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ERITREA ON THE EVE OF
EUROPEAN COLONIAL RULE

Guest Editor: Bairu Tafla

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THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF KEREN IN THE MASSAWA-KHASSALA TRADE ROUTE

Adhana Mengstaab

This brief article¹ attempts to present the strategic importance of the Keren district in the Eritrean northern caravan trade route from the earliest times to the nineteenth century.

The Geo-Strategic Location of Keren

The district of Keren, known as Bogos by the Tigrigna-speaking neighboring district, and as Sanhit by the Tigrae-speaking districts, is a mountainous region tightly welded to the Hamasen plateau. It may be considered the northern appendage of that plateau. It is a centre of the Ansaba valley which extends from the Barka valley to the Red Sea Coast. The deep valley of the river Ansaba splits that mountainous mass into two: the eastern part constitutes the Habab and Mansa, while the western portion constitutes the Marya and the Land of the Blean (Bogos, Sanhit). Bogos, which forms a sort of lower shelf of the Hamasen plateau, stands at about 700 meters above the Barka and 800 meters below Hamasen. It is bordered by the Marya and Habab in the north, by Bejjuk and Mansa in the east, by

Hamasen in the south, and by the Ben Amer (Barka) in the west. The average altitude of the land is estimated at 1,200 meters.

The Ansaba, which is the life-line of the districts it crosses, has its source on the Hamasen plateau. The Maybala stream, which rises in Asmara, and the Maygwayla stream, which rises in the area between Asmara and Tsa'azzaga, are its two major tributaries. It follows a south-northwest course down the deep valley closed in by the mountain massif almost all the way to Charit and flows into the Barka, a little south of the Dada confluence.

The town of Keren, homonymous with the district it serves as a capital, is situated between 15°46' latitude and 38°36' longitude from Greenwich with an altitude of about 1390 meters above sea level. It sprawls on a wide basin surrounded by granitic mountains on all sides. Situated at a crossroads, in a key position of the ancient trade artery leading to Suakin in the north, Massawa in the east and Sennar in the west. It has played a significant role in the economic history of northeast Africa.

The district of Keren has been referred to by travellers as the 'small African Eden' for its springy, pleasant climate. In fact, the town of Keren served as a climatic centre in the Administrative Region of Eritrea with its temperature of 15°-30°C during the greater part of the year. The land was fairly fertile, the part found nearer to the Ansaba being more so than the sandy one farther from it. Werner Munzinger, the Swiss explorer and Egyptian colonial agent, had this to say about the area when he was still a French consular agent at Massawa:

"Bogos is the centre of the large province of Ansaba. Possession of it is important if only for its fertility. But it is also the only camel route from Massawa to the Sudan. Possession of it means control over the provinces of Barka, Marea, Badjouk (Christians) whose resources are large and are capable of increasing a hundred fold in a

short time. This province, if well administered, would be the flower of all the Egyptian Sudan.”²

The Ancient Inhabitants

The present population of the Blean inhabiting the district probably replaced the Bedja original dwellers and absorbed the few Tigrae remnants. The Blean probably crossed the Takkaze in the period between the third and ninth centuries of the Christian era when the Aksumite kingdom dominated by semitized elements constantly hammered at the Agaw core across the river. Weakened by the bankruptcy of its expansionist policy across the Red Sea and its campaigns to aid its Bedja allies against the Muslim onslaught in the north, staggering Aksum of ancient glory was smashed by the coup de grace administered by Agaw resistance and counteroffensive led by Queen Esther (Judith/Yodit) in the tenth century. The remnants of the semitized dynasty made a detour via Wallo and secured their survival in the south, mainly in the area between Wallo and Shewa. The Blean seem to have settled in eastern Tigray in the ancient province of Bur, and specifically in Shimazana (Eritrea), among the Agaw remnants displaced around the ancient Agaw centre of power by the infiltration and eventual takeover of semitized elements.

Although the arrival of the Blean in their present historical homeland has not been ascertained by scientific research, it can be guessed from available data that they came to the Bogos area to check the Bedja southward expansion by the first half of the tenth century A.D. They were certainly well established in the area by the early fourteenth century.³

The Bedja, also known as Blemyes, are represented by the legendary Rom in the oral traditions of Eritrea, Tigray and north-western Gondar. More recent oral tradition and historical documentation closely relate the Balaw and Kalaw Bedja groups to this extinct group. After the rise of Islam the Bedja pushed southwards into the northern Ethiopian plateau. Bedja king-

doms appear between the seventh and tenth centuries A.D. in Eritrea. Archeological finds near Ham and Dabra Damo would indicate that there were even earlier Bedja inhabitants in the area.

As far as the northern trade is concerned, the district of Keren clearly lies within ancient Bedja territory; Massawa itself marked the southern tip of their territory. The Bedja kingdoms were subjugated by the Aksumite kingdom and acknowledged the latter's suzerainty. There is no doubt that an ethnic and cultural-linguistic merger took place in this region with these people. In the valley of the Ansaba and the Red Sea littoral, the Bedja, known to the ancient merchants of the sea as part of the Troglodytes and inhabitants of Punt, played a great role in north-east African trade.

The Blean, who were pushed to this region as a result of the upheavals caused by the power rivalry between the old agricultural-pastoralist Agaw society and the complex new society which emerged from the fusion of an indigenous society and the semitized element influenced by external stimuli between the first millenium B.C. and first Millenium A.D. (the rise of Aksum, and the Bedja downward push), settled here following the course of the Ansaba river. In pre-Aksumite and Aksumite times the Bedja, as well as the Blean afterwards, came into commercial intercourse with the traders who conducted trade activities between the Nile valley and the Red Sea littoral.

Trade Routes

Over the centuries various trade routes, through the Ansaba valley to the Red Sea Ports, back and forth to the heart of Ethiopia and Eastern Sudan, were followed. But the main pattern of the linkage can be detected. Keren served as an important link of this chain and played a great role in the network. Above all, it was most important for the camel caravan route from Massawa to Khassala, and as far as Matamma. The highland route, from the heart of the rich commercial area of Ethiopia to Massawa

to Zulla (and Adoulis before it), could be managed through the use of mules only due to the nature of the terrain. The advantage of this northwestern communications link, in the form of better loads and better speed, gave it more importance and higher profitability.

The most ancient trade routes were those frequented by the pre-Aksumite inhabitants and ancient Egyptians. From Egyptian epigraphic sources, we note that an agent of a Pharaoh made four land-journeys to the region which includes the area under study, around 2275 B.C. Queen Hatshepsut's ships made a voyage down the coast between 1501-1447 B.C. The circumnavigation of Africa by the Egyptians was achieved under the direction of Pharaoh Necho between 609-593 B.C.

The name of Punt, generally-speaking, embraced the coastal area of modern Eritrea and Somalia, but in the beginning it referred to the Red Sea Coast in general, gradually including inland territories. The term Ethiopia in its Greek and biblical sense was more associated with Nubia and the lands immediately adjacent to the south of it. The Nubian dynasty which ruled Egypt between 750-660 B.C. referred to itself as the realm of Kush, rendering the two terms equivalent. The kingdom of Meroe further down the Nile was also called Ethiopia, their King assuming the title of 'King of Ethiopians' as late as the third century A.D. At the defeat of the Egyptians by the Assyrians in the sixth century B.C., Meroe served as a new centre of Kushite power. The Meroitic kingdom merged partially with the Aksumite kingdom, giving origin to the modern use of the political term Ethiopia.

The trade relations with Egypt which were weakened after its defeat at the hands of Assyrians during the sixth century B.C., were revived and we see evidence of this in the second century B.C. from Egyptian relief illustrations of commercial expeditions to the land of Punt, and before that to the same land between 486 and 485 B.C., despite the barrier of the unfriendly Nubian desert.

Slow penetration of the Red Sea coast by Arabian merchants is the other interesting phenomenon. The African coast supplied raw materials to Southern Arabian markets in the sixth century B.C. Probably Greek traders from the Mediterranean coasts controlled the trade by establishing direct links with the inhabitants between the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Arab traders trickled into the Ethiopian highlands through the coastal trade stations between 1000 and 750 B.C. in search of markets and sources of supply. Gradually they penetrated the Agaw and perhaps other Kushitic population centres in the highlands of Tigray. The Sabaeans' absorption into these people evolved into a new more complex society. Ptolemaic trade still continued well into the second half of the second century B.C. We see the Aksumites still employing the Greek language as *lingua franca* at the height of the Aksumite commercial power. After the establishment of the Sabaeans' traders in the land, local chiefs began to control the trade activity themselves in a society of settled farmers.

Aksum rose about the first century A.D. as a kingdom heavily dependent on trade and a confederate army of farmers. It thrived on trade. At the height of its power it supplied the ancient commercial world with its esteemed luxuries. In the Christian era, Aksum continued its commercial prosperity. Influences of Hellenistic culture are visible even before that era, like the Jewish influence in the early days. Constantinople gave Aksumite traders preferred state trade status throughout the Roman empire. They were treated like Romans. The king-soldier, Ezana, after extending his dominion to the Nile, made the trade routes more accessible in the fourth century. King Kaleb entered into a trade pact with Justinian when the latter's ambassadors appeared in his court seeking defense and trade alliance with the Byzantine empire against their rivals, the Persians. Kaleb's conquest of the Yemen, as reprisals against the persecution of Christians by a pro-Jewish dynasty, was short-lived.

Some years later, that colony was lost after rebelling against Aksumite power.

After the Persian victory in Arabia in the Red Sea coast the real control ironically fell into the hands of the Hejjaz Arabs. Massawa was occupied as early as 702-20 A.D. The Furs, called Fàrsú in the local legends of the littoral, are supposed to have extended their commercial influence on all the important trade posts of the Red Sea as well. Suakin, Aqiq, Airi, Dahlak, Massawa island, Adga (near Hamphilla Bay), Gammela (near Edd), Barasoli, Baylul, Alalae (between Baylul and Assab), Margabla, Rahayta, etc. all the way down the Somali coast, had their share of influence. The cisterns strewn over these areas and oral tradition seem to corroborate the evidence.

Whatever the fact, this Furs affair cannot have had so much impact. It seems that they established traders' settlements similar to those of the Greeks in Azula, (Adulis). At about the same time the Blamyas, allies of the Aksumites who safeguarded the trade routes to the coast and above all to Egypt, attacked the Nubians, only to be defeated. The military aid sent by Aksum was in vain. This military effort further weakened the Aksumite kingdom already drained to the extreme by the Yemeni campaigns. Coincidentally, their political and commercial ally, the Byzantines, began to decline. Losing a Christian ally in the Mediterranean and lacking the support of the Bedja vanquished by the Nubians, Aksum began to feel the heavy counterblow of isolation from which it never recovered. Egypt and the Red Sea ports were occupied by the Muslim Arabs, and whatever link remained for it with Christian Nubia was cut off by the Arab occupation of Egypt.

The eighth century inaugurates a period of doom for the Aksumite Empire. It began to be cut off from the sea, the source of its riches and power. The agricultural sector of the economy was neglected. The progressive spread of Islam seized the Mediterranean and Red Sea coastal trade routes. Too much of its economic structure had become dependent on maritime trade.

Also its rigid structure of semitized overlords and Kushitic vassals contributed to its final collapse. But the primary cause of its downfall was geographical over-expansionism. It spread itself too thinly.

As mentioned briefly above, the Aksumite kingdom had constantly tried to break through the stiff wall of Agaw resistance across the Takkaze river to the south since the third century A.D. Now, isolated from its base of commercial power, it desperately drove again south for a last try in the ninth century. The result was a disaster. The Agaws, fed up with constant predatory and punitive raids, rose up in open rebellion in the tenth century, under the leadership of Esther (Yodith). They rallied behind her. The Aksumite kingdom was devastated and Aksum itself sacked and burnt as a symbol of oppression and domination, at the time of king Delne'ad. After Esther, the dynasty passed on to the Christian Zagwe, her politico-military allies. Her capital as that of her inheritors was sited in the impregnable Bugna mountains of Lasta. Not much is known of what transpired during the Agaw consolidation in the Wag-Lasta area, and the downward exodus of the remnants of the Aksumite dynasty via the Wallo to regroup mainly in the Shewa area.

The country recovered a glimpse of its past glory and lustre sometime in the tenth century. The Arab rulers of the Red Sea ports were made to pay tribute as in the past.

The Islamic strangulation process of Ethiopia, which started in the Aksumite period, continued its subtle penetration and tightened its grip on the trade outlets. The Beni Majjid tribe monopolized the trade with the Arabian coast about the ninth century. Dahlak was out of the control of Madina traders and returned to Yemeni commercial influence, including the Eritrean coastal outlets. Good relations were established between the chief of Dahlak (Saheb Jaza-ir Dahlak) and the Yemeni kings on one hand, and the Ethiopian king on the other hand, during this same period. The above named chief, who was named Abu'l Jaysh, controlled Massawa taking advantage of the weakness

of the empire due to internal instability and confusion. The Beni Najah dynasty, founded by ex-Ethiopian slaves in the Yemen (Zabid, Tihama and the nearer parts of the mountains region) between 1018 and 1060, to be overthrown later on and to be re-established by Ethiopian assistance in 1089, but was finally overthrown for good in 1159 by Ali ben Mahdi, introduced a period of pro-Egyptian influence in the Yemen. During this period the Dahlak served as the refuge and politico-military base of the Beni Najah dynasty, which was an ally and indirectly under the suzerainty of the Ethiopian monarch. The chief of the islands was at the same time recognized as prefect of the sea by Ethiopia and was also given the Arab equivalent sultan, by the Yemenis. It gradually slipped out of Ethiopian control. Thus the trade routes were falling into Arab hands.

The Dahlak events of the eleventh century indicate the extent of the Zagwe control of the maritime trade routes. In pre-Aksumite times the land routes to Egypt and the Red Sea ports during the Ptolomaic period should be recalled. As testified by the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (meaning the Indian Ocean including the Red Sea) there is clear evidence that Aksum had strong trade links through its ports, and especially through Adoulis with Roman Egypt and India. Archeological finds at Hawelti and Dabra-dammo may be sufficient proof of the Indian trade link.

From the earliest days of history, sailors from the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, India, China and Indonesia are supposed to have landed on the coast of Eastern Africa to carry out commerce. The Adoulis route wound up the highland areas through Qohayto, an ivory collecting station, across the Takkaze, as far as the Sudan. It is quite possible that the Adoulis route branched off into a northwestern direction and then directly to the west into the ivory supply centres across the Ansaba valley. As this valley had abundant elephant supply, even as late as the nineteenth century, it is possible during the initial trade period that the region itself was an important trade centre. The Red

Sea ports opposite to it were supply depots of live elephants and their tusks after hunting, e.g. during the Ptolomaic period, as Aksumite trade flourished we find these routes bustling with caravans laden with goods. Cosmas had witnessed those facts way back in the sixth century A.D. Meroe flourished on exports of iron implements into Eritrea and neighboring areas. The Bedja territories including the Ansaba valley, also must have been recipients of such products. The great caravan route to Massawa (Badee) lay in Bedja territory. In the eight century A.D. the land route from Aswan through the Nubia country into Eritrea, and branching off to the east through Bedja territory to the coast, was well-beaten. The two sons of the last Omayyad Imam, Abdallah and Ogbeit-Allah fleeing slaughter from Abdallah Abul Abbas Assafuh, the first Khalif, followed this route south and then to the east escaping to the coast and on to the Islands, a little after 750 A.D.

Coming closer to modern times we note a trade caravan and pilgrimage route trail along the Ansaba to Suakin. Pilgrims from as far as southern Shewa, Lalibala and Aksum after traveling up and down the highland in a very slow procession of large groups reached Keren probably the old Blean capital, Magareh, and later 'Ona, after crossing the Ansaba at a point about 15 Kms. east of the modern town of Keren, and either scaled up the Gabruqured Erora (Rora Bet Gabru) or turned back following the Ansaba course at Da'ari and/or through the narrow pass of Tsabab till they reached Halhal. Near Halhal, still extant are Aksumite, Christian ruins at Aratuk, belonging to the fifth or sixth century A.D. This Aksumite, Christian outpost, and a bigger site on the Asgade Baqla mountains, probably mark the northernmost outposts of direct Aksumite control.

We can list the main stopovers of such a route to Cairo, e.g. Debarwa, Asmara, Balaza, Addinefas, Embaderho, Megareh (Keren, Bogos), Halhal, Marya, Baqla (Habab), Dagore, Cia (Tokar), Suakin, Qossayer, Sinai, Cairo and Jerusalem; Lalibala,

Bugna, Soqota, Takkaze, Aksum, Adwa, Lalia, Debarwa, Digsu, and Massawa; or Aksum, Torat, Aila, Debarwa, Asmara, Balaza, Addinefass, Embadarho, Magareh, Halhal, Marya, Hagara-Nagran (Baqla), Dagore, Cia, Suakin (today Port Sudan), etc. From Suakin the route either followed a maritime line to Qossayer or branched off overland via Idab, Borgan, Anda, Rif (along the Nile) and crossed the Nile to Nagada, on the other side, on to Manfalut and Cairo. It is interesting to note that the tract between Suakin and Rif was inhabited by Christian Bedja in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The whole run from Aksum to Cairo took about three months, at a slow pace.

The pilgrimage route was discontinued and trade was greatly weakened due to Turkish avarice and lawlessness. The Turks harassed and taunted travellers and particularly the Christians. Turkish rulers of Upper Egypt and the Red Sea Islands sucked the purses of the trades dry. Commerce greatly declined. Suakin fell into Turkish hands in 1517. If the trader afforded to sustain the Turkish scourge, this route was still relatively short. It should be noted that the Balaw kingdom in the area carried on extensive trade with Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. Suakin Muslim traders took the Ethiopian pilgrims for safe conduct from the Bahri-Negasi at Debarwa and conveyed them safely to Cairo from where they continued their journey to Jerusalem since the fifteenth century.

The trade centres of the fifteenth and sixteenth century were Massawa, Dahlak, Dakhono (Hergigo), Suakin, Aidab, Qossayer, Assiut, Cairo, Barbar, Gerri, Soba and Sennar between the Nile valley and the Red Sea. Suakin was administered by a local Muslim chief subject to the governor of Hamassen to whom he paid tribute. Christian influence declined after the fall of the northern Nubian kingdom in the fourteenth century, and finally Suakin was occupied by the Turk Salim the Magnificent in 1517. The nominal tribute was discontinued and it underwent a strong Muslim influence as Salim built a strong Red

Sea fleet, as well as because a strong Funj influence from Sennar reached it. Christian communities are said to have survived as late as the nineteenth century in Suakin.

When this northwestern route was not practicable for reasons of Turkish maladministration and Muslim fanaticism, like that of Massawa or Zeila, a western route which extended from southern Ethiopia to Tunis in north Africa was used, though sparingly, due to the hostility of tribes along it and the unhealthy climate in the sixteenth century. This route was revived in the early part of that period when the Shewan capital moved to the Amhara region up north, subsequent to Ahmad Gragn's war and the Oromo advance from the south, which altogether cut off the Zeila-Aden trade route. The Turkish occupation of Massawa and the rebellion of Bahri-Nagasi Yesehaq made the Massawa route impractical.

The western route this time extended from Tchelga to Cairo. The merchants took off from Cairo as far as Manfalut, with their inland caravans to Assiut via Mosche, to Dongola (capital of Nubia), Trere, Gerri and Sennar, and thence to Tchelga. The stretch took about three months and a half. Gondar became important, as it rose in the seventeenth century, became less important during Susenyos' reign, due to a discord between him and the Funj, Muslim ruling house of Sennar, but was revived again between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Gerri, located at the Blue and White Nile junction, became the principal Nubian market, where Gondar merchants flocked. Further south, Sennar carried on great trade to Ethiopia, to Suakin, and the rest of the Red Sea coast to the east. Shandy was another centre. It was a rendezvous place for Sennar, Egyptian, Suakin and Qurdufan caravans. Giesim, east of Sennar with direct access to Ethiopia, served as a camel market. Serke and Ras el Feel were other important centres. Grana on the Ethiopian border also specialized in camel marketing. Tchelga, northwest of Gondar, was a great commercial centre holding a daily market. This route was again discontin-

ued as a result of Eyyassu II's (1730-1755) military expeditions against Sennar in 1742-44, but gradually returned to function. In the nineteenth century it went from Sennar, Khartoum, Moussallania, Wag-Mudani, El-Hara, Jarira, Hala, El-Tegatif, Doka, Balad Ibrahim, and Wahni reaching Gondar, Debra-Tabor and Basso by branching off into three. The Gondar traders, going down to Sennar, were joined on the route by those going to Matamma, Wahni, Ras-el-Alfil, and Qurdufan. When all these traders reached Cairo their caravans grew into a multitude.

There were other significant routes, but it will suffice here to mention the Kafa, Matamma and Suakin route. All these routes had much bearing on the routes that crossed the Ansaba valley, and in particular Keren. Matamma, Sennar, Shandy, Suakin, Khassala (since the early nineteenth century) and Massawa had great relevance for this area. And Keren, holding a strategic position along these routes, had, and still has, great commercial and military importance.

The camel route from Keren to Massawa via the northern route (Habab) took seven days, while the eastern mule route took only four days. The mule route started at Keren, cutting straight to Tchindiq (Ila-Ber'ed) over the Ansaba, on to Ma'adi, Gaba, down to Assus, Dassat, Menkullu and Massawa. The Egyptians tried to construct a road in 1875-76, but stopped due to the toughness of the terrain. The Italian general, Barattieri, also tried a military road as far as the Magasas ridge for a span of 40 kms., but gave up soon. The commercial camel route to Massawa crosses the Ansaba through the narrow pass of Mas'halit to Qelamat, following the Lebqa river to Ain, Amba and Massawa. Keren, besides its linkage function, serves mostly as a market of Gash and Barka grain for all of the Ansaba valley.

The important Red Sea ports in the second half of the nineteenth century were Massawa, Aqiq, Suakin and Qossayer. The port of Massawa, placed not far from the Dahlak Archi-

pelago, on a direct line with the commercial cities of Lohayyia and Hodayda, and directly south of Jeddah, offers direct entry into the country. This natural port is very close to the plateau and the road is directly manageable by camel to the foot of the escarpment. Another route from Massawa to Khassala leads through the Habab, Ansaba and Barka. It shared the hinterland produce, for example, Shewa and Kaffa produce, with Suakin via Matamma, in addition to its being the emporium of Tigray and Eritrea. It was not limited to Ethiopian merchandise either. Sudanese and Indian products found an outlet and entry in it. The Suakin route, being a vast detour, the Massawa-Keren-Khassala route was the much preferred one. Massawa's geographical location allowed it to have direct access to Egypt and an indirect link with Europe via Jeddah, and India via Aden. The modern inland routes and sea ports are similar to or the same as those of the ancient times.

The Tigray caravans descended the highland all year round, while those beyond the Takkaze, from Amhara, Gojjam and the south, had to cross the river before the big rains. They reached the port in September and October, as mule caravans cannot cover long distances. Their arrival coincided with the arrival of the Banyan merchants from the sea, who could not come any earlier through the straits of Bab-el-Mandab because of the monsoon winds. The great commerce took place at the end of the summer. The Matamma market, a prosperous one, had great weight both on the Suakin and Massawa routes. It would have grown into a more advantageous route, had it not been affected by the lack of interest of Ethiopia in commerce generally and the continuous internal wars during the Era of the Princes. As it was exclusively a camel route, the volume of trade, speed and the relative safety gave it great advantage over the direct highland access. The latter was wrought with insecurity by the interminable wars, the difficult terrain and the barrier of the Takkaze during the big rains. Further, the limited capacity of the pack mules due to their proneness to disease

and lack of forage, the long delays on the way, the impromptu and numerous customs posts, etc., made the direct highland access less profitable.

The Habab coastal belt, lying between Suakin and Massawa, gradually adopted Islam in the 1820's. The Egyptians raided the area several times in the 1850's imposing recognition of their power through the payment of nominal tribute. During this period, the rest of the trade routes, especially the caravan routes, fell under Muslim monopoly, greatly facilitating the spread of Islam in the borderlands of Ethiopia as well as northern Ethiopia and the Oromo to the south. Ethio-Egyptian conflict, as a result of the occupation of the Ansaba valley, flared up into open war in 1875 and 1876.

The trade Commodities

The commodity situation did not change much since pre-Aksumite and post-Aksumite times. This shows that the lack of interest in trade, and the historical circumstances hampering and dampening the development of this important sector of the economy limited this and other parts of eastern Africa to remain a perennial supplier of raw materials and receiver of finished goods. Raw materials being much cheaper, this fact inflicted an unfair trade balance, for example, import into Ethiopia via Massawa between June 1864 and May 1865 cost 2,754,718 francs; while export during the same period earned only 1,600,703 francs.⁴

Luxury goods, such as ivory and gold, and often slaves, constituted the core of the commodities exported from these areas. As recorded by the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, tortoiseshell (mountain, land, white, true), ivory, rhinoceros horns, pearls, precious stones, spices, fragrant gums, cinnamon, gum, frankincense, ghee (a semifluid clarified butter), honey and skins constituted the main exports from the Red Sea coast and its hinterland in the first century A.D. These areas imported during the same period: clothing, belts, blankets, brocades, dam-

asks, cloaks of various make and colour, assorted cloth, coarse cloth, Indian cloth, Chinese cloth, Arabian cloth, cotton cloth, flax cloth, fringed mantles, robes, striped sashes, silk cloth, Chinese leather, Chinese yarn, tunics, etc.; Also imported were vegetable products, cinnamon of various types, coconut, corn, wheat or other cereals, dates, spices, pepper (red and black), rice, sesame, oil, perfume, shittimwood for building boats, mudara'at (sown boats), sugar, furniture, wine, antimony for shading women's eyelids (stibium, kuhl), sweet clover, drinking cups, marble, brass, copper, iron, adzes, awls, axes, Indian beads, coral beads, crude glass, glassware, lead, Indian iron, sheets of soft copper, vases, sail timber, sandal wood (fragrant), spears, Indian steel, swords, tin, gold and silver coins, musical instruments, horses, pack mules, statues, saffron dye, cinnabar dye (bright red or vermilion), glass, metals, gold and silver ware for royal and similar households, etc.

The products, which were in high demand, were coarse cloth, metal implements, some drinking vessels and glass beads for use the common people. The ancient Bedja are reputed to have had extensively exploited the gold mines in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia for export. Tunnels and earth mounds of dead gold mines in Hamassen, Seraye, Tigray and Bagameder are corroborated by local oral tradition. The gold mines of eastern Nubia in operation during the middle ages, later taken over by the Hedarab group of the Bedja, indicate a commercial network of this commodity. During the sixth century A.D. the gold trade conducted between Zula (Adulis) and the gold mines in the western Ethiopian borderlands under Agaw patronage, entailed the exchange of iron, salt, and meat for gold nuggets. In exchange for the exotic raw materials, Roman Egypt and India offered iron, textiles, and drinking vessels, similar to Meroë's iron utensils around the sixth century B.C.

In 976-77 A.D. we see the Dahlaki chief pay annual tribute to the Yemeni king in 1000 slaves, one half Ethiopian and the other half Nuba women, plus gifts of amber. Dahlak ex-

ported at this time tortoise shells, amber, skins and slaves (the larger slave depots being Zeila and Barbara). Skipping to the sixteenth century we notice that north African trade articles entered the area via the western route from Morocco, Fez and Bijaya on the Algerian coast, in exchange for the usual commodities. It is indicated by Arab Faqih, Gragh's chronicler that trade went on with Egypt and Syria during this period.

Among the trade articles during the extensive trade with the Balaw kingdom during this century, cloth is prominent. Good quality Sudanese horses were another important item import item from Suakin to as far as the Shewan court. The northern provinces of Tigray and Medra-Bahri supplied horses for tribute; this applied particularly to the area immediately west of Medra-Bahri. The Salaw hinterland behind Suakin bred a great number of horses and paid its tribute also in horses. Suakin was exporting slaves in the seventeenth century. Cotton and horses from the Sudan and manufactured goods from Egypt and the Mediterranean region continued to be imported. Cotton burnouses of cheap quality and cotton cloths headed the list and were exchanged for gold. The exports came from Cairo via Sennar and Girgeh. Included were also spices, paper, brass, iron, brassware, iron ware, coloured Venetian glass beads, antimony, larger glass beads etc.

The list shows a striking similarity between these items and those of the *Periplus*. In exchange, gold powder, gold, civet, rhinoceros horns, ivory, ostrich feathers, and slaves were obtained from the southwestern borderlands during the eighteenth century. Of all the horses the Dongola breed was the prized type. These items also found their way into the Ansaba valley, both from the western route and through the Suakin and Massawa routes. The nineteenth century witnessed the same pattern of trade and the commodities were practically the same. For instance, Shandy which acted as a principal market for Ethiopian trade, and which had a direct connection with the Keren route, exported slaves, gold, ivory and coffee. Cutlery of infe-

rior type, cheap knives, razors, soap, beads, small glass mirrors, antimony, henna, slippers, smoking pipes, pepper, dates, tamarinds, gunpowder, firearms, copper, tin, Maria Theresa dollar coins, tobacco, oils, incense, perfumes, etc. were imported from Egypt and the Mediterranean coasts. Traders were active between Shandy and Keren during the nineteenth century. Suakin was supplied by pastoral products from the Hadendowa and the nearby Bisharin. Skins, butter and livestock were exchanged for coarse cloth, which came via Jeddah and Aden. It was a depot of ivory, cotton, gum, sesame, and cereals. It also served the Ansaba valley as it did in ancient times.

Massawa, among other things, supplied the needs of the Habab and Samhar nomads in this period. It received in return their butter, skins and milk. Fish was supplied from Dahlak. Indian merchandise for the Sudan passed through Massawa, via Keren to Khassala. Much Massawa perfume and incense was consumed by Samhar women. Rich women here wore gold and silver while the poorer wore beads. The Samhar are cattle herding nomads; the Habab own goats, cattle and camels. Around the Ansaba, the Mansa, Bajjuk, Blean and Marya have a similar occupation, excepting the Marya who grow cereals. All of these people supplied Massawa with the products described above, plus honey and tamarind. The Ben Amer also produced the same pastoral products but in larger quantities. Their commercial activity was shared between Khassala and Massawa. Their cereals and palm dum products were exported to Khassala, Suakin, and Massawa. Keren as a link of this activity benefited from the Barka-Gash products. Massawa supplied this area with coarse cloth, European wares, etc., in return for Barka butter, honey, skins, and ivory in larger quantities. After the American war, the English cloth that was exported to the Barka was replaced by the better quality American, and was esteemed in the Massawa and Keren markets.

Keren was coveted by European colonial promoters even before the Egyptians began to export tobacco in the 1870's.

Three European cultivators - Cocconi, Constant and Dimetri - exported, at least 150,000 kgs of tobacco to Alexandria for a good price in 1879. In 1883, this commodity still continued. Land rent was cheap, only 100 thalers per 200 hectares. A French cultivator, probably Constant, is supposed to have made a profit of 2000 thalers in one year alone. But the Egyptian customs, low prices at Massawa, communication and transport difficulties, the lack of security due to the frequent raids into the area, and high factorage at the port were a cause of complaint for the cultivators. For example, they had to pay the Egyptian government up to 600,000 Piastres (150,000 Francs) in a single harvest season; Cocconi had to sell his tobacco for 7 Piastres per kg., while the same amount fetched up to 12 Piastres in Alexandria. On the other hand, they exploited the cheap local labor intensively. The three hundred odd laborers, mostly women and children, were paid two thalers a month each. Besides tobacco, numerous gardens on the banks of the Ansaba, and especially the Daari, yielded citrus fruits, vegetables, and all kinds of legumes, all year round; durrah, palm dum, etc. were produced. The Daari tributary of the Ansaba was much amenable for such activities and remains so today.

The nineteenth century Keren market included the following items and prices in francs: ordinary ox, 10F; fattened ox, 15F, milk cow, 17F; young riding mule, 90 F; pack mule, 70F; first quality lamp, 3F; goat, 4 F; chicken, 0.15F; tobacco per kg., 0.50 F; butter, 0.15F; and honey, 0.10 F.⁵

The fauna and flora were still abundant in the Ansaba valley in the late nineteenth century. There were many of elephants, but giraffes were becoming rare. Rhinoceroses were dwindling due to the age-old hunting practice in the Barka valley. The horns of these animals were exported to the Graeco-Roman world especially as aphrodisiac. The vegetation too was thinning out, leaving the land bald. The wide basin accommodating the town of Keren itself was deprived of its vegetation through systematic clearing by Werner Munzinger when he occupied it

in 1872. The site of the famous fort had been the burial place of the ancestors of the Blean. Its old tombs were pulled down when their stones were used for the construction of this fort.

The Blean customary law, known as the Fetha-Magareh, provided for the protection of foreign merchants. The Samhar merchants from Massawa and the Herqiqo area, the Jabarti (highland Muslims), and foreign traders who desired to secure residence or safe conduct through Blean territory, were adequately protected to engage in their activities. The right of patronage of nobles over other nobles (patricians) or over foreign residents, temporary as well as permanent, was laid down by a sacramental formula, similar to that employed for the request of vassalage. The patron nobleman, usually a chief or a heroic figure distinguished in the society by acts of bravery, protects the trader against brigandage and secures for him the right of residence and safe conduct. The trader in turn renders services similar to those of a vassal to his protector, but quite distinct from the services of a non-aristocratic vassal or serf.⁶

There is an interesting incident that took place in connection with this law. A Damat chief (Tarqe Blean branch) and elder is said to have made his last will on his death bed expressing his deep grudge against an offense committed on his Habab protégée by Lamatchali Tarqe cousins. The Lamatchali had murdered a Habab traveller passing through their territory, despite his cry of the name of the favorite cow of the above mentioned chief, a password or code customary in those days. Following the chief's will the Damat⁷ attacked the Lamatchali in revenge of the slight committed against their leader and the law. In the clash many of the attacked were killed, a sad event in the history of this people. This incident demonstrates the sacredness and inviolability of the law, albeit interpreted and carried out to the detriment of all concerned.

Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Arabs from across the seas, north African Arabs, Sennar Funjs, Bedjas from Suakin and other areas, Samharis, especially the Balaw of Herqiqo dominated the

Massawa-Khassala trade. The Arab traders were referred to as the Jallabs (Gallabs). The term Jabarti, initially applied to the Muslims east and south east of Shewa since the thirteenth century, has gradually signified Tigraean Muslims. At one time it even applied to Arabian Muslims, in its widest sense. It was synonymous with the term Muslim, thereby also embracing Somali Muslims.

The origin of the word is ambiguous; it was probably associated with the word Gaber, plural Ageber, as a pejorative term. The Jabarti were discriminated against because of their religion in the highland; therefore, as they could not own land or engage in other occupations, the options open to them were weaving, smithing, trade and the like. Among other things, they engaged heavily in the slave trade. Could their name have been derived from that situation? They shared the Khassala-Massawa trade with the Bedja and Samhar dealers. During one of the many raids perpetrated against the Blean from the Highland, among those killed at 'Ona (Keren suburb) in 1970 were included Jabarti traders. When Egyptian occupation denied them dealing in slave trade, the Jabarti (known as Jabar locally) left for Khassala and Matamma from Keren to look for better smuggling loopholes. The Eritreans, especially the Blean, were not interested in commerce as an occupation. They went to the commercial centres to procure a particular article or exchange their products for that purpose. They were not full-time traders. The Jabarti seem to have monopolized the slave and gold trade in the country. They supplied the victims to the Nubian Jallabs. They smuggled slaves by night to the Sudanese markets against Emperor Tewodros' prohibition of slavery by proclamation.

The major market places, such as Massawa, Suakin, Shandy, Sennar and Matamma were a sort of cosmopolitan centres. Ethiopians, Arabs, Takuriris (Tokoulors), Armenians, Greeks, and other stray Europeans rubbed elbows with the local populations in their errands. The town of Keren had its share of a

few Greek, Italian and French shopkeepers in 1879, in addition to the Massawa traders.

Conclusion

The centuries-old trade activities left their mark on the way of life of the Ansaba valley people, and in particular, the Blean. The way they dress, the aristocratic structure of their society, their psychology, etc., were influenced by the long commercial intercourse. But the style and pace of the economy, seen from the commercial angle, has not changed much since millennial times. They remain 'hewers of wood and carriers of water' so to speak. They are but suppliers of raw material for meagre dividends. The antiqueness of many of the articles and the trade routes still followed by the caravans and commercial contrabandists, are basically the same as those of ancient times. Despite the technological innovations introduced into the area by Italian colonialism, especially in transportation, and the improvements contributed by a modern feudal state, the mode of life of the people has not departed far off from that of the long yesterday. As the trade was monopolized mainly by foreigners, it could not have much impact on the inhabitants. The Massawans were merely agents at the hands of Baryani Indians, the Jabarti were go-betweens between the Jallab and the locals, while the Bedja were pedlars of the Arabs.

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Notes

1. The tenor of this essay was presented at the African History Conference held in Nazeret (Ethiopia), 15-20 December 1982.
2. Zawde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV: A Political Biography* (London 1975) p. 37. A translation of the original French is quoted therein: M.A.E. Massawa 3, Munzinger to M.A.E., 22 Dec. 1865; G. Douin, *Hist. du règne du Khedive Ismail*, t.3, 1 partie, 1936).
3. Boryssus Turaev, *Gadla Ewostatewos sive acti sancti Eustathii*. Rome: De Luigi, 1906. (*Corpus Scriptorum Aethiopicum*. Tomus 21-Vitae Sanctorum Indigenarum). p.37. In this hagiography the Saint recounts his journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem. In it he describes his journey through Bogos and the Two Maryas. These events took place in the fourteenth century.
4. George Douin, *Histoire du regne du Khedive Ismail*. Tome 3-L'empire africain, 1 partie (1863-1869) (Cairo 1936) p. 260. A two column table shows the trade balance sheet of that period through Massawa.
5. Francesco de Lorenzo, *Sciotel: Vicende della colonia del Padre Stella e progetto per restaurarla dello architetto Francesco de Lorenzo* (Napoli 1887) p. 219. A comparative price list of the local market is produced.
6. Mussae Bekhit, Keren Awrajja administrator. From information from the files of the district office, provided to me on 27 March 1982 in Keren.
7. Waldatensae Taklahaymanot, alias Bula Takururay, a 68 year-old pensioner self-employed in his own 'grocery,' when asked about the antagonism between the Dama and Lamatchali Blean clans, responded with the incident repeated here. It should be clear, however, that the basis of their antagonism was the question of land. The oral information was gathered by the writer on 13 February 1982 in Addis Ababa.