which he underscored the inability of Ethiopia to ever rule this region peacefully, as well as what is called Bevin’s plan (uniting Somalis under one nation state), was the cause of the revolt. However, that is a view devoid of the historical and economic subjugation under which Somalis have been ruled within the belly of the Ethiopian feudal empire. One may ask: why did Major Walsh, in his trip to Jigjiga in 1942, showed sympathy to the Geri revolt? Why did Walsh tacitly approve Garad Ali’s takeover of the entire Reserved Area, including Harar?

Major Walsh supposedly encouraged and even promised to help the Geri revolt and its leaders against Ethiopia, because as the governor of Barbera, he and his associates were well aware of the prominence of the Geri family, the Rer-Awmame subclan in Berbara; the Rer- Awmame is the sub-clan of the Geri that produced Sheikh Yusuf Awmame, the most celebrated saint in the Barbara region. Because of this reason alone, Major Walsh knew Ethiopia's claim over the Reserved Area was nothing more one of colonial conquest, and as such could easily gauge the root cause of the Geri uprising to be an articulation and political expression of the need for Somali unity.<sup>7</sup> He also knew that Ethiopia in the eyes of Great Britain was another colonial power competing for the Somaliland.

In the 1948-57 war of resistance, a much expanded resistance by the Geri with significant human casualty, there were three factors that led to the revolt of the Geri, otherwise known as "Geri Diida." The first cause of the uprising, in addition to the historical injustice, was that the Allied Powers Commission in 1948 made one particular decision whose impact is here today affecting mainly the lives of Somalis; that was granting of the Haud and Reserved Area of Somalis to Ethiopia. It is that decision, agreed and endorsed by all Western and Christian nations, that would permanently dismembered Somalis and hence precipitated a perpetual conflict ever since.<sup>8</sup>

The second most important cause of the 1948-57 Geri revolt was the promulgation of the 1948 Ethiopian constitution which marginalized Somali more than ever before. Article 127 called for "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, founded in the fourth century, on the doctrines of St. Mark, is the Established Church of the Empire and is, as such, supported by the State. The Emperor shall

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<sup>7</sup> The relationship between Geri and Issaq residents in Barbera and Hargaysa is much deeper and intermarriage between the families goes back to the days of Garad Adan Garad Koshin and Boqor Sharmarke of Sacad Musse in Zaylac in the 1850s. In recent years, for example, four out of Garad Ali's wives were from the Haber Awal Family. The story of his last marriage is told by generations in the Reserved Area. Legend has one elder Ildab (Rer-Gadid of Sacad Musse) came to his house after a long work day and asked his wife to serve him lunch. After she told him that she did not prepare the lunch, Ildab threatened his wife with an irreversible divorce. She reportedly responded by saying: "hadaad ifurto ma Garad Ali baad ismooday," or "threatening me with divorce? Who do you think you are? Garad Ali!?" Upon learning that the lady was divorced, Garad Ali sent an emissary to the woman with a marriage proposal and a generous dowry to her family; and the rest is history. The children of Garad Ali and Elder Ildab by this legendry woman remained close siblings to this date. Moreover, Garad Yusuf's daughter was married to the most important Sacad Musse Suldán, Suldán Hashi Elmi who too died in Jigjiga.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, I.M. Lewis

always profess the Ethiopian Orthodox Faith. The name of the Emperor shall be mentioned in all religious services.” This was the first step to institutionalize a ‘second class’ status to non-Christians under the rule of the empire. Moreover, Article 125 of the same document provided for the Amharic language as the only national language in the empire. A third factor was a new form of taxation which Ethiopia wanted to collect both agricultural and pastoral Somalis throughout the Haud and Reserved Area, against which the Geri Garad again revolted.

We can glean from both Arif Mohamed’s assessment in “Historical Background of Geri and Jarso People and Features of their Customary Law” (an unpublished manuscript submitted for an MA; Towards the fulfillment of a Law Degree at Addis Ababa University, 2004) and from Sylvia Pankhurst’s extensive writings that the Geri revolt was part of a comprehensive search for a nationhood by the Somalis for the Somalis in the region. In the second Geri revolt (1946-1957), Michael Miriam, founder of the National United Front (NUF), has played a prominent role in advocating for the Geri leadership some of who were killed and others were lynched. The atrocities that ensued the second revolt, locally known as “Wakhtigii Kanooniga” or the Canon time, is succinctly captured by an article that Dr. Hussein Bulhan, a young boy in Jigjiga at the time, would reminisce 20 years later in a Horn of Africa Journal article, “Partition of Land and Psyche in Somali Society,” Horn of Africa, Volume 3, No. 4, 1981:

*“The Ethiopian authorities decided to execute ten innocent Somali men. On the day of the execution, every Somali in town – child or adult – was forced to watch the terrifying spectacle. Each victim was made to stand on a pickup truck with hands tied behind his back. A noose of rope, suspended from a horizontal pole, was then placed around each victim. After a speech of intimidation and warnings to disgusted observers, the driver was ordered to quickly move the truck leaving behind a writhing humanity in mid air, gasping and sometimes urinating in death. I can never forget the plea of one-bearded-elder among the victims. With a remarkable calm and dignity, he uttered one and only one request: “If my son and I must die, please let me go first and in a different pole.” That plea was never granted, and the grisly execution proceeded as planned. When each pair was hanged, we were then herded to the next location. On three separate occasions, the rope broke, unable to withstand the weight of victims. Each time, the victim was picked up, put on the truck, and hanged again. The ten men were left hanging for several days for all in the city to see. Nightmares and repressed rage subsequently became part of our colonial heritage. When I later came to the United States, I understood the terror and rage Black America had experienced during the long history of lynching.”*

In defeat, Garad Ali, after being released from a high security jail (Alm Baqay – the End of the World), remained recluse and was subjected to permanent house arrest in Jigjiga until his death in 1967. His younger brother, Garad Yusuf, remained and died in Mogadishu while receiving assistive stipends from Somali Affairs Office (Danaha Xaffiska Soomaliyeed). Xaaji Abdi Buh died in 1977 as a local prominent elder in Borama, while Ali Gudal died in Jigjiga in 1993, after he came back to Jigjiga and resumed his elderly role upon returning to Jigjiga nearly one-half century in exile. Garad Yonis Garad Hassan, a second cousin to Garad Ali and the

commander of the combined Geri militia and a coveted opponent of the rule Haile Selassie died in Jigjiga in 1994.

The Geri revolt, laying down the foundation for greater and subsequent resistance and a psychology of political awareness, gave way to the Al-Nasrulahi movement of the late 1950s headed by Ugas Mahmud Majeerteen and Sheikh Abdulnasir, two individuals who never lost their revolutionary zeal despite advanced ages.<sup>9</sup> By 1960, Garad Makhtal Dahir, one of Africa's most charismatic liberation fighters, a man whose most recognizable physical was a long and bushy beard, begun to organize the Geesh revolt which later on gave way to the formation of Western Somali Liberation movement and to the contemporary front of the Ogaden National Liberation Front.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, unlike Tibebe Eshete, who thinks the British rulers of the region of the 1940s disrupted a sedeqo-exchange-based tranquil relationship between Amhara settlers in the Geri and Jarso district of Jigjiga and in the entire Haud and Reserved Area, thus encouraging the Geri revolt, a naive but glossy argumentation, the Somali question in Ethiopia is one of colonial occupation with severe consequences to the Somalis in the region.

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<sup>9</sup> Ugas Mohamoud Majerteen died in exile in San Diego, while Sheikh Abdi Nasir, after multiple arrests by the EPRDF government died in Dhagahbour about eight years ago.

<sup>10</sup> See The New York Time, "Somali Guerrilla Chief Say He'll Ignore a Truce," Special Report on Makhtal Dahir, March 28, 1964.