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THE OROMO AND THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF ISLAMISATION IN ETHIOPIA

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THE HISTORICAL INTERACTION between Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa is profoundly connected with the region's specific historical, linguistic and cultural characteristics. While the western coast of Africa faces the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, since antiquity the northern part of Africa's eastern coast as far as the Bab al-Mandab has interacted with the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula. The Arab geographers called all the various populations living on the western coast of the Bab al-Mandab 'Habash', while Abyssinia is the ancient name of the northern parts of modern Ethiopia, corresponding to modern Tigray and Eritrea. In recent scholarship, the term 'Greater Ethiopia' has been used to refer to Ethiopia in its twentieth-century borders before the independence of Eritrea in 1993.[1]

To understand the historical evolution of the relationship between the Islamic world and Ethiopia, we must outline the main characteristics of this area:

1. A geography that is intercontinental: the south of Arabia, the south of Egypt, the Eritrean coast and the Ethiopian Highlands formed a single cultural region. Relations between the ancient Yemeni kingdoms (such as Qataban, Saba – the biblical Sheba – Himyar and Hadramawt) and their contemporaries in Ethiopia, Aksum and the Aksumite rulers, as well as Meroe in the Sudan, are attested by archaeological evidence. Early Aksumite civilisation, before conversion to Christianity, also reflected the deep influence of south Nilotic culture, as an expression of southern Nubian and Meroitic civilisation.[2] Aksum was therefore able to intermingle with southern Arabia, but also with southern Nubia in late antiquity.[3]
2. The presence of a long-established written language tradition that stimulated the production of historical documents for at least two thousand years. The earliest of these inscriptions, the Ezana stele (AD 330), was written in three languages, Greek, Ge'ez and Sabaean, and mentions the king of Ezana, the first Aksumite ruler to convert to Christianity.[4]
3. A myth that traces the roots of the Aksumite kingdom to Old Testament biblical tradition. The only Ethiopian represented in the Old Testament is portrayed as a

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man of high moral character (Ebed-Melech, an officer of the court of Zedekiah, king of Judah),[5] while the biblical relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is reported in the Old Testament too (Kings 10: 1–13). However, it is in the Ethiopic text the *Kebra Negast*, the most important written source concerning the Solomonic line of the emperors of Ethiopia, that these connections are elaborated in full. The text contains an account of the encounter between the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba (who is also called Makeda from *mk-kdi*, which means 'female divinity' in Meroitic) with King Solomon and how the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia with Menelik I, the son of their union. The *Kebra Negast* (datable in its current form to the fourteenth century, although elements date back to a period between the fourth and sixth centuries AD) has been described by the famous Ethiopian studies expert Edward Ullendorf as 'not merely a literary work, but a repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings'.[6]

These features characterised Ethiopia during its long interaction with Islam and a vigorous process of Islamisation that, if we exclude religiously motivated clashes in the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, was mainly peaceful. From the sixteenth century, the Oromo ethnic group played a prominent role in these interactions. This originally pastoralist, nomadic Cushitic tribe took a conciliatory religious approach, alleviating the Islamic–Christian military conflict. Some of the Oromo converted to Christianity, while the majority embraced Islam, and their defence of their new religious identity permitted a form of integration that was sometimes violent and sometimes peaceful. Yet both Muslim and Christian Oromo continued to intermarry, while maintaining their own religious identities. The Oromo, then, played an important role in the religious environment of the region and it is on them that this essay will focus to explore the spread of Islam in Ethiopia from the sixteenth century onwards. First, however, it is necessary to outline the earlier spread of Islam in the region in the medieval period.

Christianity had reached the Ethiopian Highlands via Nubia, and Islam also came on the same route (see Figure 12.1). After embracing Christianity during the third to fifth century, Nubia's Islamisation was finally achieved under the Mamluks in the thirteenth to fifteenth century.[7] Nonetheless, the fierce resistance of Christian Nubia to Arab-Muslim penetration from the seventh century onwards is attested by different Arabic sources. The Muslim historian of the expansion of Islam, al-Baladhuri (d. 892), describes the early Arab attacks on Nubia,[8] while al-Tabari (d. 923) portrayed fighting between the Arabs and the Beja, the inhabitants of the territory to the east of the Nile as far as the Red Sea.[9] A further costly invasion ten years later deterred the Arabs from again attacking 'those people whose booty is meagre, and whose spite is great'.[10] Instead, in 652 they made a truce, known as the *baqt*, with the kingdom of Makuria, which undertook to deliver 360 slaves a year in return for Egyptian products and an agreement to respect each other's traders.[11] For the next 500 years, slaves, doubtless acquired from the south or west, were exported to Egypt, while Arabs settled in the Christian kingdom as traders and miners of gold and precious stones. Egypt's Fatimid rulers (969–1170) relied on black slave soldiers and their rule coincided with the apogee of Christian Nubia.[12] However, crisis arrived when in 1268 a local Nubian usurper appealed for recognition from the

Mamluks. Dynastic wars and Egyptian intervention followed: in 1317, a Muslim ruler (Shekanda) gained control of the remnants of the Nubian realm of Makuria and, during the following centuries, the Christian presence slowly but steadily disappeared. The end of Christian Nubia was described by the Mamluk historians al-Maqrizi (d. 1442)[13] and al-Nuwayri (d. 1332).[14]

The presence of churches and buildings in Nubia was not enough to secure the survival of Christianity within a region where 'no vestige of royal authority has remained in their country', as reported by Ibn Khaldun.[15] Arab pastoralism and clan nomadism brought utter disorder and unceasing warfare.[16] Sovereignty in the region passed to the Funj, an ethnic group whose origin is still unknown today, who conquered the area and rapidly adopted Islam. The main reasons for the disappearance of the Christian identity in Nubia are probably the abandonment in the first half of the thirteenth century of the old Greek-Nubian liturgical language for Coptic on the one hand and for Arabic on the other, in parallel with the annihilation of the Christian kingdoms. In contrast, in Ethiopia an independent Christian identity was maintained through the *Fetha Negast* (a legal code compiled around 1240), the role of monasticism in symbiosis with the political role of the dynasty, as well as the historic connection with the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria, which, in conjunction with the Solomonic legend of origins expressed by the *Kebra Negast*, helped give birth to a proto-national tradition.

Islam in Ethiopia, from the Muslim Occupation of the Coasts to Restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty (Seventh to Fourteenth Century)

Islam penetrated the Ethiopian Highlands from an early date and one of Ethiopia's communities associated with this event is the Argobba. According to Christian tradition, the Argobba were an indigenous population which needed a putative Arab ancestral origin to legitimise their conversion to Islam. Questions about the Argobba's cultural origins have puzzled scholars and laymen alike and, despite the uncertainties and obscurities, a plethora of hypotheses have been proposed.[17] According to Aklilu Asfaw,[18] this term referred to the entrance of the Arabs into the Horn of Africa: *Arab geba*, 'the Arabs have entered'. Although the Argobba today consists of a largely Muslim (96 per cent) population that lives in the 'Afar, an Islamic region of the country, 4 per cent are affiliated with the Christian Orthodox Church, indicating that, as in the past, a part of this tribe was linked to the predominantly Christian group of the Amhara. However, according to local sources in eastern Hararghe, the name Argobba could also come from the Arabic term *al-rujba/rajagib beher*, 'the tutor family' (*rujba* means 'tutor' or 'joints of the fingers', *rawajib*), and then historically designated those who held the 'right' knowledge of Islam, the urban elites and the early missionaries who played a key role in the spread of Islam in the hinterland of the Horn of Africa from the eleventh century. In any event, the first interpretation does not completely contradict the second one; both terms confirm that the 'Afar and Hararghe regions were among the first to undergo a process of Islamisation. Identifying the precise geographical area in which the Argobba lived during the early centuries of the Muslim presence in the region is complicated. While Ahmed Hassan Omar argued that,

Figure 12.1 Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, showing the main regions
discussed.

according to local Arabic manuscripts, 'Argobba' would designate the inhabitants of one ancient Muslim city (Goba) in Ifat (which must not be confused with the still existent city of Goba in the Bale region) and the specific language that they spoke, eventual confirmation of this would not, however, modify the historical–mythological origin of this term.[19]

However, according to Muslim legend, the Muslims of Argobba are to be identified with the descendants of forty members of the Islamic community who emigrated from Mecca in 614 to the protection of the Emperor of Aksum. According to Ibn Hisham's *Sirat Rasul Allah,* the biography of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad advised his followers who were being persecuted by the Quraysh in Mecca that, 'If you go to Abyssinia, you will find a king under whom none are persecuted. It is a land of righteousness where God will give you relief from what you are suffering.'[20] Muslim legends praise the piety of the Ethiopian king, who is said to have secretly converted to Islam.[21] Legendary though such accounts are, they serve to emphasise the similarities between the pre-Islamic and Aksumite civilisations, as is also shown by their proto-urban societies, their extensive commercial activities and their original plurality of religions, which culminated in the adoption of a monotheistic faith officially supported by the political leadership. Just as the Quran is indebted to the Old and New Testament tradition (apocryphal and not), the *Kebra Negast* – even if not comparable to Islamic revelation because it is not considered to represent the divine word – is a product of the same cultural–religious melting pot that proclaims continuity between the Jewish tradition of the kings and the new one established in Ethiopia by divine right and certified by the Ark of the Covenant. If Muhammad was the 'Seal of Prophecy' (Q. 33: 40), Menelik I was the 'Seal of divine kingship'.

The beginning of the relationship between Islam and the empire of Aksum was thus peaceful, and Ethiopia was considered a pious country to be exempted from early Islamic expansionism. It was only with the caliphate of the Umayyad ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) that some strategic harbours on the Red Sea began to play a more important commercial and strategic role. Al-Tabari reports that the Dahlak Islands in the Red Sea off the Eritrean coast were occupied in the seventh century to transform them into a penal colony;[22] important Qadarite theologians were deported there under the Umayyad caliph Hisham (r. 724–43).[23] The first Arab historian to give us more precise information about the Aksumite kingdom and its affiliation with the early Muslim converts in the Horn of Africa is al-Yaʿqubi. In his *Kitab al-Buldan* (AD 872), he describes the political situation in the north of the region at the time when the Beja, a Nilotic–Cushitic population, took advantage of Aksumite decline to create five kingdoms in the north of Eritrea.[24] The Beja were not yet Islamised, but the new faith began to spread gradually due to the presence of settlements inhabited by Muslims who worked in the gold mines of the region.[25] With the tenth century, a peaceful relationship based on trade was established between the Aksumite capital Kuʿbar and the local Yemeni chief Ibrahim Ibn Ziyad (902–4), a Zaydite ruler.[26] In the ports of Zailaʿ, Dahlak and Badiʿ, Muslim traders were tributaries (*dhimmī*) to the Christian rulers.

After the year 1000, Muslim traders played a significant role in linking the different reaches of 'Greater Ethiopia' in a period in which the political rulers of the region were changing. It was because of this role that Muslim traders were tolerated, but they were actively persecuted whenever they attempted to proselytise. Islamic communities were established in the Benadir, Brava and Merca areas. The

geographer al-Idrisi (1100–62) gives a fairly accurate description of their locations in his geographical treatise written in about 1150, but it is not until the thirteenth century that we have a depiction of the coastal town of Mogadishu in which Arab, Persian and perhaps Indian traders lived.[27] However, it was probably from the tenth and eleventh centuries that Arab Muslims left a permanent imprint on the south-eastern coast of the Horn of Africa through the creation of clans such as the Darod and Ishaq (still represented today in the region), which were the forerunners of Somali identity.[28]

The eleventh and twelfth centuries remain particularly obscure and even the leading experts in Ethiopian studies have few theories about them. The figure of Judith or Gudit, who attacked Aksum at the end of the tenth century, was probably a female ruler of Jewish origin related to the Agaw tribe, according to Edward Ullendorff,[29] or the Queen of the Damot kingdom, led by the Sidamo tribe, for O. G. Crawford.[30] This is significant because, during this period in which Christianity was in retreat, trade passed increasingly into the hands of Muslim families and clans. Muslim Amhara and Tigreans known as Jabarti braved the severe hardship of caravan life in Ethiopia – attacks by bandits, oppressive tariffs, swollen rivers, steep plateaux and wild beasts – to carry their goods, and in the process ideas and news, from one region to another. Muslims controlled this trade and the peoples along the route gradually adopted Islam: first the Cushitic-speaking Somali peoples of the eastern lowlands, then Semitic speakers on the south-eastern highland fringes, where small Islamic emirates had existed since the thirteenth century in eastern Shoa and Ifat. As masters of Egypt, the Fatimids could exert considerable influence on Christian Ethiopia, as it was the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria who appointed the Bishop of the Ethiopian Church. There are some indications that the ruling dynasty of Cairo put pressure on the Patriarch to ensure that the interests of Islam and Muslim merchants were safeguarded in Ethiopia. They even interfered in the selection of the metropolitans sent to the Christian kingdom. However, it seems that there were also often internal problems between the two churches.[31]

In 1137, an Agaw prince seized the throne and created the Zagwe dynasty, which until 1270 ruled a large part of the northern Ethiopian Plateau, seeking legitimacy through constructing impressive rock-hewn Christian churches in Lalibela, the city of Zion, or the 'black Jerusalem', as it was subsequently described by the first Western travellers. Christian settlements extended southwards through the eastern lowlands to the coast at Zailaʿ, in search of higher rainfall and the lure of trade, exchanging slaves, gold and ivory for salt from the lowlands and imported Islamic luxuries. As Christian kingdoms retreated further and further onto the Plateau, Muslim traders took control of the coasts of the Horn, developing their commercial interests and creating local emirates. However, after Salah al-Din's reconquest of Jerusalem (1187), in 1189 he fulfilled a long-standing request of the Zagwe dynasty by reserving the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and an altar in the Church of the Holy Nativity at Bethlehem for the Abyssinians, an act that would have been much appreciated. The arrangement has survived till today, confirmed by the presence of Ethiopian monks at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the thirteenth century, the Zagwe still controlled a limited part of what had formerly been the Aksumite kingdom: Tigray, Lasta, Angot and part of the Begamder, and, even if their royal

titles described them as the 'kings of kings of Ethiopia', their territories bordered a countless number of small multiethnic emirates under Muslim control. It is reported by al-ʿUmari that Muslim colonies had even established themselves in the Christian part of the Highlands at the beginning of the thirteenth century, although all of them were required to pay a tax of three *afiqaḥīs* (ingots of iron), which was the Abyssinian currency.[32]

The struggle with Islam was further embittered by the fact that the Coptic Church sometimes colluded with the Egyptian rulers by appointing *abuna*s (bishops), who worked for the promotion of Islamic economic interests in the Ethiopian Highlands. *Abuna*s from Egypt were not able to establish themselves by assuming anti-Islamic positions. While the Zagwe dynasty strove to maintain a positive relationship with the main Muslim rulers of the Horn of Africa, it also sought to convert to Christianity largely pagan areas such as Gojjam and Shoa. The Muslim–Christian relationship during the century of Zagwe leadership encouraged peaceful economic interactions that on the one hand allowed Islam to build bridgeheads towards the Ethiopian Highlands, but on the other maintained the status quo, keeping the entire region free from violent quarrels. Even if the Zagwe dynasty stimulated the building of monasteries and the monastic presence in areas previously not yet Christianised, it was overshadowed by the general belief that, as a non-Aksumite line, its power was acquired through an illegitimate act of usurpation. To paraphrase Taddesse Tamrat, the Late Antique Aksumite Christian tradition was saved and preserved by the Zagwe dynasty before the return of a Solomonic line.[33]

The situation changed drastically with the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty. Yikunno Amlak (1270–85), renamed Tesfa Iyesus, 'Hope of Jesus', ended the Zagwe dynasty and claimed to be an heir to the rulers of Aksum. Donald M. Levine believes that this re-establishment was related to the advent of the Amhara, an Agaw people who developed a distinct southern Ethiopian-Semitic tongue through a process of pigeonisation and creolisation. The predominance of Tigray, which has been the most important area of the Christian empire since the early Aksumite kingdom of late antiquity, was definitively ended. The Amharaland was more mountainous than the rest of the Ethiopian Highlands, but with fertile hills and valleys: barley, wheat and millet were as abundant as honey and horned cattle. The independent kingdoms led by local Muslim or Falasha (Jewish) dynasties in Lasta as in Damot and in Gojjam as in Bale, which the Zagwe had permitted, were not endorsed by the Solomonic rulers. Under the kings of Amhara, such as Yikunno Amlak and his successors, the Christian sphere of influence expanded considerably. The great breakthrough in military expansion occurred during the reign of Amde Siyon (1314–44), the founder of the Ethiopian state. In his thirty-year career, he conquered Damot, Hadiyya and Gojjam, subdued the hostile Muslim emirates of Ifat and Fatigar and those of the south, Dewaro and Bale, and finally defeated the Falasha troops in the north which had been mobilised to support the Muslim cause. The Arab writers of the 1340s described him as the ruler of more than 99 kings.[34] It was in this period that interreligious conflict in the Horn of Africa began to assume an international dimension: the Mamluk sultan, al-Nasir Muhammad, began a persecution of the Copts of Egypt and demolished many churches (even if many mosques were burned by the local Christian community as well); in

response, Amde Siyon increased the military campaigns against the emirates of the Horn, leading to the intervention of the Muslims of Ifat who, between 1332 and 1338, sent an embassy to Cairo to ask the sultan to mediate with the Abyssinians on their behalf. Al-ʿUmari relates:

> The Muslim kingdoms of Abyssinia were seven in number: Awfat, Dewaro, ʿArababni, Hadya, Sharka, Bale and Dara. These kingdoms, which belonged to seven kings, are weak and poor, because the cohesion between the inhabitants is weak, the produce of the country is not abundant and the king of Amhara imposes his authority on the other kings of Abyssinia, not to mention the religious antipathy which exists between them and the disputes which separate Christians and Muslims.[35]

However, if the political relationship between the Mamluk and the Solomonic dynasties was increasingly difficult, the diplomatic titles used in official correspondence from the Mamluks addressed to the Ethiopian court highlight the importance of the Abyssinian kingdom for Cairo. The Christian Ethiopian ruler is addressed as *al-jalīl* (the Sublime), *al-ḍirjām* (the Brave), *rukn al-umma al-ʿīsawiyya* (the supporter of the community of Jesus) and *muʿaẓẓim kanīsat ṣahyūn* (one who makes magnificent the church of Zion). Al-Qalqashandi, referring to the term *al-jalīl*, voiced some doubts about the use of a divine epithet for a Christian king, which highlights how the Mamluk chancellery was little concerned about the religious appropriateness of the titles and more interested in the diplomatic niceties.[36]

The first two centuries of the new Solomonic dynasty also played a crucial role in forging a Christian religious identity through the creation of a vast field of missionary activity for the Ethiopian Church. Its evangelists were the spiritual counterparts of military heroes: holy men like St Takla Haymanot (d. 1313), who created pioneer monasteries in non-Christian areas, practised extreme self-mortification, waged epic struggles against indigenous primitive religions and attracted the people to Christianity by their power, sanctity, miracles and the services they could perform in the new Christian order, in a way not so dissimilar from the early Sufi orders that would reach the Horn of Africa from Iran and India. The pre-eminent Ifat sultanate, which was responsible in the thirteenth century for the annexation of the former sultanate of Shoa in the Ethiopian Highlands, rapidly increased commerce with the port of Zailaʿ, which it controlled and which was one of the main ports on the Gulf of Aden. Tensions with the Christian Solomonic dynasty increased, erupting in conflict in the following century and leading to partial occupation of Ifat and the establishment of a Christian garrison at a number of important sites. The lack of unity among the Muslims and the military superiority of the Christian army were the main reasons for the submission of Ifat, Dewaro, Sharka and Bale. Al-ʿUmari describes how every time a local Muslim chief died, his sons and heirs would come to the Christian emperor's court with presents to obtain a sort of official confirmation of their title as new chief of the Muslim provinces, emphasising de facto Christian control over the entire area. The failed Muslim insurrection of 1332 against the Ethiopian ruler, led by the part of the Ifat sultanate that did not submit to the Christians, destroyed the sultanate's independence for many decades. In its place arose the sultanate of ʿAdal in the same region.[37]

Peace and War, Victory and Defeat: Ethiopian Resistance to Muslim Encroachment (Fifteenth to Sixteenth Century)

In the reign of Zara Yacob (1434–68), as reported by the *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, the struggle between the neo-Solomonic dynasty and the emirates of the coast continued.[38] The diplomatic interaction between Zara Yacob's successors and the ʿAdal emirate, the main local Islamic sultanate, was characterised by fluctuating policies: under Baeda Maryam I (1468–78), relations with Badlay b. Saʿd al-Din were peaceful until his death, while under Iskinder (1478–94), Baeda Maryam's son who reached the throne at six years old, regency was granted to his mother, Queen Eleni, who was a convert to Christianity and daughter of the Muslim king of Hadiya. From her childhood, Eleni retained awareness of the wider Muslim world and sought to reach a reconciliation with ʿAdal, not least to promote commercial relations.[39]

Two new developments arose at the turn of the sixteenth century, making the conflict assume a more international aspect: the arrival of the Portuguese and the unification of the Muslim emirates of the coast around a local leader, Imam Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Ghazi (r. 1506–43).[40] After the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa, Vasco da Gama bombarded the port of Mogadishu and in 1507 established a settlement on the island of Socotra. The Mamluks were unprepared for the Portuguese naval incursions and in the first decades of the sixteenth century the Europeans bombed and sacked the main harbours of Zailaʿ and Berbera. However, after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, which united most of the Islamic Mediterranean world politically, Istanbul sought to exert control over the Red Sea and the maritime trade routes to the Indian subcontinent. The struggle between the Portuguese and the Turks for mastery of the Arabian Sea was destined to have a profound effect upon the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and Muslim emirates of the coast.

The Somali and ʿAfar campaigns within the Islamic emirates of the coast, in particular those of ʿAdal, Ifat and Harar, would cause a hardening in relations with the inhabitants of the Ethiopian Highlands, but also within the Muslim emirates themselves. The emirs first recruited their forces from the ʿAfar tribes, who were lured by the promise of plunder, but afterwards were soon joined also by Somalis, Banu Jirri, Zerba, Habr Maqadi and many others. These leaders, of whom the most famous were Mahfuz and Ahmad b. Ibrahim (both Somali and related to each other), replaced the title of emir after their first successes with that of imam, transforming the raiding and pillaging of the inhabitants of the Plateau into a holy war against the Christian enemy.[41] However, without Ottoman supply of firearms to the ʿAfar and Somalis, they would not have met with such military success: Mahfuz, the Imam of Harar, had already been killed by Lebna Dengel in the 1517 campaign against his territories.[42] However, the early defeat of Mahfuz gave the Christians an exaggerated false sense of security. None of the first armed conflicts between the two states before 1516 was sufficiently disastrous to dispel the false notion of military superiority which Lebna Dengel and his officials continued to presume in their relations with ʿAdal.[43]

Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Ghazi, nicknamed the *Gragn*, the 'left-handed', by the Ethiopians, was able to rebuild Muslim political power in south-eastern Ethiopia. His marriage to the daughter of Mahfuz assured him the loyalty of his supporters while the Ottoman–Portuguese conflict for control of the sea routes prompted Istanbul to

occupy the ports of Suakin and Zailaʿ and to establish relations with the Muslims in Portuguese-occupied Masawwaʿ. At the same time, in Zailaʿ, Catalan merchants, rivals of the Portuguese, were initially supplying the Muslim forces with arms. In 1531, Ahmad b. Ibrahim launched a well-planned attack that brought three quarters of Highland Ethiopia under his sway. The former Muslim kingdoms of Bale and Hadya and the Sidamo and Gurage realms were taken quite easily. The conquest was devastating in its destruction, irresistible in its ferocity and appalling in its cruelties:[44] churches and monasteries were burned and many Christians forced to convert.[45] Confronted with the stone churches of Lalibela, Ahmad b. Ibrahim looted objects made of precious metals, burnt manuscripts and everything of wood, but did little damage to the churches themselves. In 1535, Ahmad, in control of the south and centre of Highland Ethiopia, for the first time invaded Tigray, where he encountered strong opposition from the hardy mountain tribes and suffered some reverses; however, his advance was not stopped.[46] Lebna Dengel became a hunted fugitive, harried from one mountain fastness to another. The havoc and destruction continued for more than fourteen years, during which virtually the whole of Highland Ethiopia was conquered and a great many centres of Ethiopian Christian civilisation destroyed, shaping the Christian perception of Muslims as the enemy within. The jihad was finally ended by Christian guerrilla resistance and with the help of a contingent of Portuguese soldiers, sent upon the request of the Ethiopian king, who arrived in 1541.[47] Lebna Dengel died in battle in 1540 and was succeeded on the throne by eighteen-year-old Emperor Galawdewos (r. 1540–59), who received military support from the Portuguese and was able to retake large amounts of territory.[48] Finally, Sarta Dengel (r. 1563–97), in a brilliant series of campaigns, decisively put an end to Harar as an Islamic military power, to the Ottoman expansion into Eritrea and to the independence of the Falasha kingdoms. Despite continued harassment and attempted invasions from foreign Muslim centres in subsequent centuries, the Solomonic kingdom re-established sufficient security to contain external Muslim threats thereafter.

This new relationship between Islam and Christianity could be observed over the next century, in the Amhara Gondarine era, under the reigns of Fasilidas (r. 1632–67) and his son Yohannes I (r. 1667–82). This period was particularly important for the role the Amhara played on the Ethiopian Highlands in the evolution of the Orthodox Church as a national institution in opposition to the increasing interference of the Jesuits, who had been established in Ethiopia as a result of the Portuguese alliance since the mid sixteenth century.[49] However, Fasilidas's policy also increased Ethiopian isolationism towards any foreign political or economic entity. He signed various alliances with the Muslim rulers of the coast, sending an envoy to the Imam al-Muʾayyad biʾllah of Yemen in 1642 asking him to banish or kill any Portuguese he came across. A few years later, he asked for a Muslim alim to be sent to his court. The alim arrived in Gondar in 1648, but was greeted with such opprobrium by the population that the king advised him, for his safety, to depart and sent him away loaded with costly gifts. The defence of true faith against heresy assumed with the Jesuit presence a very different character from the same discourse in the pre-Jesuit era. The Muslim–Christian divide was replaced with an Orthodox–Catholic/heretic one, shaping Ethiopia's identity.[50] Although Fasilidas's Gondar castle, as well as the churches of Lalibela, remain symbolic of the complexity and cultural richness of Ethiopia, the isolationist policy (to which the Jesuits' definitive expulsion in the 1630s was an important contribution)

reached new heights under Emperor Johannes I (r. 1667–82). In 1668, the royal coun-cil promulgated an edict of religious discrimination, which decreed that the Franks (the descendants of the Portuguese) must leave the country unless they joined the National Church, while Muslims, who could not be expelled because they played a significant role in the economic life of the country, were forbidden to live with Christians and had to inhabit separate villages and separate quarters in the towns. Amharic nationalism was emerging, but not within a modern historical context; on the contrary, a process of feudalisation overran Ethiopia. The kingdom became completely isolated, while the surrounding local Islamic emirates dominated the trade routes and all commercial activities.[51] Muslim traders supplied the population of the Plateau with manufactures and complex goods, but also slaves and agricultural products from the broad basin of the Red Sea, and from the Indian subcontinent and the Mediterranean.

The Oromo's Role in Shaping Ethiopian Interreligious Identity

The other factor that prevented Abyssinia – and indeed 'Greater Ethiopia' as a whole – from returning to a pre-jihad status quo was a series of invasions by an east Cushitic people from the south, who attenuated the Muslim–Christian antagonism by weaken-ing the position of both parties.[52] These were the Galla, or Oromo. The Oromo pres-ence, as Donald N. Levine has argued, would moderate Muslim–Christian antagonism and, over the following centuries, gave rise to a peaceful interreligious interaction that has survived until modern times (that is, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). It is therefore important to emphasise that, if a sort of 'clash of civilisations' started with the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty and erupted more violently when the ʿAfar and Somalis started to receive Ottoman support, it failed to destroy the Tigrinya and Amhara of Highland Ethiopia and developed increasingly as an interethnic conflict which assumed religious dimensions.

The first Oromo emigration (the term Galla is today considered particularly offen-sive) for which there are any documents occurred during the 1520s when they invaded Bale, although there is evidence for an Oromo presence in the southern part of Ethio-pia from at least the thirteenth to the fourteenth century.[53] During the 1530s, they crossed the Webi Shabeelle, one of the ever-flowing rivers of the southern Ethiopian–Somali area, and invaded the Arsi–Bale–Dewaro regions.[54] At the height of Ahmad b. Ibrahim's expansion, the Oromo had already made significant inroads into Muslim territory in south-east Ethiopia and, after the amir's death, it was the Muslims of Harar who suffered most from the beginning of the Oromo's geographical reloca-tion.[55] In the 1540s and 1550s, the Oromo penetrated northwards to invade Fatigar and Shoa, while other groups devastated the Harar region; not until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century had they reached Gojjam, Amhara, Wollo and Damot. By invading parts of the recently Islamised areas of southern Ethiopia from the south, the Oromo were favouring the Christian resistance in the north. However, they main-tained an effective equidistance from the religious conflict.

The Oromo's monotheistic religion, expressed through a belief in the sky god Waqaa (who acquired different names in different areas), is an expression of a Cushitic religiosity that dates back to an obscure historical period, probably prior to the sixteenth century.[56] Today, approximately 47 per cent of the Oromo are Sunni Muslim, 30 per cent are Orthodox Christian and 17 per cent Protestants, while a

limited minority remain bound to an indigenous Oromo religious tradition.[57] They had a more markedly egalitarian culture (in comparison with the Somali clan system and the Amhara hierarchical regal structure) with a complex age-based class system, through which all men rotated in their lifetime. These branches were organised into a family clan structure and socially stratified in accordance with the male *Gadaa*, or age grade system, which remains in use among the Borana tribe. The classes of *Gadaa*, called *Luba*, are related to the members' age. A man's *Luba* was strictly associated with that of his father. There were eleven grades of *Luba*; a man belonged to each grade for a cycle of eight years and each grade was characterised by a particular set of rights and responsibilities; members of different *Luba* had the opportunity to reach a higher *Luba* level. Finally, the Oromo popular assembly, called the *Gumi Gayo*, established laws that were in force for each eight-year period until the next *Gumi Gayo* was held with a new elected leader.[58]

The Oromo adapted to the new geographical region into which they had migrated, some of them increasing their skills as pasture tenders and learning to use horses, others becoming stable farmers. However, their expansion was not calculated to extend political dominion over others, because the aforesaid internal structure did not at the beginning seek to gain recognition for a central authority to collect tribute or impose a national religious culture. Instead, being Oromo was probably linked to socio-political projects promoting the political-economic autonomy and legitimacy of rural *civitates*, in contrast to the more structured societies already established within the different areas they reached.[59] Oromo leaders in direct contact with Christian or Muslim areas in the sixteenth to seventeenth century began a long process of integration that increased their importance.[60] After they had settled and became Christian or Muslim, the Oromo often intermarried with the Amhara or the ʿAfar and Somalis. In the southern part of the country, especially in Bale and Arsi, the Oromo remained the dominant element of the population and maintained the *awama*, their traditional folk religion. There they created several kingdoms, gaining dominance over the indigenous Sidamo or Omotic people of the area and remaining essentially independent from Ethiopian imperial authority until the nineteenth century.[61] The Oromo, geographically closer to Amharaland than to Harar, from the sixteenth century onwards absorbed many Abyssinian social and political institutions, losing their former structure and becoming powerful warrior tribes independent and antagonistic to each other, whilst many were recruited into the armies of the Negus.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, much of the Horn underwent a process of Islamisation, not as a result of military force, as older scholarship argued, but with the increasing and predominant role of trade, and this also affected the Oromo. The Oromo's integration into Ethiopian society and their partial transformation into a praetorian guard did not prevent them from converting to Islam; on the contrary, the Muslim faith became significant as symptomatic of Oromo identity in regions geographically remote from the Abyssinian capital. The majority of the Oromo population living in the Islamic southern areas of the Horn – Harar and Arsi–Bale – gradually adopted Islam from the sixteenth century on, accepting the Imam of Harar as their nominal master while preserving some aspects of their original culture and socio-political organisation. Also in these regions, local Islamic authorities started

to favour interethnic marriages with Somali and Oromo women to assure tribal support. As Mohammed Hassen argues:

> The Oromo appear to have wanted to counter Christian unity and strength by making Islam a major unifying factor, part of their cultural life, and a mark of their independence. Trimingham's observation is accurate when he writes that the Oromo in Wollo reinforced their independence by the adoption of Islam. He goes on to argue that the Oromo in Wollo accepted Islam as a bulwark against being swamped by Abyssinian nationalism. Indeed, Islam appears to have served as a powerful symbol of Oromo identity and a reliable fortress against the domination of their Christian neighbours.[62]

In the seventeenth century, the Ethiopian Emperor Susenyos (r. 1606–32) took a keen interest in the Oromo. He had come to power with Oromo support,[63] learnt their language, married an Oromo woman and integrated them into Ethiopian politics. However, after an initial period of peace between the Amhara and the Oromo, the emperor tried to Christianise those who were not geographically close to the Amhara territories, reigniting conflicts and bringing the war back to areas that had been comparatively peaceful since the arrival of the Oromo.[64] Oromo warriors flooded into Susenyos' domain and within a short time outnumbered his Amhara followers. During the reign of Iyasu I (1682–1706), the Amhara army of the north penetrated the Shoa region with the intention of attacking the Oromo of the south, but the unenthusiastic response of the local Amhara rulers to attacking their neighbours, who were partly 'Amharised' and with whom they maintained relatively friendly relations, convinced the emperor to maintain the status quo. The Oromo interaction with the previously subdued populations of the Ethiopian Highlands, such as the Sidamo, Mecha or the peoples of Innarya, Gibe and Damot, promoted an increasing number of coalitions in which a cultural mixture during the Zemene Mesafint (the Era of Princes) consolidated the leading role of the Oromo in parallel with an Islamic revival in the second half of the eighteenth century, partially due to the great development of caravan trade on the Plateau. This factor combined with Islam to become a unifying factor which helped the Oromo chiefs to consolidate their authority.

During the eighteenth century, Iyasu II (r. 1730–55) was the last Negus who had any semblance of authority; nevertheless, the unity of the Ethiopian kingdom already depended on Oromo military support and Islamic trade. When a rebellion broke out in the Damot region shortly after the coronation of Iyasu II, the Oromo chief Waranna became local governor and his troops allowed the capital at Gondar to be supplied with basic necessities. The Oromo's militarisation permitted lower-ranking warriors of many clans to rise to prominence and, with the increasing importance of the Shoa region (where the next capital, Addis Ababa, would be founded), the Oromo who converted to Christianity acquired a greater standing, emerging as new rulers of the area. Gondar was unable to control the Ethiopian Highlands while those who benefitted from the situation were the 'Amharised' Oromo who obtained important positions within the administration, the army and the Ethiopian court. The Christian Oromo partly 'Amharised' to reach a higher level within the Solomonic hierarchies and the majority of the emperors of Ethiopia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had Oromo blood. However, despite sharing the same religion with the Abyssinians, they

did not share the political-ideological orientation of the Ethiopian Church, whose main interest was to preserve a structural inequality rooted in fascinating myths and legends, putting religious power in the service of the empire.[65] Muslim-born local Oromo chiefs had to become nominal members of the Church for political reasons, but did not change their sympathies. As reported by Ferret and Galinier, but also by the Capuchin monk G. Massaia:

> A fundamental law of the Ethiopian state was that princes had to be Christians, therefore Muslims who aspired to the status of nobility had to change their religion. Such conversions were only nominal and when made governors of provinces they did all they could to favour Islam.[66]

The result was the increasing discontent of the Abyssinian clergy with Oromo supremacy and it was in the first half of the nineteenth century that the morale of the Church was at its lowest ebb because conversion to Islam in the Highlands had reached its apex. The social and economic activism of Muslim communities in the Highlands was clearly superior to the still feudal way of living of the Christian communities, while all commercial activities at the coastal ports were univocally in Muslim hands.

In the Wollo region, the Oromo converted in large numbers to Islam during the eighteenth century, or at least this was the perception of the Amhara and Tigray elite in Gondar. The Yajju state and an anti-Oromo prejudice increased the interethnic conflict, de facto favouring the emergence of the Yajju Oromo, nobility whose conversion to Christianity from Islam was never accepted as genuine. The Islamic presence in Wollo was rooted in the prevalence of different Sufi confraternities, in particular the Qadiri and Shadhili, quite probably as early as the sixteenth century.[67] The appeal of Sufi orders was their emphasis on common religious performances through *dhikr* (invocations), piety and solidarity, but also their interaction with non-Muslim communities. The Islamic mystical presence fostered a rich spiritual tradition interconnected with local non-Muslim folk practices which did not impose Arabic as the main identifying religious idiom, but developed an intermingled hybrid religious culture, albeit maintaining stronger links with centres of Islamic learning in the wider Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In the Ethiopian countryside, mostly populated by farmers, local traders and craftsmen, there developed *zāwiya*s (local monasteries not so dissimilar to those of the Christian Ethiopian tradition) and Islamic education. Around these *zāwiya*s, there grew up places for local pilgrimages, usually connected with saints' graves and mosques.[68] The local male and female *zāwiya*s were viewed entirely as places of retreat and religious study where Muslims were committed to the pious life, prayer and the study of the Quran and *fiqh*. The Christian monastic influence was evident in the Horn of Africa too and even if the Quran (57: 27) expressed an Islamic opposition to cenobitism, religious seclusion for spiritual reasons became particularly popular in the Wollo region with the expansion of Sufi holy places that transformed the saints' shrines into pilgrimage sites where students and common people prayed and encouraged spiritual experience.[69] The subsequent emergence, in the nineteenth century, of women's convents linked to the Qadiriyya, but clearly influenced by Christian nuns' orders, in the Amhara, ʿAfar, Argobba and Oromo territories is symptomatic of the existence of a cultural–religious melting pot able to introduce innovations. These sacred areas of pilgrimage allowed for conversion and for religious-conflict mediation between the various local ethnic groups. This was a prominent characteristic, quite

unusual, but paradigmatically connected with the growing interreligious identity of the Plateau.

Conclusion: The Islamisation of the Ethiopian Highlands and Ethiopia's National Identity

The rising power of the Oromo defused the Muslim–Christian clash of civilisations that characterised the sixteenth century with Ahmad b. Ibrahim's attempt to annihilate the Christian presence from the Ethiopian Highlands (although the Solomonic dynasty, despite fighting fiercely against the Islamic emirates of the coast, never tried to extirpate the Muslim presence in the region due to the usefulness of their role as traders). The rising Oromo role in the Horn of Africa on both sides, the Christian as well as the Islamic, is due to their great pliability and to the fundamental aspect that emphasised the roots of a national identity outside a religious dimension. Muslim, Christian and traditional folk praxis in any case fully shared a clear Oromo identity, which increased their importance in the Horn regardless of their religious beliefs. Oromo society today is still multireligious, through a village system in which church and mosque are not so distant.

We can therefore problematise the process of Islamisation in the Ethiopian Highlands as follows. First, forced conversion remained rare, especially outside the violent clashes of the sixteenth century, which nonetheless did not lead to a concrete transformation of the religious geography of the Plateau. Second, the arrival of the Oromo preserved the status quo in the south-eastern part of the Ethiopian Highlands, de facto freezing the interreligious conflict. Third, the process of feudalisation in Ethiopia, as a response to the internationalisation of the Muslim–Christian conflict, helped to defuse the religious clashes of the sixteenth century in an attempt to preserve its Christian identity. Fourth, the 'isolationist' policy of the Ethiopians during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in the increasing importance of Muslim trade activities between the coast of the Horn and the main urban areas of the Highlands.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the paradigmatic figure of Ligg Yasu, the son of Ras Mika'el, the chief of the Wollo-Galla region (to whom Menelik had married his favourite daughter) who tried to secure his son's the succession to the throne with the support of the Wallo tribes, an intermixed, predominantly Muslim, Oromo people,[70] clarified the level that the process of Islamisation in the Ethiopian Highlands had reached.[71] Ligg Yasu's pro-Islamic orientation, following his accession to the throne, was the main cause of his defenestration: Christian Ethiopian society could not approve the existence of an emperor whose Christianity was just a facade. However, it is important that, after this 'incident', Ethiopian society, both Christian and Muslim, preserved its unity, making it ready for the Italian invasion of the 1930s. The Oromo ethnic element of Ethiopia can be considered the cornerstone on which the unitarian national identity of the country has been reshaped in the last centuries. Their interreligious and long-standing assimilation contributed to the end of the Muslim–Christian clash of the sixteenth century, weakening ʿAfar and Somali attempts to restructure the internal equilibrium of the Highlands, and keeping them on the geographical and social margins of contemporary Ethiopian society.

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