

THE BLIN OF BOGOS

BY
MICHAEL GHABER

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MICHAEL CHADLER

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Dedicated

To

Ghimja, Weini, Reda'

and

Bal. Tilluk Hammad

(as the author would have done it)

FOREWORD

Various known as the Bilen to the Tigrigna speakers and the Blen to the Tigre, the Blin – as they call themselves – are a Kushitic people constituting about 4 per cent of the total Eritrean population today. However, for most parts of the past century and a half, they counted more than their small number mainly because of the strategic position of their habitat. Their adherence, in comparatively high proportions, to the two important religions in the region, Islam and Christianity, might also have contributed in giving them a distinctive role and consideration in the society. They claim to have lived where they are today for about a 1,000 years. But according to the author, Michael Ghaber, they could very well have been there for the past three millenia, always relentlessly struggling not to be submerged into the influential Semitic culture which was brought to the region by Sabaeen migrants from across the ancient Erythrean Sea.

There are a good number of 19th century writings on the Blin, including a book published in 1859 in Winterthur, Switzerland, by the "mercenary" Swiss diplomat, Werner Munzinger. However, Michael's book is the first of its kind to be published in this century exclusively dealing with this particular group of people. The author, himself from the Blin, was one of the best disposed Eritrean elite to write on the subject. His typescript, entitled "**Bogos: 1849-1890**", was completed in May 1971 as a thesis project submitted to the History Department of the then Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. A member of the Eritrean Liberation Front and head of the UNHCR-financed and ELF administered Refugee High School in Kassala between 1977 and until his martyrdom in May 1992, Michael did not only lack the means to have it published, but he was also partly unwilling to do so before he could write some more to make it an all-round and complete study. But he never had the time to engage on a long writing exercise because of the rough and hectic life he had to lead

as a virtual bare-foot schoolmaster. Fortunately, however, he wrote down a few pages just before his death, and that piece today forms the Epilogue (see p. 56) to the old typescript. In fact, I would say that this additional writing brought the book nearly to what the author had in mind – to cover major developments among the Blin up to the present time. In short, this small book is no doubt an interesting account of an interesting linguistic group in Eritrea. Above all, it covers an important period in the history of Eritrea in general and the Blin in particular. And although much more awaits to be researched on this subject, Michael's contribution will nevertheless remain of first class importance on the Blin for several years to come.

I edited a few minor errors in the typescript and tried to introduce common spelling of proper names by replacing the academic transliteration which he had to follow in the thesis.

An explanatory note is also in order concerning certain names. In the thesis project, the author used the word Bogos to mean the land although the Blin were at times called the Bogos. The word is not commonly used nowadays except in historical references. Similarly, the word Senhit, used as the name for the Province of Keren, locally refers exclusively to the Blin living around the town of Keren (i.e. the seven Tarqe clans and the Neged, a tribal federation of over a dozen groups claiming different origins). In the Epilogue, Michael mentions the word Halhal-Bogos instead of simply referring to Bogos; that prefix was in use during the 19th century, especially after Ras Woldemichael Solomon's retreat to Halhal.

Michael's thesis, when submitted to the History Department of HSI University, contained the acknowledgement printed in the next page.

Wolde-Yesus Ammar

Suleimaniyah, Iraq

July 1993

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my deep gratitude to all of my oral informants who spared me their time and thus contributed towards making this work as correct and as informative as possible. I am indebted to my friend Wolde-Yesus Ammar whose constructive criticisms enlightened some points in the paper. I also thank Zemariam Berhe for his help in translating French documents; Reda Habte Michael and Darshih Elos for helping me in translations from Italian sources; Tekle Melekin for sketching out the maps; and Kale-Ab Nigusse for assisting me in the tedious copying out of draft chapters. I apologize for not being able to mention the names of all those who in a number of ways contributed towards giving this paper its final shape. However, my special and profound gratitude goes to my adviser, Dr. D. Crummey, who spent much of his invaluable time in reviewing my drafts.

Michael Ghaber
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
May 1971

FOREWORD	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	vii
MAP	5
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 The Setting: Origin of the Blin	3
CHAPTER 2 The First Phase of Raids over Bogos and the Indirect Egyptian Involvement (1849-1860)	12
CHAPTER 3 The Second Phase of Raids over Bogos and the Coming of Direct Egyptian Occupation (1860-1872)	23
CHAPTER 4 Bogos under Egyptian Rule (1872-1884)	34
CHAPTER 5 Ras Alula and the Advent of the Italians (1884-1890)	45
CONCLUSION	54
EPILOGUE The Blin since 1890	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

INTRODUCTION

Bogos is a fertile habitat of a pocket of Kushitic people who have lived where they are today at least since the tenth century A.D. The area formed a meeting place for most of the nineteenth century scramble for Africa adventurers and "civilizers" who had their focus on the lands between the south-western littoral of the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. The inhabitants of this area, known as Blin, were victims of many raids launched for a variety of reasons and interests. The raiders included adventuring *rases* (warlords) from Ethiopia proper, Ottoman rulers from Massawa and Egyptian subjects from the Barka region. Circumstances had forced the Blin people to have contact with diplomats like Plowden and Cameron and also with Catholic missionaries of great renown like Father Stella and Giusseppe Sapeto. This paper tries to show how the Blin fared this stormy period in Eritrean history.

The work is divided into five chapters dealing with the origin of the Blin, the various raids they suffered mainly between 1849 and 1872; the period of direct Egyptian rule (1872-1884), and finally, the activities of *Ras* Alula and the Italians as they affected Bogos before the said European power, which had its very first African settlement in Bogos in 1867, consolidated its conquests in the region to come out with its Colony of Eritrea in 1890.

The first chapter, which had to rely heavily on oral tradition and observations due to lack of recorded material, is an account of their origin. That there were migrations of Agaw people from central Ethiopia to Bogos seems unquestionable. But whether the Blin are migrants from the Agaw region of Lasta, as their tradition dominantly claims, or whether these waves of migrations merely brought additional Agaws to an already existing group of the same people is beyond the scope of this paper.

Chapters two and three deal with the devastations that the Blin suffered from the raids of 1849-1872. These raids were waged by Tigrayan rulers from the south, the Nayb of Massawa in the east, and the Egyptian rulers of Kassala with their allies in the Gash and Barka plains. The last two chapters deal with the period of

Egyptian rule in Bogos and the coming of the Italians. And interestingly enough, the factors that forced the termination of Egyptian rule in the area were those which enabled the Italians to come in.

This work is by no means a complete study of the events that took place in Bogos during the period under discussion. Various technical problems hindered access to important places and personalities that could have given more substance to the work. More emphasis is given to the raids and the traditional history of the Bogos.

CHAPTER 1

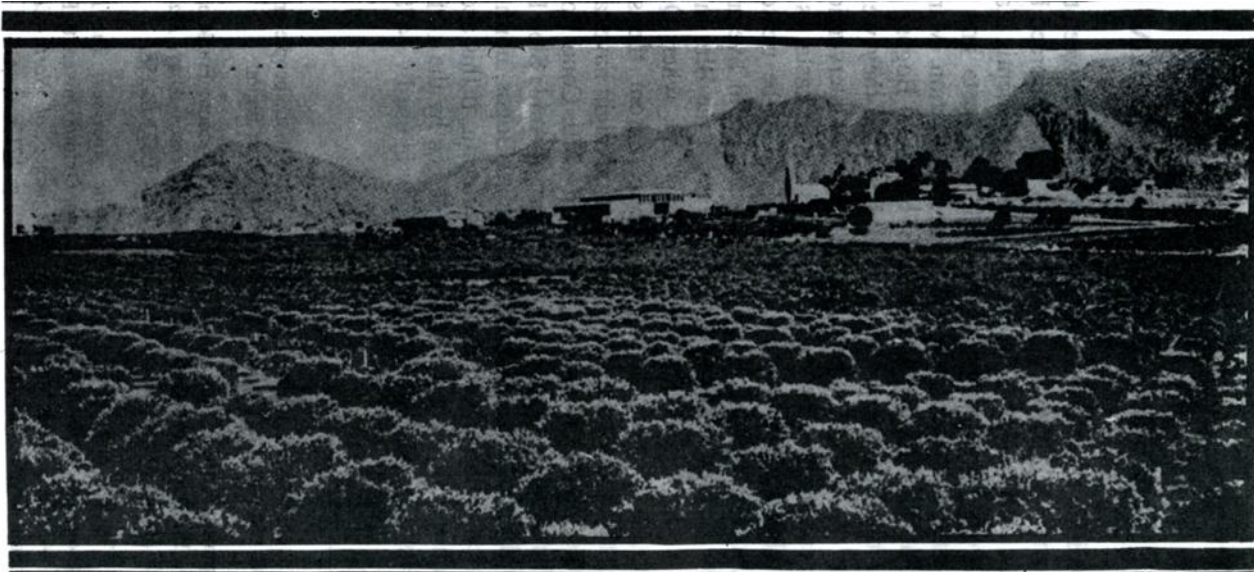
THE SETTING: ORIGIN OF THE BLIN¹

Tradition establishes a striking connection between the Blin in Eritrea and the Agaw in Ethiopia.² This is re-enforced by a close linguistic relationship.³ The presence of many identic place names in the areas between the Agaw region of Lasta and Bogos in central Eritrea evinces some historical connection. Many writers think that the Blin migrated from Lasta to Bogos. However, whether the Blin were always in Bogos until they were cut off from an "ocean" of Agaw peoples by the intervention of the Semitic culture or were really "migrants" from Lasta, as their oral history claims, is still a mystery and cannot be treated in this paper. No one can tell when the Blin started to live in the area they now occupy. Conti Rossini writes that the Blin migrated to Bogos at the end of the 10th century A.D. when Queen Ben Hammawiya invaded the Lasta province from the south. He suggests that the second wave of migration might have taken place during the fall of the Zague Dynasty in 1270. Conti Rossini also writes that St. Ewstatewos, contemporary of Amda Sion I, reported in 1343 that he passed through the land of Bogos, north of Serae, and thence to the Maria country further north. If this account was true, then the Blin were definitely in Bogos by the 14th century. He asserts that the word Blin was already in use by 1478 and that

¹ Many authors use Bogos or Blin to refer either to the people or the region. I will use Blin for the people and Bogos for the region.

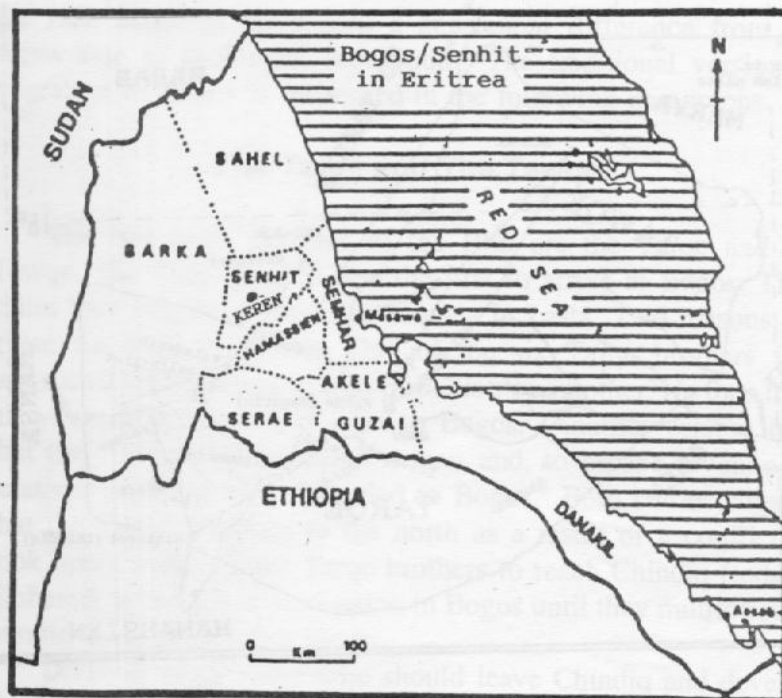
² J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*. (London; FrankCoss and Co. Ltd., 1952) pp. 164-166; Geometra Gebreyessus Abay, *Massarat Alet Hizbi Mareb Milash*. (Sec.ed Asmara, 1954 E.C.) p. 158.

³ A.N. Tucker and M.A. Bryan, *Linguistic Analyses; The Non-Bantu Languages of North-East Africa*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1966) pp. 449-555; *Idem.*, *Non-Bantu Languages of North-East Africa*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1956) p. 121.

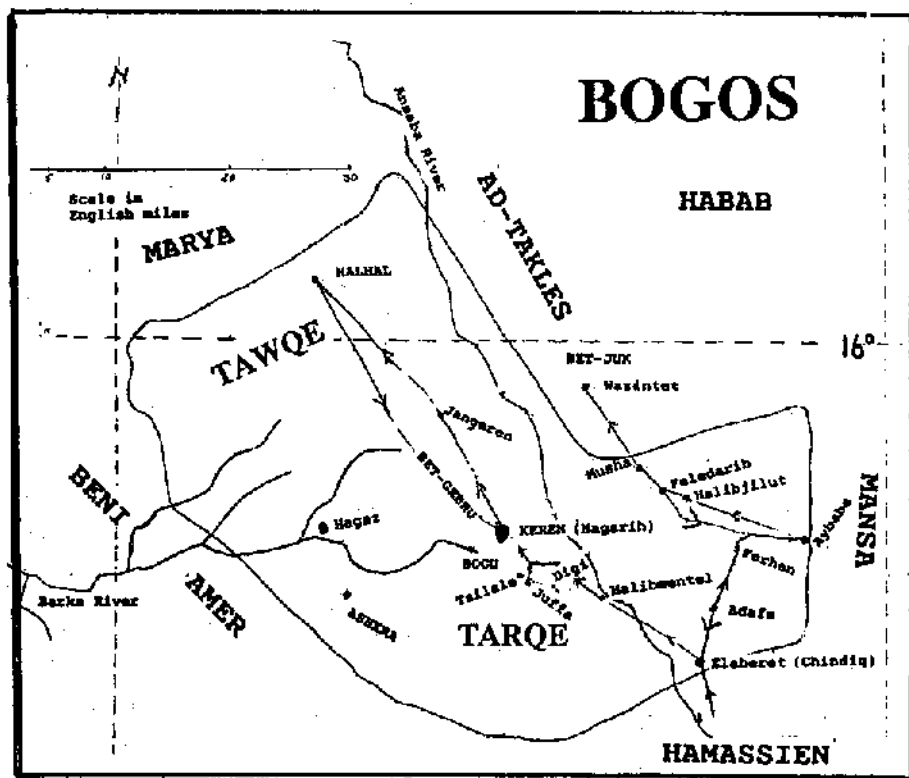


Picture of Chindiq (present-day Elabered) in Bogos taken from a 1977 ELF publication

Eritrea



Eritrea is presently divided into 10 provinces (including Gash, formerly southern part of Barka, and Asmara, the capital). The Province of Senhit (Keren) constitutes 10% of the Eritrean landmass; the territory of Bogos occupies about two-thirds of the Province.



This sketch map of Bogos, a region presently constituting the major part of Senhit or Keren Province, shows the routes used by Wibe, an Ethiopian warlord, in his repeated raids over the area in the mid-19th century.

the Blin language developed a substantial difference from the Agaw due to prolonged separation.⁴ The traditional version of migration to Bogos is recounted in the following paragraphs.

The Tarqe and The Tawqe

The two large families of the Blin are the Tarqe and the Tawqe. The Tarqe branch was the first to arrive at Bogos. They claim their original home was Saquata in Lasta. Two reasons are given for their migration. One of the six Tarqe brothers was ostracized for begetting a child from his step-mother. He then took his younger brothers and went to Bogos.⁵ Another version tells that the Tarqe brothers killed a man and, to escape revenge by relatives of the victim, they fled to Bogos.⁶ Both stories suggest that the Tarqe migrated to the north as a result of a conflict. It took many years for the Tarqe brothers to reach Chindiq (today's Elaberet) as their first destination in Bogos until they multiplied in number and needed new lands.

Division arose about who should leave Chindiq and develop the newly acquired lands. The six Tarqe brothers were: Bigedai, Lamachalli, Hada, Satifa, Hagos and Gabru. Hagos moved to south-western Hamassien, where his descendants are today known as the Liban people. Satifa, went northwards and occupied the areas between Mansa and Bétjuk. They failed to increase in number and became extinct. Gabru moved north-west and occupied what is today known as the Bet Gabru Plateau (Rora Bet

⁴ Conti Rossini, "Sopra una Tradizioni di Blin," *Note Ethiopia. (Giornale della Societa Asiatica Italiana)*. (Firenze; 1897) vol. 10, pp. 153-155; see also by the same author "Schizzo e etnico della popolazioni eritree" in Martini (etal), *l'Eritrea Economica*. (Roma; 1913) pp. 75-76.

⁵ Francesco Offeio, *Nell Colonia Eritrea*. (Roma; 1910) p. 45; also Mussa Gidar and Bal. Tilluk Hammad tell the same story.

⁶ Graz. Tesfamariam Petros.

Gabru). Hada went deep into the Barka plains but later made a retreat because of the heat and malaria. The Hada were as many as all of the other four Tarqe brothers put together. Their contact with the Natab family of the Beni-Amer influenced their customs, including the habit of not milking cows which was considered as a sign of social prestige. Bigedai and Lamachalli "deceived" their brothers and remained at Chindiq.⁷ Both brothers occupied all areas between Chindiq and Magarih (Keren).

As noted, the Hada family found the Barka plains very uncomfortable. They came back and invaded the territory of Lamachalli and Bigedai. Bloody battles followed in which the Hada emerged victorious over Bigedai and Lamachalli.⁸ The Hada, thus, settled on the lands of their subdued brethren. The lands of the extinct Satifa were taken over by the Saqueneiti group of Hada.

It is claimed that before the arrival of the Blin, the Bogos lands were inhabited by the Baria and other peoples known as Bellow and Kellow. The two last mentioned belonged to the Rom⁹ family of the Beja people. The Kellow went to Barka and the

⁷ Ato Kiflemariam Fidel, Addis Ababa, 10/5/71, from the Lamachalli family confirms the story claiming that the said family did so because they did not want to leave the fertile areas of Chindiq behind.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Jean Doresse, *Ethiopia*. (London; Ele Books Ltd., 1956) pp. 90-91. Translated from French by Elsa Coult. Doresse refers to a story in Northern Ethiopia telling how the Rom or "Rum", "were swallowed up in the bowels of the earth." My informant Bal. Tilluk confirmed the legend with slight modifications. There is a tomb assigned to a Rom about 8 kms north of Keren. I was told that many such tombs exist about 10 kms east of Keren at *Iribique*. Doresse tells of the presence of such tombs in many parts of northern Ethiopia.

Bellow to the coastal areas of the Red Sea. The Baria¹⁰ people went to the Gash area which they still occupy.

The Tawqe branch of the Blin were late-comers to Bogos. They were originally from Quarra district of Begemidir. Their tradition states that they migrated to Bogos because of the troubles caused by Queen "Gudit" in the 10th century.¹¹ They first passed through Dembya and Tembien district of southern Tigrai. Then they settled at Tekelezan in Hamassien. The Dembezan group of the Hamassien people are said to have come from Dembya. Tradition claims that the Tawqe resided at Tekelezan for a long time.¹² From Tekelezan, they advanced through Tarqe country and reached their present habitat at Halhal. The areas around Halhal were also inhabited by the Baria and the Beja peoples. But, when the Tawqe arrived at Serawa and Halhal, they found the land under the control of the now almost extinct Bet Mussi.¹³ The Tawqe fought against the Bet Mussi who had iron weapons manufactured by their own artisans at Halhal and Serawa. (There was a gold mine at Serawa in recent years). The Tawqe subdued the Bet Mussi and established themselves on the areas found between the lands occupied by Tarqe and Maria peoples in the

¹⁰ Werner Munzinger, *Ostafrikanische Studien*. (1864) p. 189, says the whole of Bogos region must have been under the Baria people and claims that place names like Ona and Aratta are from the Baria language.

¹¹ Alaka Taye, *Ya-Ethiopia Tarik*. (Addis Ababa; 1914 E.C.) pp. 32-33, says that the Agaw of Halhal-Bogos migrated there because of a famine in Lasta; but Graz. Tesfamariam Petros says that the Tawqe were forced out by Queen Gudit.

¹² Graz. Tesfamariam Petros.

¹³ Munzinger, *op.cit.*, p. 197 says that Bet Mussi were destroyed by the Tawqe at Serawa (a village about 25 kms north of Keren) and Halhal. He suggests that since the Tarqe tell that they have taken their Blin dialect from the Bet Mussi, the latter probably were part of Tarqe before the Tawqe subdued them.

south-north direction. They are bordered by the Beni-Amer in the south and Betjuk and Ad Tekles in the east. A few remnants of the ancient Bet Mussi called the Laguen live among the Tarqe and Tawqe today. The Blin people including the Tarqe, Tawqe, Jengeren, Bet Mussi and several other tribal groups that claim descent from Agaw and non-Agaw origins in the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands make up the population of the Bogos region today.¹⁴

The Blin language is close to the Agaw dialects today spoken in the Tembien and Saquata areas. I talked to many Agaw speakers from Tembien and I could understand their language very easily. Tucker and Bryan give a very good analysis of the similarities between the Agaw language of Agaw-Midir and the Blin language.¹⁵ They treat the Hawiya language of the Agaw-Midir group and the Blin to be of the same family and present grammatical construction for both. One cannot easily discount the strength of the traditional claim of migration from central Ethiopia. Moreover, the traditional Blin claims are directly confirmed by other related Agaw families in Tigrai, Serae and Hamassien.¹⁶ The traditions so far recorded not only show the connection of the Blin with the Agaw of the highland areas, but also give ample instances that many groups who now speak Tigrinia were cousins of the Agaw of Lasta and Saquata as well as of the Blin in Bogos.¹⁷ There are many common place names of Agaw origin

¹⁴ Trimingham, *op.cit.*, footnote No. 2, p. 164, says that local tradition of the Blin tells that they were continually joined by other Agaw families fleeing oppressions and blood feuds.

¹⁵ A.N. Tucker and M.A. Bryan, *loc.cit.*; *Non-Bantu Languages of North-East Africa*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1956) p. 121.

¹⁶ Geometra Gebreyesus Abay, *loc.cit.*

¹⁷ Yohannes Kolmodin, *Tradition de Tsazzaga et Hazzaga (Tigrinia text)*. (Rome; 1912) pp. 20-25 and 30-31 says that the Laguen or Lewi people in Hamassien and Serae area came from Quarra and were ethnically

in both Bogos and the Agaw districts of the central plateau. Moreover, the areas between Bogos and Lasta now settled by speakers of Semitic languages, retain many other place names of Agaw origin, e.g. Adaffa in Lasta, Abergelle in southern Tembien, Halhale in Serae and Serejeqa, Waki Dibba, Darkunakh and Abrashiko in Hamassien. These place names are lined up in the north-south direction. Names like Halhal and Adaffa¹⁸ are thus found both in Keren and in the central plateau.

Many of the small tribal groups which claim to have joined the Blin in later waves of migrations towards Bogos link themselves with the semitized Agaw of highland Eritrea and Tigray. Examples are the Adkame people in Ansaba district of Keren and also the people of Bab-Jengeren, although there is some confusion in recorded traditions as to which Agaw group precise connections can be established with.¹⁹

Many informants in Keren agreed that the Blin came from the south-east. However, some informants said the Blin came to Keren from a westerly direction, having first migrated south-westwards from Hamassien; they claim that the large tombs at Damba (about 30 kms east of Agordat) are tombs of Blin fore-fathers. There were other informants who suggested that both the Tarqe and the Tawqe spoke the Agaw language and borrowed the Agaw dialect that they speak today from the Bet Mussi group. However, I could not prove as from where the Bet Mussi themselves came.²⁰ Still,

connected with the Blin; see also Geometra Gebreyesus Abay, *loc.cit.*

¹⁸ J. Perruchon, "Extrait de la Vie d'Abba Jean, 74eme Patriarche d'Alexandrie en Abyssinie" *Revue Senticque*. (1899), p. 85 says that Adaffa was the original name of Laliballa.

¹⁹ Kolmodin, *loc.cit.*, (pp. 30-31), records a tradition which says that the Jengeren are from the Agaw of Tembien.

²⁰ Mussa Gidar and Graz. Tesfamariam Petros are of the opinion that the Bet Mussi did not come from Lasta but were a people whom Tarqe and Tawqe met in Bogos; see also Conti Rossini "schizzo etnico e storico della

all of the informants agreed that the Blin came from the central plateau areas of Ethiopia.

There is no question about some connection of the Blin with the Agaw people of central Ethiopia. The existing traditions and linguistic links are evidences for such a conclusion. As suggested by Conti Rossini, the migration of Agaw to the north seems reasonable. This assumption is especially sound when we consider the tenth, thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries during which the Agaws of Lasta were troubled by Gudit from the south, the disturbance caused by the fall of the Zagwe Dynasty, and the invasion of Gragn, respectively. But the question remains open as to whether all of the Blin in Bogos migrated from Lasta or whether there were some Kushitic or Agaw remnants towards which migrations took place from the south.

popolazioni eritree." in *l'Eritrea Economica*. (Roma; 1913) p. 84.

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST PHASE OF RAIDS OVER BOGOS AND THE INDIRECT EGYPTIAN INVOLVEMENT (1849-1860)

Although the seventeenth-century material is very scanty, it seems that Gondar rulers had control over Bogos. Conti Rossini cites that Iyasu the Great (1682-1706) visited a certain *Kantiba* Naud of Habab, and he probably passed through Bogos.¹ In addition to this, Basset mentions in the Chronicle of Iyasu that the Emperor reached the monastery of Tsadamba (about 30 km south-east of Keren) and celebrated the feast of *Timkat* there.² Again in 1760, Michael Sahul's two expeditions ravaged all areas in northern Eritrea through Bogos up to Rora Baqla (Maria) and Bet Asgade and the period that followed Michael's raids was disrupted by tribal feuds between Hazzaga and Tsazzaga.³ About eleven years before the end of the Era of Princes (Zemene Mesafint), we come to the period of Wibe's raids over Bogos.

During Tewodros' rise to power, Bogos was exposed to foreign and internal disorders. The internal problems were numerous, but the external ones proved disastrous. In 1849, Wibe carried out one of his last and most devastating raids in the Bogos and neighbouring areas.⁴ Moreover, the Egyptian garrison at Kassala, which up to this time advanced slowly, reached Bogos in

¹ Conti Rossini, 'Schizzo Etnico e Storico della Popolazioni Eritrea' in *L'Eritrea Economica* (Roma; 1913) p. 88.

² M. Rene Basset, *Etudes sur l'Histoire d'Ethiopie*. (Paris; Imprimerie Nationale, 1882) p. 41.

³ Conti Rossini, *loc.cit.*

⁴ Mordechai Abir, *The Era of Princes; The Challenge of Islam and the Re-Unification of the Christian Empire 1769-1855*. (London; Longmans, 1968) p. 135; see also Werner Munzinger *Ostafrikanische Studien*, (1864) p.199.

1850 and began its outrages against the Blin.⁵ Yet, the period is important not only because of the raids, but also because it saw the withdrawal of the Orthodox Church and the rapid conversion of the Blin to Islam and Catholicism.⁶ Interestingly enough, the Blin dominantly belong to these two religions today.

Wibe's raids on Bogos began in 1844.⁷ Parkyns, who passed through the Dambalas in south-east Hamassien in that year, reports the advance of Wibe's plundering soldiers far to the north.⁸ Munzinger tells of the destruction Wibe caused at Halhal in the Tawqe region in 1844.⁹ The tradition recorded by Kolmodin states that Wibe's two sons, Ishatu and Kokabe led their soldiers to the Bogos area for five continuous years after Wibe's first raid.¹⁰ Kolmodin's tradition does not mention that Wibe carried out any raids on the Bogos after 1849. If we take Parkyns' report of 1844 to be the first, then, that of 1849 seems to be the last.

⁵ J.Spencer Trimingham, *Islam In Ethiopia*. (London; Frank Coss and Co. Ltd., 1952) p. 165; see also R.Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 103-104.

⁶ Alame Eshete, *Evolution et Resolution du Conflit Egypto-Abyssinien face a la Penetration Europeenne au Nord Est d'Afrique 1877-1885*. (Paris; unpublished doctoral thesis, 1969) p. 87. Alame writes that the first Catholic mission was founded in 1852 at Keren; but see also Carlo Giglio, *Etiopia/Mar Rosso 1857-1855*. (Roma; Instituto Poligrafico Dello Stato, 1953) vol. I, p. 64.

⁷ Werner Munzinger, *Ostafrikanische Studien*, (1864) p. 199; see also Mansfield Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*. (London; Frank Coss and Co. Ltd., 1966) vol. I, pp. 296-297 and Mordechai Abir, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

⁸ Mansfield Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*. (London; Frank Coss and Co. Ltd., 1966) pp. 296-297.

⁹ Werner Munzinger, *loc.cit.*

¹⁰ Yohannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzaga et Hazzaga*. (Rome; Tigrinia text, 1912) pp. 157-160.

The Blin saw Wibe as an Amhara chief interested only in plundering, with no intention of taking firm control over the area or of giving justice. Wibe was the most ruthless of all plunderers remembered in the stories of Blin elders. Many take Wibe also as a period of long raids by a horde of plunderers from the central highlands of Ethiopia. They call the period *Wiberka* (the period of Wibe).¹¹ The story of one of his raids is told as follows.¹² Wibe descended from Hamassien and made his first battle at Chindiq against Hakin who was the most important of all the Blin chiefs. Hakin resisted for three days and at last was defeated and killed in the battle.¹³ Among many others, Ayda, the sister of Hakin, was taken captive. After Chindiq, Wibe organized his soldiers in three flanks and continued his pillaging northwards. The right wing advanced in north-easterly direction from Chindiq through Adaffa, Farhen and Aybaba. They burned all Bogos and Mansa villages in that region. Only the Ad Birhanu at Faladarb challenged the invaders and after fighting for some days in the battle of Halib-Jilut, 20 kms north of Keren, Ad Birhanu were crushed. Many people were taken into slavery and many head of cattle seized. The left-wing moved through Diggi, Tsilale and Juffa and thence to Magarih. The centre was led by Wibe himself and moved between the two flanks directly north-wards through Halib-Mantal to Magarih. The right-wing continued through Betjuk, Habab, Ad

¹¹ All my informants from Keren used this term to refer to the period.

¹² Mussa Gidar who narrated the story knew Wibe as the king of the Amharas and remembers that Wibe's soldiers took his father's oxen while he was ploughing. This probably refers to the raids of Ishatu in 1850. The informant was over 130 years old in 1971.

¹³ My informants say that Hakin died at the last battle Wibe fought against the Blin, but Kolmodin's tradition reports that this happened in the first. Hakin's death was probably in 1849 because Lee Van Dovskinin a biography of Munzinger, *Ein Liben Fur Afrika* (Zurich; Thomas Verlag, 1954) p. 22, quotes Stella saying that Hakin died two years before his arrival at Bogos in 1851.

Takles and at last ascended to Halhal. The left-wing joined Wibe's party and advanced to Halhal. All areas they passed through were thoroughly pillaged and Halhal surrendered after the Abrihim tribe of Tawqe fought for several days. Wibe camped at Halhal for some time and then returned to Hamassien through Keren by a south-westerly route. The reason for these raids is said to be the refusal of the Blin to pay the tribute which Wibe asked annually at harvest time.

Wibe's soldiers plundered all the produce and famines were common. Kolmodin's tradition points out that all of Wibe's raids were at harvest time.¹⁴ This suggests that Wibe invaded the agriculturally rich Bogos to feed his soldiers stationed in Hamassien. What Plowden wrote after his visit to Bogos in March 1854 well describes the motives of Wibe. He said:

Being plains, and richly cultivated with Indian corn, they are the favourite field for the incursion of [Wibe's] troops affording the most spoil with the least fighting.¹⁵

Another menace to the Blin came from the neighbouring tribes who had been converted to Islam under the influence of the Egyptian rulers of the Sudan. Moslem preachers already converted the Maria between 1820 and 1835.¹⁶ The Habab were converted in 1838.¹⁷ Kassala was occupied and made the capital of Taka province in 1840.¹⁸ These conversions facilitated the Egyptian

¹⁴ Kolmodin *op.cit.*, p. 158.

¹⁵ W.C. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country*. (London; 1868) p. 8.

¹⁶ Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁸ Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 71.

advance towards Bogos and put the Blin in a very precarious situation. During the reign of Mohammed Ali Pasha the main trend of the Egyptian expansion was southwards. It was so because Britain and France checked Mohammed Ali's ambitions in the Red Sea areas to take advantage of the reviving trade in that period.¹⁹ Mohammed Ali favoured using the Islamized subjects in acquiring slaves rather than outright annexation of the bordering areas. During the regency of Ibrahim Pasha in 1846, it was rumoured that Egyptian troops would march from Sennar through Bogos to Massawa. And although that did not take place, Egyptian interest in controlling the routes between Kassala and Massawa became more serious.²⁰ When Abbas I succeeded Mohammed Ali in 1849, the Egyptian position in the Sudan was shaken by his weak leadership. Sudan was not only ruled by banished criminals but by men who endeavoured to enrich themselves through plundering the neighbouring people without any check from Cairo.²¹ It was in this period that the Egyptian subjects, particularly the Beni-Amer, Baria and the Maria persistently attacked the Blin. The game was profitable for both the Egyptians and their subjects: the former for expanding their territory and gaining a good source of slaves, and the latter for taking the holy war as a pretext for pillaging.

In 1850, Ilyas Bey, the Egyptian governor of Taka, and the Beni-Amer people attacked Bogos. The Blin, allegedly with the support of Father Giovanni Stella, repulsed them.²² This victory

¹⁹ Mordechai Abir, *The Era of the Princes*, (London; Longmans, 1968) pp.95-96; see also ECE Dye, *Moslem Egypt and Christian Abyssinia*. (New York; 1880) p. 120.

²⁰ Mordechai Abir, *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²¹ Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 85-87.

²² Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 165 reports about the failure of the Egypt-Beni-Amer raids over Bogos, and Ato Tsaggai Bayan says that Father Stella had eleven men armed with good guns and because of this is the Blin

over the numerous enemy soldiers is well remembered to the present; many Blin stories exist attributing success to the intervention of St. George.²³ However, this victory did not last long. On March 15, 1854 the Beni-Amer under the leadership of the new governor of Taka, Khusraw Bey, made another successful raid that took the Blin by surprise.²⁴ This time the Blin were ruthlessly massacred. About 340 women and children were taken to slavery and over 1800 head of cattle driven away to Kassala.²⁵ Consul Plowden visited the ruined villages two weeks later and the Blin on the spot asked him for British protection as well as the return of the captives.²⁶ Plowden proceeded to Kassala but his negotiations with the Bey failed to secure the release of the captives or to obtain a commitment to stop the raids in future. He then submitted a report on the incident to the Earl of Clarendon on

defeated the Beni-Amer. Tsaggai's story must be about a later incident since Stella came to Bogos in 1852.

²³ Ato Mussa Gidar and Bal. Tilluk Hammad tell the story of *Giorgis Hamballay* (St. George with his white horse) who hovered over the Blin helping them to cut the heads of their enemies at Magarih.

²⁴ **Annales de la Congregation de la Mission*, XX (1855), 568-569; Stella to Poussou, Keren, 24/10/1854; see also Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

(*) All material from *Annales* is taken from Dr. D.Crummey's own notes jotted down on the original work.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; see also *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868* p. 83 No. 156; Plowden's report to the Earl of Clarendon, Massawa, March 15, 1854; and Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881* (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 103.

²⁶ *Correspondence respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868*. (Corr. Res. Abyss only hereafter) p. 85, No. 160 and p. 86, incl., No. 161. Plowden to Bey of Kassala, April 16, 1854.

April 29, 1854.²⁷ On June 30, Britain, through her Consul in Cairo, asked the Egyptian government to return the Bogos captives and dismiss the Bey.²⁸ The request was granted and on November 3, 1854, Plowden reported the return of 203 captives back to Bogos.²⁹ With the coronation of Said Pasha in 1854, who assumed power over the newly created Sudanese provinces in 1856, and the withdrawal of the Egyptian garrison from Kufit in Barka a year later, the attacks of the governors of Taka on Bogos were checked temporarily.³⁰ However, the completion of the railway line between Alexandria and Suez in 1857 and the extension of telegraphic services between Alexandria and Sawakin two years later diverted the traffic of trade from the Nile to the Red Sea. This new situation increased the intention of Egypt to annex Bogos.³¹

While the Beni-Amer attacks were mainly directed against the Bet Tarqe, whose geographical position was more accessible than that of Tawqe, the Habab and Maria invasions concentrated on the latter. In 1849, the Tawqe accepted Islam to accommodate themselves to the situation.³² However, Islam was only nominal, and in 1861-1862 Munzinger reported that churches and Christian

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85, enclosure No. 160 and p. 86 No. 161. Plowden to Earl of Clarendon, Kassala, April 18, 1854; see also *Anales XX* (1855), 571, Stella to Poussou, Keren 29/10/1854.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87, enclosure No. 162. Plowden to Earl of Clarendon, Kassala, April 20, 1854.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89 inclosure No. 166. Earl of Clarendon to Mr. Bruce, F.O. June 30, 1854.

³⁰ Haill, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³² *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia. 1846-1868.* p. 132 enclosure No. 190. Plowden to Earl of Clarendon, Massawa, November 3, 1854.

rituals were still maintained.³³ Moreover, conversion brought no end to threats and armed attacks. Around 1856, the Maria and the neighbouring Chaffa tribe of Tawqe defeated Ad Gabsha and destroyed their capital, Halhal, despite the existence of Egyptian rule over Tawqe since 1854.³⁴

Munzinger says that there were many tribal feuds among the Tawqe.³⁵ According to his account, the Chaffa supported by the Beni-Amer, who bordered Bogos on the west, fought against the Gabsha, but were defeated. In 1843, the Chaffa fought the Gabsha with their Beni-Amer allies and burned Halhal. In 1847, the Chaffa and Gabsha came together and defeated Ad Kalb. When Wibe's son, Ishatu was raiding the whole of Bogos in late 1850s, Chaffa and Gabsha advanced southwards and defeated the Fada tribe and thereby burned Hibub, located on the border of Tawqe with Tarqe.

While the Tawqe were drawn into the confusion of tribal wars and outside incursions, the Tarqe were seeking safety by conversion to Catholicism. Until the coming of Catholics, the Tarqe belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church at least in name and originally, it appears, the churches of St. Michael, St. Mary, St. George, Selassie and Arbatu Inssissa, all of which are located around Keren, were Orthodox churches.³⁶ However, today only St. Mary's Church at Dabrassina, 25 kms north-west of Keren, and Selassie, about 30 kms south of the town, are not Catholic. Father Giovanni Stella, who made an extensive tour of Bogos with Sapeto in 1851, established the first Lazarist Mission in Bogos in the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85, enclosure No. 160. Plowden to Earl of Clarendon, Kassala, April 18, 1854. See also Nuninger, *op.cit.*, p. 197.

³⁴ Munzinger, *op.cit.*, p. 200.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Geometra Gebreyessus Abay, *Messenger Alet Hizbi Mereb Melash*. (Asmara; sec.ed. 1954 E.C.) p. 158; Ato Mussa Gidar and Bal. Tilluk Hammad tell the same story.

year 1852.³⁷ The Blin, suffering much from the continues lack of peace and order, saw no alternative to accepting Catholic teaching in return for protection.³⁸ Catholicism was preferable to Islam for it was only a modification of their previous faith. A local story tells that Father Stella, known as *Aba Yohannes*, came to Bogos immediately after his expulsion from Tigrai.³⁹ The religious and political insecurity in Tigrai caused the Catholic Mission to turn northwards. Besides, Biancheri who sought to carry on his work in precisely those areas where a native priest issue could not emerge, encouraged Stella's mission in Keren.⁴⁰ Dr. Alame writes that Stella's superior, de Jacobis, believed in pushing his missionary activities to the interior of Ethiopia in spite of the persecutions that they faced at that time. Stella and Sapeto believed in using European political support to accomplish their missionary work from the northern borders of Ethiopia. And this difference with de Jacobis brought Stella to Bogos.⁴¹ It could be said that Stella was a religious refugee when he arrived at Bogos.

According to Ato Tsaggay Bayan, Stella first arrived in Mansa with eleven Akkele Guzai soldiers. The Mansa people did not welcome him, so Stella had to cross the Ansaba River westwards to seek a place among the Saqueneiti. He was not accepted there either. He then went to Ad Damsass who resided in the southern part of Keren town. A man called Manna, whose

³⁷ D. Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missionaries in Orthodox Ethiopia 1830-1868*. (Unpublished typescript) p. 137; see also Alame *op.cit.*, p. 87.

³⁸ Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

³⁹ Ato Tsaggay Bayan, whose uncle had some personal connection with Stella, passed the information to the writer.

⁴⁰ D. Crummey, *loc.cit.*

⁴¹ Alame Eshete, *op.cit.*, p. 88; see also *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission*, XVII (1852) pp. 136-137, February 12, 1852.

mother was from Hamassien, succeeded to convince the people to allow Stella live among them. After a while, Stella gave clothes and other gifts to the Damsass people and slowly succeeded to occupy the old hut where the priestly family of Kada had acted as religious leaders in the absence of priests.

Father Stella became very important not only as a religious leader, but also as a defender of the Blin against outside attacks. Ato Tsaggay tells of an incident where the eleven soldiers of Father Stella were very effective with the good guns they carried and were the main factor for a great victory of the Blin over the Beni-Amer. This probably was another Blin victory since Stella arrived after the defeat of Ilyas Bey in 1850. He mentions many incidents in which Stella acted as a spokesman for the Blin by going to Kufit and Kassala to claim back the property of Bogos from the Beni-Amer invaders. It seems that Father Stella was hailed as a religious and political leader in the years of his establishment in Bogos.

The relation of Bogos with Tewodros' rule seems to have been a very weak one. Munzinger reports that the Blin, particularly the Tawqe, did not pay tribute to Tewodros' governor of Hamassien. In 1859, Marid, governor of Hamassien for Tewodros, made a short raid against the Blin because they refused to pay tribute.⁴² In June 1858, de Jacobis wrote that Niguse, grand son of Wibe by his mother and hereditary ruler of Semien who contended for the throne against Tewodros until the former's death in 1861, was cooperating with the Mission and allowed them to have a church in Bogos.⁴³ In 1859, Stella wrote that Niguse gave him peace to build the Catholic church in Keren.⁴⁴

⁴² Munzinger, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

⁴³ *Annales*. XXII (1858), pp. 442-443, de Jacobis to Poussou, Abyssinie, 29 June, 1858.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 427, Stella to Poussou, Keren, 1859.

The eleven years between 1849 to 1860 saw the end of the chronic raids of Wibe. Their impact, however, cannot be better dramatized than by the famous Blin curse "May Wibe cut you into pieces!" The period saw Bogos slip out of effective control from the Tigrai rulers. And it was during this period that direct Egyptian involvement in the area intensified. It saw the advent and the establishment of Islam and Catholicism in the region which for the first time brought to Bogos a different culture, and thus cutting it from highland Eritrea and the rest of central Ethiopia. And there is every reason to take this period as a prelude to the Egyptian attempts to conquer Ethiopia in 1875-76 and the later Italian efforts to replace the Egyptians in northern Ethiopia.

CHAPTER 3

THE SECOND PHASE OF RAIDS OVER BOGOS AND THE COMING OF DIRECT EGYPTIAN OCCUPATION (1860-1872)

Emperor Tewodros' failure to deal with the western powers after Plowden's¹ departure from his court in 1860 made his position weak in the north. Thus, his adversaries from the north, that is, his rivals in Tigrai, the Nayb of Hirgigo, and Khedive Ismail each in their own way tried to interfere in Bogos. But the presence of Father Stella coupled with the decentralized Blin social structure kept the three-sided competition over Bogos at stalemate until Egyptian dominance finally prevailed in 1872.

The presence of Plowden in the court of Tewodros and Tewodros' religious policy brought a Franco-Catholic alliance with Nigusse. It was in Plowden's time that the French recognized Nigusse as king of Ethiopia and the Catholic missionaries in northern Ethiopia welcomed the French move. In the years after Plowden, Cameron struggled to act as a British consul in Ethiopia and during one of his travels between Gondar and Massawa, he met in Bogos with an agent of Tewodros' governor of Hamassien. The agent complained about the Egyptian presence in Halhal, but nothing came out of it.² Following the death of Nigusse, Gobaze's name was influential among the Blin. Rassam, who came through Bogos on his way to Gondar in 1864 says that he met a tax

¹ Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla country*. (London; 1868), p. 463; see also *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission*, XXII (1858), 442-443, de Jacobis, Abyssini, June 19, 1858 and also in the same work XXIV (1859), 428, Stella to Pousou, Keren, 1859. (Only *Annales*, volume, year and page hereafter).

² *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868*. (London; December 1868), p. 233, No. 355, Cameron to Russel, Bogos, Abyssinia, March 31, 1863).

collector at Hibub (about 20 kms north of Keren) who told him that most of the people longed for the Emperor to come and give them peace and order, but he himself was in favour of *Wagshum Gobaze*.³ This suggests that Tewodros' authority in Tigray was light and limited to tribute collection. True, the Catholic Missionary, Bel, who visited Bogos in 1866, wrote that the people of Bogos depended on Tewodros' governor in Hamassien.⁴ This governor also gave the Shetel agricultural land to the missionaries.⁵ But, basically, the decline of Tewodros' power seems to have left Bogos at the mercy of the Egyptians, the Nayb and the anti-imperial rebels. Only one of my informants said that he heard from his elders of one governor appointed by Tewodros, a man called Haylu.⁶

The Nayb's efforts to control Bogos were not as strong as those of Tewodros' agents; nevertheless, they were sufficient to cause serious damage in the area. The Nayb continually sent his troops towards Mansa, Bogos and Habab in search of tribute. On their way, the soldiers ravaged Bogos and their raids were particularly disastrous on the frontier areas between Bogos and Mansa. The Nayb's activities were limited to these areas because of the incursions of the Tigrayans and the Egyptian subjects from the south and south-west, respectively.⁷ The areas are nearer to

³ Rassam, *Narrative of the British Mission to Theodore King of Abyssinia*. Vol. I. (London; 1869), p. 126.

⁴ *Annales XXXI* (1866), 608, Bel, Massawa, April 23, 1866.

⁵ Alame, *Evolution et Resolution du Conflit Egypto-Abyssinien face a la Penetration Europeenne au Nord Est d'Afrique 1877-1885*. Paris (unpublished doctoral thesis; 1969) p.109; see also Giglio, *Etiopia/Mar Rosso 1857-1885*. Vol. I. (1958) pp. 66-67.

⁶ Ato Petros Hinoshim says that Haylu of Tsazzaga was governor of Hamassien and parts of Bogos that border Hamassien.

⁷ One of such raids is discussed in *Annales*, XXX (1851), 75, Delmante to Lechartier, Massawa, July 23, 1862.

Massawa and on the routes to Habab. As the Egyptian rulers formerly used the Beni-Amer, the Nayb used the people of Samhar to pillage Mansa and Bogos. Theoretically acting on behalf of the Turks, his motive was financial gain.⁸ Yet, despite the Nayb's proximity to Bogos, he was unable to displace the influence of Tewodros or that of the Egyptians, and the three-sided predatory *modus vivendi* persisted until 1870. The position of each of the contenders is well explained by Consul Cameron:

Whatever the claim in question may be worth, it only asserts a right to levy tribute, and makes no pretence either to furnish protection to the inhabitants, ameliorate their conditions or keep them in restraint.⁹

The position of the Catholic mission now was in no way better or stronger than in the preceding years. It suffered as much as the people from the continued disorder; nevertheless, its leaders were looked upon as political rulers in the absence of any strong power to control the area. Said Pasha withdrew his troops from Kufit early in 1857 claiming that the main Blin leaders were getting strong enough to stand against Tewodros' agents or the Nayb.¹⁰ The central figure was Father Stella. He was extremely active in defence of the Blin. In 1865, he sent a report to France against a Beni-Amer incursion in the Tawqe area and in the following year, while he was requesting British protection for his Catholic converts, his superior Bel disapproved Father Stella's

⁸ Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881* (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 103-104.

⁹ Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868, *loc.cit.*

¹⁰ Dye, *Moslem Egypt and Christian Abyssinia*. (New York; 1880) p. 124; see also Hill, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

political activities.¹¹ Although they did not produce the needed protection from France or Britain, the missionaries' demarches were important and probably contributed to check Egyptian claims. Certainly, Said Pasha was vexed and complained to the French consul in Egypt about Stella's political activities.¹² Stella's links were not limited to Britain and France. He turned to Italy when his earlier efforts had proved fruitless. In 1867, he obtained from Haylu a piece of land at Shetel, about 25 kms south of Keren. He brought 30 Italian colonists among whom the most notable were Buccianti Zurchi and Bonichi.¹³ The colony was known as "Colonia Italo-Africana di Sciotel." Zurchi died working in the Shetel farm and the scheme was soon a failure because of insufficient finances.¹⁴ The colony produced nothing in agricultural terms but it had great implications as the first spot settled by Italians in Africa.

Meanwhile, Stella's position within Bogos suffered a sharp decline. One informant relates that Stella begot an illegitimate daughter and was looked down by many people in Bogos.¹⁵ He moved to Bello north-east of Ashara where the site of his Shetel farm still exists. There, he lived with the parents of his wife for some years. The place where he died in the year 1869 is still known as *Mission Qurduque* (the place of missionaries). Giglio writes that Stella had a conflict with Munzinger about the Shetel

¹¹ *Annales*, XXXI (1866), 608, Bel, Massawa, April 23, 1866; see also Giglio, *Etiopia/Mar Rosso 1853-1885* (Roma; Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1953) vol. I, p. 64 where Legéan calls Stella a religious and juridical dictator of 17 Blin villages, and the complaint of Said Pasha in *Annales*, XXV, 16, Biancheri to Sturchi, Keren, November 18, 1859.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Giglio, *Etiopia/Mar Rosso 1857-1885*. (Roma; Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1953) vol. I, p. 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ato Tsaggay Bayan January 1, 1971 Addis Ababa.

farm because Munzinger tried to give the colony to a German company against the will of Stella. In 1869, a brother of Stella's wife with a friend made an attempt on the life of Munzinger wounding him seriously. They were caught and killed by Munzinger's guards. Stella died in Shetel only two weeks after the incident.¹⁶ Arturo Issel lamented that Stella's selfless work for Bogos was not rewarded and the last days of Stella were days of disgrace and misery. He says that Stella was chased out of his residence in Keren as a bandit because of Munzinger's jealousies.¹⁷ In 1870, when Antinori visited Shetel, he found it completely ruined because of the battles that took between Wolde Michael and Haylu and, of course, because of the death of its owner, Stella.¹⁸

Besides Stella's activities, the nature of the political organization of the Blin remained to be a factor keeping the balance among the contenders until the Egyptians controlled the area. Each tribe had to find its own way to avoid the raids of different masters. Each of them had their own *Sim* (chief) and it was only in time of necessity that they came together. That they sometimes were divided even in the face of a foreign enemy is shown in the way the Blin fought Wibe. Hakin, the leader of the Zerai tribe is reported to have fought alone in the battle of Chindiq and once Wibe defeated him; the Birhanu tribe and later the different tribes of Tawqe fought Wibe singlely, and thus were crushed one at a time. As mentioned in chapter II, Wibe took Aydab as a captive and her uncle Oqbakristos went to Semien in search of her.¹⁹ She later became one of Wibe's wives; tradition

¹⁶ Giglio, *op.cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁷ Issel, *Viaggio Nel Mar Rosso e Tra I Bogos (1870)*. (Milano sec.ed., 1876) p. 88.

¹⁸ Alame, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Ato Wolde Tinsae Takruray, November 20, 1970, Addis Ababa.

claims that she succeeded in convincing her husband to make her brother the ruler of Bogos. Oqbakristos was thus appointed ruler of Bogos until Hakin's son, Ibsilassie, could become of age; the latter, however, died before maturity. After Oqbakristos, Zerai, another brother of Hakin, succeeded to the post and after him *Kantiba* Shawish ruled until the post was given to Gabrasilassie I, the second son of Hakin.

Although tradition asserts that the relation of Zerai family with Wibe and other Tigrai rulers made them central rulers of Bogos, there is no evidence that the Blin had a common leader before the 1870's.²⁰ Sapeto reports that he found it very difficult to introduce Catholicism to Bogos because of the existence of different chiefs each of whom had to be contacted individually.²¹ He writes that each of the 25 villages of the Tarqe section of Bogos had their own ruler and sent their representatives for the meetings that took place in times of emergencies. In the nineteenth century, first the Egyptians and then the Italians had to deal with different tribal groups to extend their power over Bogos. The Birot family took the post of *Sim* for Hadembas during the Egyptian period and later the Italians restored it to Damsass in return for their cooperation.²² In the same manner, Bet Gabru and the Saqueneiti were given the post of *Sim* by the Italians.²³ Thus, until 1932, the Italians kept the old decentralized system of administration using *Sims* of different tribes to rule. Thus, when the Italians appointed one chief each for the Tarqe and Tawqe, it

²⁰ Ato Maskal Takruray believes that the Zerai tribe were the leaders of Bogos until the coming of the Egyptian rule because Wibe gave them this post. Maskal is from the Zerai group.

²¹ Sapeto, *Viaggio ai Mansa ai Bogos agli Habab*. (Milano, n.d) p. 116.

²² Ato Wolde Selassie Maharzgi, November 30, 1970, Addis Ababa.

²³ Bal. Tilluk Hammad, November 26, 1970, Keren.

was openly opposed.²⁴ This separate tribal organization in Bogos was a cause for the presence of numerous agents of the outside contenders. The Zerai, for instance, were allies of the Tigrai rulers and the Bet Gabru the allies of the Kassala Governors.²⁵ The Chaffa tribe of Tawqe were reported to had been allies of Tigrai rulers whereas the Gabsha either allied with the rulers of Massawa or Kassala to avoid pillage.²⁶ It was only during the Italian rule that all of the *Sims* were controlled by one power. The consequences of decentralization were tribal feuds and weakness in the face of external foes.

From the death of Mohammed Ali Pasha to the succession of Ismail Pasha in 1863, the Egyptian advance from the west was slowed down. But shortly before Ismail's accession to the throne, Said Pasha started his intrigues by accusing Ethiopia of using the period of Egyptian withdrawal from Kufit to attack Egyptian posts in the Barka area.²⁷ In 1862, when the Nayb of Massawa revolted against the Ottoman rulers of Mecca, the Bani-Amer soldiers of the Egyptian Governor of Kassala advanced to Massawa and relieved the town.²⁸ Such incidents, which required Egyptian intervention in Massawa, increased the strategic importance of Bogos for the control of the area between Kassala and Massawa. A few years before Munzinger became governor of Massawa, he clearly stated that there could be no firm control of the Sudan unless the areas between Massawa and Kassala were occupied by

²⁴ British Military Administration of Eritrea, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*. (Asmara; 1943) p. 17.

²⁵ Ato Arey Abdalla, September 6, 1970, Asmara.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Dye, *loc.cit.*

²⁸ Hill, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

Ismail's government.²⁹ In 1863, Egyptian raids carried out by their subjects in the Gash valley were resumed. In March of that year, Cameron reported that the raiders from Gash destroyed 12 villages, killed nine people and took 300 head of cattle.³⁰ Khedive Ismail had a master-plan to control the Nile from its mouth to its source, including its Ethiopian tributaries. He wanted to link Kassala with Massawa by a railway line through Bogos as part of his larger plan to control the Nile basin.³¹ Besides this, Ismail feared the annexation of Bogos to Massawa by the Ottoman ruler of Massawa and decided to forestall that from happening.³² Ismail's new expansionist schemes coupled with the already rising importance of the Red Sea trade brought about by the improvement of communication-system in Said's rule, encouraged Egyptian advances in the area. Egyptian regular soldiers continued to encroach on the Bogos and it was in those days that the Blin chiefs wrote the following statement in their last request for British intervention:

It is two years now since the people of Barka and the Baria, the Egyptian subjects, have begun to disturb us; they steal our children and our cattle, we beg you to help us get our stolen men and cattle. Furthermore, we want whole-

²⁹ G.Douin, *Histoire du Regne du Khedive Ismail 1863-1869*. Vol. II, 1 (Le Caire; Imprimerie de L'Institute Francais d'Archeologie Orientale, 1941) p. 438. 30.

³⁰ *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868*. 233, despatch 355, Cameron to Earl Russel, March 31, 1863.

³¹ William M. Dye, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

³² R.Hill *op.cit.*, p. 103.

heartedly that our country belongs to England and recognize no other master but [England].³³

Britain did not accept the request for protection because it believed this would endanger the lives of British captives in Maqdala.³⁴ In 1866, Massawa was leased by the Turks to Ismail. Again on January 6, 1867, Egyptian soldiers entered Keren and ravaged it; the people were forced to flee to the mountains.³⁵ In the same year when Britain decided to use force to free its captives from Tewodros, Ismail saw it as a good opportunity to get British approval of his moves in the Red Sea. Although the British plan to march through the Sudan to Maqdala was abandoned, they had to use the Red Sea which by then was under the control of the Egyptian garrisons. The British expedition had to march through Massawa, and Ismail not only offered his Red Sea fleet, but sent about 3000 soldiers to Massawa to help the British if they needed them.³⁶ As far as the Ethiopian political struggle in the central provinces was concerned, Ismail appears to have been indifferent. For sometime, he refused to accept the request of the Blin for protection. He also refused to help Kassa of Tigray against the ambitions of Tekle Giorgis in 1870. The main reason for the lessening of Ismail's advances in the period 1867-1870 were the result of the policies of Jaffar Pasha, the Governor General of the Sudan. Jaffar was against high government expenses for acquiring territories. He considered all areas between Kassala and Ethiopian borders as useless desert which were not worth the financial expenditure they needed for control. Munzinger called the

³³ *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846-1868*, 540, 686, Chiefs of Bogos to Colonel Stamton, Bogos, a few days before December 3, 1866.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Annales*. XXXII (1867), 550; Bel to Etienne, Massawa January 6, 1867.

³⁶ Dye, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

Egyptians "poor colonialists" at this particular moment.³⁷ Yet, Jaffar's desire for territorial expansion, specially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, was very strong.³⁸

A good agent for the new Egyptian expansion was found in the person of Werner Munzinger. Between 1855 and 1862, Munzinger had established himself among the Blin and spent most of his time in Keren.³⁹ He made extensive travels in 1861-1862 covering most of the Tawqe, Maria, Barka and the Gash areas and wrote his *Ostafrikanische* studies about this tour. With his experience of more than eight years in the area, the Swiss Munzinger was approached by almost all states that were involved in Red Sea affairs. He served as British agent at Massawa from 1865 onwards and acted as the political adviser of the British expeditionary army to Maqdala in 1867. By the concord that existed between France and Britain, he also served as a French agent in the town.⁴⁰ Wylde suggests that when in 1871 Munzinger accepted the post of governor of Massawa from Ismail, he did so because he was convinced that France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 had disqualified her from the imminent scramble for north-east Africa.⁴¹ As governor of Massawa, one of Munzinger's main tasks was to extend his power over his former home, Bogos. He carried out his plan in June 1872 when his soldiers marched to Keren and declared it Egyptian territory. Munzinger was welcomed by many Bogos chiefs who needed any protection they could get.⁴²

³⁷ G. Douin, *loc. cit.*

³⁸ Neil G. Kotler, *History of Eritrea*, (Asmara; HSIU Extension, unpublished typescript, 1966) p. 30.

³⁹ Ferdinando Martini, *Nell' Africa Italiana*, (Milano; 1859) p. 220.

⁴⁰ Dye, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

⁴¹ Wylde, 83 to 87 in the Sudan, (London: 1888) p. 324.

⁴² Neil G. Kotler, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

The year 1872 then began as a new era for Bogos. Now for the first time after many years of anarchy, the Blin entered a relatively peaceful period in which they enjoyed administration better than they ever had. For the succeeding twelve years, they were subjects of an organized government which gave them a long awaited protection. Some warriors of Bogos became members of the regular Egyptian army; foreign incursions were reduced by the Blin warriors' active role in the Egyptian army. The capital of Bogos, Keren, began to take the shape of a town with its mission school and the administrative headquarters of the Egyptian governors.

CHAPTER 4

BOGOS UNDER EGYPTIAN RULE (1872-1884)

Both the missionaries and the people welcomed the 1872 occupation of Bogos by Egypt. Emperor Yohannes, preoccupied with consolidating his own authority, does not seem to have been worried by it. Yet within three years, the two powers were to clash which brought about the Egyptian alliance with Wolde Michael, and this in turn exposed Bogos to further disorders. Wolde Michael's arrest by the Tigrayans in 1879 coupled with the Egyptian financial problems and the Mahdist uprisings in the Sudan not only ended the rule of Egypt over Bogos but increased Ethiopian influence in the area.

Munzinger, as the first Egyptian governor, was welcomed from the beginning because the Blin and the missionaries hoped that he would provide peace. The Catholic missionary Touvier Duflos approved the Egyptian administration to free the Mission of non-religious functions, and even lent positive support for rebuilding the church of St. Michael at Keren.¹ Dr. Alame asserts that Duflos, served as a guide and interpreter for the Egyptian soldiers during their advance towards the Mareb in 1875-1876.² Emperor Yohannes himself did not show any opposition to Egypt establishing itself in the Bogos country. In 1873, E.A. De Cosson reported that the Emperor did not object to the Egyptian presence at Bogos so long as they agreed to send him Aba Kayssi (a rebel from Akkele Guzai residing in Adwa, who had long troubled the

¹ Alame Eshete, *Evolution et Resolution du Conflit Egypto-Abyssinien Face a la Penetration Europeenne au Nord-Est d'Afrique 1877-1885*, (Paris; unpublished typescript, doctoral thesis, 1969) pp. 90-91.

² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Emperor from the north).³ Even after *Aba Kayssi's* submission, we still find Yohannes writing to Khedive Ismail telling him that Egypt can keep Bogos unchallenged if it restrained itself from further annexations.⁴ Again on March 15, 1877, Gordon wrote that, although the occupation of Bogos had led to the Ethio-Egyptian conflict of 1875-1876, Yohannes did not protest against its annexation in 1872.⁵ The Emperor's indifference to the Egyptian expansion in the coastal areas may be attributed to his own internal problems in securing the throne.⁶

Free from any interference from Yohannes and assured of a friendly welcome by the missionaries and the inhabitants of the area, Munzinger then started his rule smoothly. His marriage to a Blin woman, Malka, seems to have influenced his policies in administering his subjects. As my informants say, Malka was brought to Keren as a captive of *Kantiba Barih* of Ad Hadembess.⁷ She had a son, Kifle, before her acquaintance with Munzinger. Once she was married to Munzinger, her son was given the title of Bey and became an officer in Munzinger's army. Kifle and his mother succeeded in convincing Munzinger to take the title of *Sim* from Barih's family of Ad Damsass and give it to Birot; Barih was the killer of Malka's father. Her sister was

³ E.A. De. Cosson, *The Cradle of the Blue Nile: a Visit to the Court of King John of Ethiopia*, (London; 1877) pp. 83-84.

⁴ A.B. Wylde, *'83 to '87 in the Sudan. Vol. I. (London:1888) p.324.*

⁵ G.B. Hill, *Colonel Gordon In Central Africa 1874-1879* (London; 1881) p. 214.

⁶ G. Douin, *Du Regne du Rhedive Ismail*, vol. 3, No. 2, (Le Caire; Imprimerie de l'Institut Francais d'Archeologie Orientale, 1941) p. 344-345 says that while Munzinger was occupying Bogos, Emperor Yohannes was dealing with Azabo Galla in the South.

⁷ Informants Ato Tsaggay Bayan and Ato Abdalla Arey say that Malka and her sister were captured by *Kantiba Barih* when the latter killed their father to avenge the death of Mussa Damsass.

married to Hinbira, a prominent man from Bet Gabru, and she also succeeded in securing the leadership of that people for her husband. Hinbira was later able to repulse an invasion of Bet Tawqe with the help he received from Munzinger.

As soon as Munzinger took control of Bogos, he set out to improve the economic and administrative fields in the area. His soldiers escorted traders between Massawa and Keren and this secured all areas between the two towns.⁸ Munzinger did not only adopt the decentralized administrative system through the *Sims* but also improved the latter's power by enforcing their decisions with his army. He demarcated borders among the Blin themselves, and also gave Bogos its first legal boundaries with all its powerful neighbours.⁹ He freed slaves, settled disputes equitably and established peace and order among the Blin families.¹⁰ Munzinger's government built the fortress of Senhit, designed the main parts of the town of Keren and dug many wells for the villages around the town.¹¹ He encouraged the missionaries to construct the modern church of St. Michael which was completed many years after his death.¹² Towards the end of his rule, Munzinger recruited many soldiers from among the Blin and, under the commandship of Kifle Bey, he used to send them to

⁸ Ato Mussa Gidar and Ato Arey Abdalla say that the road which connected Keren with Massawa was far north of the Hamassien border, and because it was secure, many people preferred to settle near it rather than along the one passing through northern Hamassien.

⁹ Informants Bal. Tilluk Hammad and Ato Petros Hinoshim.

¹⁰ Neil G. Kotler, *History of Eritrea*. (Asmara; HSIU Extension, unpublished typescript; 1966) p. 31; also many of my informants agree to this.

¹¹ There are six such wells in Juffa, about 5 kms south-east of Keren, and two at Ander, about 15 kms north of Keren.

¹² Ato Mussa Gidar and Ato Wolde Tinsae Takruray claim that Munzinger sometimes used forced labour for constructing public buildings.

repulse intrusions from Hamassien.¹³ On September 24, 1875 Munzinger left Bogos for the Danakil area with his 480 soldiers to lead part of the invading Egyptian army against highland Ethiopia. He was defeated and annihilated with his men before he was able to cross the desert.¹⁴ Many people in Bogos still remember Munzinger as the only governor who ruled their region as an Egyptian governor. And for all practical purposes the Egyptian rule in Bogos ended with his death.

After Munzinger, the Egyptian period was overshadowed by the activities of *Ras* Wolde Michael. Being from the Hazzagga region of Hamassien, Wolde Michael was always an opponent of Haylu of Tsazzaga. During the reign of Tewodros, the confrontation between him and Haylu was continuous. In about 1865, during the period of Tewodros' decline and the rise of Kassa of Tigray, Wolde Michael was accused of being an ally of Tekle Giorgis by a rival from Hamassien, by the name of *Kantiba* Bakit. This accusation led to Wolde Michael's detention at Amba Alage by Bezbiz Kassa.¹⁵ His two son's, Makonnen and Mesfin, killed

¹³ Mussa Gidar.

¹⁴ G. Douin, *op.cit.*, p. 720, reports that Menelik sent Alaka Biru with a friendly letter to Munzinger and he arrived at Keren disguised as a monk in March 1875. Menelik asked Egyptian help for scientific and economic studies in Shoa. He also sought a patriarch for Shoa. On August 10, 1875 (page 726) Munzinger was instructed to give firearms to Menelik and ask him attack Emperor Yohannes from the south if war started between Ethiopia and Egypt. Again at the time of Munzinger's departure to Dankalia (page 793), Arakel Bey, the governor of Massawa created problems on Munzinger's movement. Munzinger told Touvier Duflos that he was fed up with Egyptian service and would not return. These facts suggest that Munzinger's mission was aimed at securing Menelik's alliance before attacking Yohannes.

¹⁵ Yohannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzagga et Hazzagga*. Vol. 5 No. 2 (Rome: Tigrinia text, 1912) p. 21; also in Douin, *op.cit.*, pp. 754-55, Arakel Bey mentions the name of Wolde Michael as one of the potential governors of Hamassien if Egypt succeeded in annexing Hamassien and

Kantiba Bakit and they fled to Bogos. *Kantiba* Gabru, the uncle of *Ras* Alula, pursued but failed to catch them.¹⁶ Makonnen and Mesfin succeeded in travelling all through Barka, Gash and Walkayt and at last met Tekle-Giorgis in Semien. While his sons and Tekle Giorgis moved northwards to fight Kassa, Walda-Michael bribed his guards and got rid of his chains. He headed for Hamassien through Tigray, but when he reached Adi-Grat, he heard of the victory of Kassa over Tekle Giorgis and immediately asked Kassa's pardon at Adwa. He was given amnesty with his sons and returned to rule Hamassien.¹⁷ Against this background of relations between Emperor Yohannes and Wolde Michael, let us now turn to the role the latter played in disrupting the relations between Egypt and Emperor Yohannes as well as those between Bogos, Egypt and Emperor Yohannes in 1876-1879.

As governor of Hamassien, Wolde Michael easily contacted the Egyptians in Massawa and in Bogos. In the battle of Gundat, he fought on the side of Yohannes but only to win the Emperor's confidence.¹⁸ The outcome of the battle gave Wolde Michael a lot of firearms.¹⁹ Again at the battle of Gura, although he fought on the victorious Ethiopian side, Wolde Michael decided to part with Emperor Yohannes, possibly because he had more confidence in the Egyptians than in Yohannes for helping him to become the sole ruler of Hamassien. He made his way to Massawa with the defeated Egyptian troops and after receiving 700 Remington rifles from Ratib Pasha, he established himself in Bogos. When

adds that Wolde Michael was prisoner of Bezbiz Kassa at that time.

¹⁶ Kolmodin, *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁸ G. Douin, *op.cit.*, p. 720 Arakel Bey's mention of Wolde Michael as a possible future ruler of Hamassien indicates that Wolde Michael was friendly towards the Egyptians long before the battle of Gundat and Gura.

¹⁹ G.B. Hill, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

Yohannes withdrew south to Tigray, Wolde Michael gathered his troops and in a bloody battle he defeated and killed Hailu, the Emperor's governor in Hamassien.²⁰ This victory endangered the Emperor's position in the north who then agreed to cede the whole of Hamassien to the Egyptians if they would agree to send him the rebel.²¹ But Wolde Michael was too strong to be subdued by either the Egyptians or Yohannes. On December 16, 1877, when Colonel Gordon was trying to make peace between Egypt and Ethiopia, he admitted that Wolde Michael was still too strong to be arrested by either power.²² Only three months after his meeting with Gordon at Halhal, Wolde Michael again invaded Hamassien from Bogos in March 1878 and killed Bayru, who had replaced Haylu as governor.²³ Yohannes, chased Wolde Michael to Keren to avenge the death of Haylu but failed to pursue military measures because he was far to the south dealing with Menelik.²⁴

Once Bayru was killed, Wolde Michael tried to stay in and rule Hamassien without using the Egyptian territories as a base, but he knew that he could not hold long against Yohannes. He also found out that the Egyptians were not going to continue their support to him.²⁵ In December 1878, then, Wolde Michael peacefully gave himself to Ras Alula, the then governor of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209, see also Archer Thomas, F.R.H.S. *The War In Egypt and the Sudan*, vol. I. (London: Blackie & Sons, 1887) p. 160-161.

²² G.B. Hill, *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁴ Kolmodin, *op.cit.*, p. 214, says that Yohannes followed Wolde Michael up to Imer (15 kms from Keren on the Asmara-Keren road). But when the death of Bayru occurred in March 1878, Emperor Yohannes was dealing with the submission ceremonies of Menelik in Wollo (March 20, 1878).

²⁵ G.B. Hill, *op.cit.*, p. 209 in December 1877 Gordon wrote that he would arrest Wolde Michael and send him to Cairo if Yohannes cooperated.

Hamassien and in the following year, he threatened to invade Bogos and Massawa on behalf of Ethiopia.²⁶ Wolde Michael's submission was followed by his arrest by *Ras* Alula on September 11, 1879. Informants remember Wolde Michael only as a man who resided at Halhal temporarily. The end of Wolde Michael as a political actor introduced a new element into Ethio-Egyptian relations. Alula, an able and aggressive servant of the Emperor, had an undisputed control of Hamassien and the intention of reclaiming Bogos. The Ethiopian position was strengthened by the decline of Egyptian power in the Sudan as a result of troubles in Egypt itself. The successors of Mohammed Ali were bankrupt. In January 1879, Gordon wrote that he would like to give Bogos to Yohannes because of financial difficulties in administering it. Moreover, he suggested ceding Zula to Italy in order to involve Britain and France in the Red Sea and the Sudan.²⁷ In July 1879, Khedive Ismail was deposed and Egypt was plunged into a confusion by the increased Franco-British involvement and the nationalist movement of Ahmed Arabi. *Ras* Alula took the opportunity to interfere in Bogos. On July 28, 1879, he appointed *Kantiba* Shawish of Ad Zerai to rule the Bogos area bordering Hamassien.²⁸ It was the first Ethiopian appointment of a chief in Bogos since the days of Wibe. In September of that year, when Gordon arrived at Massawa from Cairo on his way to Khartoum, he indicated clearly the extent of Alula's presence in Bogos: "I find the Abyssinians are in virtual possession of Bogos, and that it is not a question of ceding or of not ceding the country but of retaking it."²⁹ However, Gordon's judgement should not mislead

²⁶ G.B. Hill, *loc.cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 333; see also Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881*. (London; Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 151 and Alame *op.cit.*, p.127.

²⁸ Alame, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

²⁹ G.B. Hill, *op.cit.*, p. 401.

into believing that Alula had already established a new government in Bogos. This was to take several years yet. Although the Tigrayan warrior's power was strongly felt among the Blin, he did not control Bogos. Neither was *Kantiba* Shawish's appointment welcomed by Ad Zeraï. Shawish was a *shifta* (bandit) before he became a *Sim* and in addition to this, he was a cruel ruler. These factors led to his unpopularity; however, his leadership lasted only for a few months.³⁰ Mussa Gidar claims that it was only when the Egyptians left in the face of the imminent Mahdi threat that Alula's soldiers began to get involved in Bogos affairs. The *Ras*' efforts to control Bogos were considerably helped by Gordon's failure to induce Britain or France to get directly involved in the Red Sea.³¹ Yet, in the face of Ethiopian advance, Egyptian power continually shrank in Keren and in 1881 Alula's troops freely moved into eastern and south-eastern Bogos, and Yohannes officially claimed the area.³² In the following April, the *Ras* advanced to Bogos and after camping at Dabra Sina for a few days, he declared all of Bogos and the surrounding areas to be Ethiopian. The Egyptian garrison remained inactive.³³ The presence of Ethiopian soldiers so close to Keren was too strong for the missionaries to ignore, and Duflos asked Raffray, the French consul at Massawa, to recognize Ethiopian rule over Bogos in order to get the protection

³⁰ Informants Ato Mussa Gidar and Bal. Tilluk Hammad tell that Shawish was very cruel and the most hated chief.

³¹ Alame, *op.cit.*, p. 130, suggests that Britain and France were much concerned about the Egyptian crisis in 1879 and did not want another area of conflict in the Red Sea.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 158; see also F.L. James, *The Wild Tribes of the Sudan*, (London; 1883) p. 238. He reports that many Abyssinian raiders existed in south western Bogos in April 1883.

³³ Alame, *op.cit.*, p. 159, also *Graz*. Tesfamariam Petros says that Ras Alula established a military settlement at Hadish Adi near Dabra Sina.

of Alula. Although the *Ras* welcomed the idea and promised protection, the French government failed to accept the request.³⁴

Despite the many problems Wolde Michael caused to Munzinger's successors, the financial troubles of Ismail; the incursions of *Ras* Alula after 1880, and the Mahdist revolt in the Sudan, the Egyptians nonetheless accomplished many things for Bogos. Communications were improved and conditions laid down for extensive missionary activities. A very good account of the progress achieved under Egyptian rule is given by F.L. James, who traversed Bogos in April 1883.³⁵ According to him, Keren was connected by telegraphic line with Kassala and Massawa, and through both lines to Cairo. The 1500 Egyptian soldiers in Keren had constructed a road that connected the town with both Kassala and Massawa. This road encouraged trade between the Sudan and the Red Sea region. Munzinger's fortress at Keren was improved and the mosque of Keren was built. In the mission, Pere Picard (locally known as *Abuna Bikar*) took the place of Stella. Education expanded rapidly; the school in Keren had a teaching staff of seven priests and nine sisters for 150 boarding and 500 day students. The main subjects taught were French, religion, wood work for the boys and sewing classes for boys and girls. A carpenter's shop in the mission produced cart-wheels. The plantation areas around the town and their well cultivated farms became good examples for the people to imitate, F. L. James confirms. The mission had a printing press on which were produced books in Amharic and in other local languages. The mission also offered clinical services, and saved children bound for slavery, many of whom were enrolled in the boarding school. Consul Raffray claimed that Egyptian rule in Bogos was much better than the Ethiopian administration of adjacent districts.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 183.

³⁵ F.L. James, *The Wild Tribes of the Sudan*, (London; 1883) pp. 237-243.

³⁶ Alame, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-93.

The major factor ending Egyptian rule in Bogos was the Mahdist revolt. Within a year of its beginning in the white Nile area in 1882, the effects of the revolt reached the eastern Sudan, with the appearance of Osman Digna's troops in the Gash-Setit region. Alula was concerned about the new threat. Britain, now in possession of the Suez Canal, was extremely alarmed by the new developments in the Sudan. Of particular concern to both the governments of Egypt and Britain was the fate of the Egyptian garrisons at Amedib, Algeden, Ghirra, Gallabat and Keren. In 1884, the two governments decided to withdraw. While General Gordon was assigned to evacuate all Egyptian posts in the Sudan, Admiral Hewett of Britain was sent to Ethiopia to find ways and means for a safe withdrawal of the Egyptians through Ethiopian-held territory to Massawa. Hewett's mission was completed with the signing of the Treaty of Adwa in June 1884. Egypt and Britain agreed to cede Bogos to Ethiopia and surrender all military equipment stored in the abandoned fortress.³⁷ The treaty thus guaranteed a safe passage for the Egyptian troops to Massawa.

In August of the same year, Emperor Yohannes moved to the Adiabo district of north-western Tigray and sent *Ras* Alula and *Ras* Michael with their troops westwards from Hamassien through Bogos, Barka and Gash to Kassala. On their way, they collected tribal levies from the whole of Bogos, Beni-Amer and Habab.³⁸ Alula's advance greatly helped the Egyptians to evacuate Keren and successfully withdraw their army from the eastern Sudan. Ethiopia fulfilled its obligation under the Treaty of Adwa. It remained to be seen if Britain could live up to hers.

From 1872 to 1884, then, Bogos passed through three distinct stages. First was Munzinger's rule which is clearly remembered as

³⁷ S. Rubenson, "The Adwa Peace Treaty of 1884", *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. (Addis Ababa; Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1966) p. 225.

³⁸ Alame, *op.cit.*, pp. 294, 302-304.

peaceful and just. The second was the period of Wolde Michael which gave a lot of trouble to Yohannes, the Egyptians and the people of Bogos. With Wolde Michael's submission to *Ras Alula* and his dramatic arrest in 1879, the history of Bogos under the Egyptians entered its third stage which continued up to 1884. This period witnessed the decline of Egyptian rule. The troublesome Mahdist uprising in the Sudan, and the international crisis in Egypt finally reached Bogos and thereby terminated Egyptian rule over the area.

CHAPTER 5

RAS ALULA AND THE ADVENT OF THE ITALIANS IN BOGOS (1884-1890)

The 1884 Treaty of Adwa increased Alula's influence over Bogos at the same time that the Mahdist revolt gave a good chance to Italian colonial ambitions in the Red Sea region. The Catholic mission and the change of British policy in favour of Italy blocked the Ethiopian moves to control Bogos and other coastal areas. Thus, the simultaneous advances by Italy and *Ras* Alula very rapidly culminated in an Italian occupation of Bogos, mainly because of the death of Emperor Yohannes in 1889.

In September 1884, *Ras* Alula entered Keren and began to display his anti-Catholic mission attitude by expelling Duflos from the town.¹ In April of the following year, the *Ras* declared the occupation of Bogos and appointed *Blata* Gabru as its governor.² Four months later, in September 1885, at the head of 25,000 soldiers, Alula marched to Kufit to take all the areas evacuated by the Egyptians.³ Wingate tells that Alula agreed to campaign against Osman Digna because he was provided with 1000 rifles and 50,000 dollars by Britain which wanted to use the *Ras* against the Mahdi for her own advantage.⁴ The Ethiopians met Digna at Kufit on September 22 and, although Alula was seriously wounded, he won the day. Digna lost 3000 men killed and Alula's

¹ Alame Eshete, *Activites Politiques de la Mission Catholique (Lazarite) en Ethiopie sous le regne l'Emperor Johannes 1868-1889*, (Paris; unpublished typescript; 1970) p. 70. (Hereafter, Act. Pol. M. Cath.).

² *Idem.*, *Evolution et Resolution du Conflit Egypto-Abyssien face a la Penetration Europeenne au Nord-Est d'Afrique 1877-1885*, (Paris; unpublished doctoral thesis 1, 1969) p. 339.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 344; see also F.R. Wingate, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan* (London; sec.ed., Coss & Co. Ltd., 1891) p. 251.

⁴ F.R. Wingate, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, (London; 1891) p.251.

loss, including his uncle *Blata Gabru*, was 1500 men killed.⁵ The victory made Alula famous among his subjects in Hamassien and the Blin. The following song in the Tigre language is said to have been sung for *Ras Alula* when he victoriously re-entered Bogos from the north on his way back to Asmara.⁶

አሉላ አሞዕል ዋዝንተት ሓድረያ፤
 ሰንሒት ተሰቐር ዓለት አንሳ እግል ትርአያ፤
 ቤት-አስገደ ሞን ፈወቂታ ከረያ፤
 መሓዝ ዓድ ፈዛዕ ኦሮ ፊተውራሪ ከስአያ፤
 ስጋደት ኤሎስ እብ ብሩዱ ፈግረያ፤
 ደርቡኸ ሞስል ጥርሞበታ ራእሳ ሓር በልሰያ።

Trans

"When Alula arrived at *Wazintat*, the people of *Senhit* boasted, and wanted to be admired by their ladies. He made the *Bet Asgade* come down from their plateaux and punished the *Fazza* only by one *Fitawrari* of his. He scaled the Cliff of *Elos* without difficulty and forced back the Dervish with their trumpets."⁷

The song gives a clear indication of Alula's movements through the areas from Keren to Kufit and tells about his battle against the Mahdi by stating that he repulsed the Dervish back to the Sudan. In 1886, Alula abandoned his planned raid against the

⁵ F.R. Wingate, *loc.cit.*

⁶ Informant *Graz*. Tesfamariam Petros, 24/7/70. The song is confirmed by Ato Petros, the father of the former, who remembers *Ras Alula's* campaign through Bogos.

⁷ *Wazintat* is in Betjuk about 12 kms north of Keren. *Senhit* is the Bet Tarqe part of Bogos, *Bet Asgede* the ruling family of the Habab, *Fazza* the Tawqe family that live between Halhal and Keren and *Elos* is the mountain through which a steep path leads to the gates of Halhal.

Habab and started to pay attention to the Italian menace from Massawa.⁸

The missionaries were troubled by the confusion that followed the Egyptian evacuation from Bogos. In their struggle to get a protector, they first tried to contact *Ras Alula*, but when this failed, they showed a sharp division as to whom to approach. Some favoured France, and others Italy. Stella was one of the first Italian missionaries to write that he would accept a post under their government if the Italians could commit themselves to have a place in the Red Sea region.⁹ It was also he, as we have already seen, who secured *Shetel* for the Italians in 1867. Father Sapeto, a companion of Stella, was responsible for the purchase of Assab on behalf of the *Societa di Navigazione Rubattino* in 1869. In 1870, Italian diplomats like Antinori toured the area and drew Italian attention to Bogos through the influence of the missionaries. After Stella, Pere Pailard continued to side with Italy, while Pere Picard also acted in favour of Stella's ideas.¹⁰ On the other side, Touvier Duflos wanted to create an alliance of the mission with Waranna, a rebel against Yohannes who claimed control of Gondar in the 1880's.¹¹ France, as a world Catholic power, already had much influence in Bogos. Not only were most of the missionaries its nationals, but a Frenchman had a tobacco farm at Keren and it was in regard of these facts that France complained against the

⁸ Neil G. Kotler, *History of Eritrea*. (Asmara; unpublished typescript, HSIU Extension, 1966) p. 36.

⁹ Giaccherio & G. Bisogni, *Vita di Giuseppe Sapeto*. (Firenze; 1942) p.349, Stella to Sapeto, Kassala, 10/6/1866; see also Neil G. Kotler, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-34 for the details of Italian missionary involvement in the colonization of Eritrea.

¹⁰ Alame, *Act. Pol. M. Cath.*¹⁰, p. 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

Hewett Treaty in Adwa arguing that it did not take into account the fact that France had a special position at Keren.¹²

J.B. Coulbeaux was the other opponent of Italian interests in the mission. He was accused of friendship with Alula and while Picard was trying to get the release of the Italian captives of Dogale in 1887, he is said to have been dealing with *Ras* Alula at his camps.¹³ Colonel Saletta, the Italian agent around Bogos, and the rest of the missionaries were against Coulbeaux's activities. The French hopes in Bogos ended with the departure of their last consul from Massawa in 1888.¹⁴

Once the Italians declared Assab theirs in 1882, and subsequently occupied Massawa in February 1885, they began to focus their attention on the former Egyptian territories west of Massawa. Colonel Saletta began to contact the leaders of Habab who now were cut off from the Sudan because of the Mahdist disturbances.¹⁵ In addition to this, many *Blin Sims* like those of Bet Gabru began to contact the Italians by going to Massawa.¹⁶ Thus, as soon as *Ras* Alula's campaigns in Bogos ended in 1885-6, it seems that the Italian influences started to gain ground. But the real Italian advance to occupy the area had to wait until the Italian temper was roused by their defeat at Dogale in 1887.

After the battle of Dogale, the Italians had every reason to push on to occupy Bogos. First of all, their defeat at the hands of an African general gave public support for Italian retaliatory

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Governo di Italia, *I Nostri Errori: Tredici Anni in Eritrea*, (Torino; Francesco Casanova, 1898) p. 64.

¹⁶ Ato Wolde Selassie Maharzgi and Ato Mussa Gidar; see also Kotler, *op.cit.*, p. 35, for the Italian approach to the Habab & Beni-Amir because of the need of protection by these people from Mahdist troubles.

measures. Secondly, Crispi's cabinet took the opportunity to exploit the situation by rousing Italian public opinion through their claim that Italy had to make up the loss it suffered in the Suez as a result of its failure to cooperate with Britain in 1882.¹⁷ The gain was to be made by helping Britain in the Sudan against the Mahdists, and that could only be done by occupying all areas laying between Massawa and Kassala. After 1887 also Britain showed a change of policy in favour of Italy. In December of that year, when G.H. Portal, a British diplomat, was sent to Ethiopia to cool down the hostilities between Yohannes and Italy, he openly supported Italian occupation of Bogos.¹⁸ With the Italian troops already in the vicinity of Bogos by the annexation of Ailet, Saatit and Umkulu, all of which were on the road to Keren, and with the obvious weakness of Yohannes because of the Mahdi and the Italians, Portal had no choice but encourage Italy to continue her expansion as long as it did not threaten the Nile. The British attitude towards Italian advances in North-East Africa was put as follows:

Salisbury had been quite favourable to Italian expansion in East Africa. He had been willing to hand over Abyssinia to Italian colonial enterprise in 1888 despite India office objection, on the a matter of Imperial policy; and, as long as Crispi confined his attentions to this region. Salisbury had accepted the rise of the Italian East African Empire with equanimity.¹⁹

It was not only the British support that counted for the Italian move to Bogos. Just six days after Portal's departure on January 6, 1888, the Mahdists declared war against Yohannes and on January

¹⁷ J.C. Lowe, *The Reluctant Imperialists*, vol. I (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) p. 140.

¹⁸ G.H. Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia*, (London; 1892) p. 168 Article 4.

¹⁹ C.J. Lowe, *op.cit.*, pp. 141-42.

23 of the same year, in a decisive battle defeated King Takle Haymanot of Gojam, devastated Gonder and took the *Niguse's* sons as captives.²⁰ This invasion compelled Yohannes to move southwards leaving the Italians free in the north. No one was more eager for Italian expansion than Count Antonelli who still had not lost confidence in Menelik's friendship. The following speech to the Italian Parliament in May 1888 tell much about his colonial policy:

Italy needs colonies for her future and for her trade and this bourgeois habit of always counting the cost is unpatriotic: There is something greater than material interests, the dignity of our country and the interest of civilization. You have always said that now we are in Rome, we must create a new world. Well then, if these are your wishes, you must assist the government, give it the means to succeed in its mission.²¹

The Italians had all what they needed for moving in to Keren. They had strongly pro-expansionist leaders at home, they avoided a direct clash against Yohannes and won the favour of Britain for their plan of territorial acquisitions. What remained was how to execute the plan. To do this, they decided to use Yohannes' enemies in Hamassien for the annexation of Bogos. That was an ideal decision because the same people were the ones that led Italy towards the occupation of all highland Eritrea in the future. Kaffal Goffar was the first Hamassien rebel to be approached. Kaffal, son in-law of Wolde Michael, fled to Bogos and asked Kuruf Bey's

²⁰ G.N. Sanderson, 'Conflict and cooperation between Ethiopia and the Mahdist State 1884-1898', *Sudan Notes and Records*, vol. 59 (Khartoum; 1969), p. 20.

²¹ C.J. Lowe, *op.cit.*, pp. 139-140, quoted from Bourguin, *Les Politiques d'expansion Imperialiste*, (Paris; 1949) pp. 137-139.

friendship in 1883.²² But, (according Kolmodin's tradition) he was imprisoned by the Egyptians and sometime after escaping from the prison, he became a *Shifta*.²³ Baldissera's need to occupy more territory without heavy expenses offered Kaffal a good job and persuaded the former to accept Kaffal's proposal to occupy Keren for Italy.²⁴ From the beginning, Baldissera never trusted Kaffal because of the information that he used to gather about Kaffal's secret contacts with Ras Alula and Mangasha of Tigray.²⁵ For the moment, however, the Italian commander could not avoid dependence on Kaffal, so in July 1888 *Balambaras* Kaffal took the fortress of Keren and hoisted the Italian flag on behalf of Italy.

After the occupation of Keren, the relations between Kaffal and the Italians deteriorated. Kaffal was accused of using their guns to raid the surrounding areas, of inciting the local people against the Italian rule and as mentioned above, of secretly dealing with the Tigray rulers.²⁶ A reliable report by Ato Petros Hinoshim tells about Dabbab Araya's (a cousin and strong rival of Yohannes) attempt to exploit the strained relations between Kaffal and Baldissera.²⁷ According to this story, Dabbab heard that Kaffal was conspiring against the Italians in alliance with Ras Alula. He then decided to cut short Kaffal's plan in order to weaken Ras Alula and by so doing to get the Italian support for his own

²² A.B. Wylde, 83 to 87 in *the Sudan*, vol. I (1888) p. 334.

²³ Yohannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzaga Et Hazzaga*. Textes Tigrina, (Rome; 1912) vol. V.I, p. 248.

²⁴ *Tredici Anni in Eritrea*, p. 67.

²⁵ Guilio del Bono, *Commentari Dell Impero: Da Assab ad Adua*, (Roma; N.D.) p. 77.

²⁶ *Tredici Anni in Eritrea*, pp. 68-69.

²⁷ Ato Petros Hinoshim, Keren, 24/7/70, says that he witnessed the struggle between Kaffal and Dabbab when he was a student of Father Picard at Keren-Lalai.

ambitions. So, sometime in 1888 Dabbab, with many soldiers from Segeneiti, secretly infiltrated to the town of Keren and camped near the church of St. Michael. Kaffal, who was at the fortress (only about 1 1/2 kms away), did not know what was happening at those early hours. But, later while Dabbab and his troops demanded food and drink from the missionaries, Kaffal's soldiers arrived and began shooting at them. In the confusion that followed, Dabbab's horses ran away. When he tried to take the mission horses, his soldiers, being Catholics from Akkele Guzai, opposed his attempt. Dabbab had no other chance but to escape to the southeast of the town. At a mountainous areas leading to Hamassien, he fought for some days and failing to stand Kaffal's attacks, he retreated to Hamassien.

Following Kaffal, many Hamassien notables turned to the Italians. Prominent among these were *Bilata* Baraki and Sibhatu, sons of *Kantiba* Bakit of Karneshim, Gugsu, son of Haylu of Tsazzaga and Bahta Hagos of Segeneiti.²⁸ With the help of these men, Baldissera was convinced that he can do away with Kaffal. Thus in 1889, he sent out two groups of commandos, one through the northerly route of Meshalit and another through the route that directly connects Massawa with Keren through Mensa. On July 2, 1889 Captain Dimaio surrounded Kaffal at his fortress and early in the morning took Keren without bloodshed.²⁹

Besides the state of anarchy in Ethiopia because of the death of Yohannes in 1889 and the influence of the Mahdi revolt in the Sudan, the appalling economic conditions in Bogos helped the Italians to get acceptance by the people. The Great Famine that overwhelmed the whole of Ethiopia in 1890-1892 was already well established in Bogos. In January 1889, Father Picard wrote that he found a child cast away near the Ansaba River because his

²⁸ Kotler, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Tredici Anni in Eritrea*, p. 40.

parents could not feed it.³⁰ On February 22 of the same year, Father Crouzet quoted Picard reporting that because of drought the people had no grain at all.³¹ Again in April 1890, Picard reported an incident where a certain woman offered her children to any body that could feed them.³² These are the years that are known as *Karboni*³³ in the Blin tradition. Many of my informants confirm that the Italians won the confidence of the Blin and other surrounding peoples by distributing grain.³⁴

In 1889, then it was not Count Antonelli's deal with Menelik in Shoa or some extraordinary economic motive by the Italian industrialists that led the Italians to the Red Sea region. It was, rather, the ambitions of Crispi's financially poor government and the need of military honour by people like general Baldissera and Colonel Saletta that extended Italian rule to all areas between the sea and Mareb, even before the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship was signed with Menelik on May 2, 1889 at Wichale. On January 1, 1890 Umberto I, King of Italy, proclaimed the birth of the first Italian colony of Eritrea. With this, almost all of the significant native political figures were subdued. This ended power struggle among local chiefs not only in Bogos, but in most parts of Eritrea.

³⁰ Richard Pankhurst, *The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892*, (Addis Ababa; HSIU, unpublished typescript, 1964) p. 32; see also *Ibid.*, p. 43 where migration of the people in search of grain to Massawa is discussed.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³³ Ato Mussa Gidar says that the word comes from the Blin word *korben* for dry skin because all cattle died and people used dry skin for food. But (Abba) Dr. Ayele Tekle Haymanot says that the word comes in connection with the name of an Italian official who ruled at Massawa during the period of the famine. Many of my informants agree with Mussa and I could not find any independent support for Abba Ayele's interpretation.

³⁴ Informants Ato Mussa, Bal Tilluk, and Ato Petros.

CONCLUSION

Tradition and language link the Blin with the Agaw people of central Ethiopia. This ethnic and cultural affiliation gave the inhabitants of Bogos a unique status among the peoples in the region. This fact was re-inforced by their conversion to Islam and Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century. And whatever connection there might have been between the Blin and the central Ethiopian authority, it was completely obscured by the Era of Princes (*Zemene Mesafint*). The power of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church declined with the weakening of political power of the Christian Kingdom, and the Blin lost touch with it.

During the re-unification of Ethiopia, Bogos was not controlled by any outside power save the Catholic missionary activities and their Muslim competitors. Even when Tewodros succeeded to exercise some authority in the central provinces of Ethiopia, his control could not reach Bogos, and the raids that had already caused much damage on the Blin only became more acute. These raids lasted longer than they should because of the Blin social structure and the inability of either of the contenders to dominate Bogos till 1872. Almost all of the neighbours of the Blin – the Samhar from the east, the Bani-Amer and the Baria, from the west, the Habab from the north and the Tigrayans from the south – each did their part in devastating the region. However, the Blin enjoyed a relative peace under the short Egyptian rule. The rule of Ismail Pasha for sometime introduced an element of modernization by keeping order through its army and encouraging mission activities in the town of Keren. During this period, Keren became known to all powers concerned with the politics of the Red Sea and the Sudan. Prominent personalities like General Gordon, Ras Alula and others like the Franco-Italian agents, dealt with their problems at the town thereby giving it the appearance of a diplomatic centre.

Just as the confusion that followed changes in the balance of power during 1868–1872 led to the successful Egyptian penetration, so the 1884–1889 troubles in the Sudan, the British

intrigue together with the chaotic situation in Ethiopia at the end of Emperor Yohannes' rule, led to the Italian occupation of Bogos. That event ended Bogos's role as a centre of imperialist competition for many years to come.

EPILOGUE

THE BLIN SINCE 1890

Michael Ghaber finished this supplement to his 1971 thesis on Bogos in the spring of 1992 and mailed it to me on 20 May 1992 stating, in an accompanying letter: "Do whatever editing you wish to do on it". He died in a car accident in Kassala, Sudan, five days later, and long before his mail reached my re-routed address in Iraq. Entitled "Historical Origins and Social Relations of the Blin", the piece of writing was partly the result of my suggestion to him to explain what has taken place in Bogos since 1890. And although he wished to further sharpen some of his thesis arguments in the writing he undertook, the final draft nevertheless fitted what it was intended for: an Epilogue. Further dwelling on the non-legendary origins of the Eritreans in general and the Blin in particular, Michael explains the social and political changes that took place in the region during most parts of 1890 to 1990, a century in which Eritrea itself evolved into an identifiable entity. Condensed in the summary below, therefore, is Michael's last writing exercise. (In 1981, he published in Tigrigna "A Short History of Eritrea" which has served as the text book on that subject in Eritrean schools in Eastern Sudan). The full text of the original Tigrigna manuscript for this Epilogue is also being printed. (Translator: W. Ammar).

* * *

ORIGINS OF THE ERITREAN PEOPLE

It has been established in history that the Eritrean people hail from the following three major branches of the human race:

1. The Nilotic Race

The original inhabitants of the entire surrounding region were the Nilotic peoples, who are today represented in Eritrea by the

Baria (Nara) and Kunama in the western lowlands of the country. It is believed that the Nilotic peoples left the area because : (a) they were pushed into the interior of the African Continent by the Kushitic peoples, and (b) severe climatic changes forced their migration towards the tropical forest zones. They were mainly hunters.

2. The Hamitic Race

The Hamitic or Kushitic peoples left their habitat in lower Egypt in about 5,000-3000 B.C. and invaded the Nilotic peoples in Eritrea and the rest of the Horn of Africa. It is said that centuries of extreme drought dried up forests and created deserts, including the Sahara Desert. The major movements of peoples were thus caused by the climatic changes. The Hamitic/Kushitic people are today represented in Eritrea by the Afar, Blin, Hadareb and the Saho. Other peoples in the Horn of Africa speaking languages of Kushitic origin include the Agaws, Oromos, Sidamas and the Somalis. They were mainly herdsmen.

3. The Semitic Race

The Semitic peoples started their early migrations from the Arabian Peninsula to Africa in about 1,000 B.C. They brought with them advanced culture, social organization and better modes of production in agriculture and animal breeding. Various known as the Sabaeans, the Habashat and the Agazian, the Semitic peoples from the mountains of today's Yemen resettled in the plateau country west of the Red Sea and imposed their culture and mode of life over the large Kushitic population in the region. Their historical relics are found at Keskese, Kohaito and Metera in Eritrea, and at places like Yeha and Axum in Ethiopia. The Semitic or, rather, the semitized Kushitic peoples in today's Eritrea are represented by the Tigrigna and Tigre speakers. In actual fact, it was estimated the Eritreans are, originwise, 80 per cent Kushitic and 20 per cent Semitic. But, culturally, it is the other way round today.

THE ORIGIN OF THE BLIN

There are two ways of surmising the origin of the Blin: oral tradition, and an analytic approach based on historical premises.

1. The Traditional Approach

As it was well covered in the text, oral history recounts of migration of a section of the Blin, the Bet Tarqe, in about 1,000 A.D. from Lasta in central Ethiopia to the Keren area, better known as Halhal-Bogos during the last century. It is also claimed that the Bet Tarqe seized by force the land from its original occupants, the Baria or Nara people, and that the Bet Tawqe in about 1270 A.D. settled in the Halhal highlands after subduing an originally Blin speaking people called the Bet Mussi. Pockets of the Bet Mussi are still to be found among the Bet Tarqe (i.e. the Senhit) and the Bet Tawqe. (Bet means 'the House of' or the tribe of).

2. The Historical Approach

This is based on historical premises which take into account the movement of peoples and the concomitant major demographic changes that took place in the region. The area between lower Egypt and western Eritrea up to Bogos was occupied by Beja peoples while the entire stretch between Bogos and Lasta was inhabited by Agaw peoples who were gradually supplanting their language and culture by that of the few Semites from the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, Geez and later Tigrigna became dominant. The Amharic language was born as a mixture of Agaw and Tigrigna.

In the long historical process, the Kushitic Agaw peoples inhabiting Hamassien, Serae and Akkele-Guzai adopted Tigrigna as their language while people in the northern parts of Eritrea became Tigre speakers. The Blin could, therefore, very well be a people who remained as an island in the mountain fastness of Keren after all the surrounding area was overwhelmed by a

Semitic ocean. Perhaps, similar description could fit the Kushitic Saho people in Akkele-Guzai and the Agaw of Ethiopia.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

In earlier days, the Blin were mainly herdsmen in which the status of a person was measured by the number of animals he possessed. In much later years, one's social standing was measured by his land possessions and agricultural revenue. It was true that the Tarqe and Tawqe groups were considered the ruling families or groups which at certain period deprived the other minority tribes of their basic civic participation and some liberties. However, it is grossly misleading to assume that the said ruling or 'aristocratic' clans constituted exploiter classes.

On the other hand, the internal administration of the Blin was decentralized throughout their history. The various tribal groups and clans had their respective, non-hereditary *Sims* (Chiefs). In the Highlands as well as in Semhar, Habab (Sahel), Maria and among the Beni-Amer, a leading central figure used to emerge as a Kentiba or Ras to lead the community as one whole. This never occurred among the Blin. They formed common front against invaders, but they never fell under one military or civilian leader. On the other hand, their decentralized form of administration was more democratic than that of the groups cited above. The Afar, the Kunama and the Saho also had decentralized system of administration like that of the Blin. The Italians in 1932 named paramount chiefs for these linguistic groups, although the experiment failed because the concerned peoples rejected it.

The Blin had been engaged in a protracted defensive struggle to preserve their identity against continued Semitic encroachments on all fronts. Nowadays, most of them are bilingual, some speaking Blin and Tigrigna and the others Blin and Tigre. One must also mention here that, sandwiched as they are between the two major ethnic groups in Eritrea, the Blin occupy a highly strategic position in the country. In the days when there were no

modern highways, Keren was the only passage from the western lowlands of Gash and Barka to Semhar, and from the central plateau to the northern highlands, and vice versa. In the past century, the people of Bogos suffered continued material destruction in armed clashes either directed against them or fought between powerful rulers from northern Ethiopia, the Naybs of Semhar, Habab, Maria and the Beni-Amer. The most important battles fought in Eritrea during the past half a century also took place in the Keren region.

THE BLIN IN THE 1940s

The coming of the British in the wake of Italy's defeat in East Africa in 1941 changed the political life in Eritrea. Parties were formed, and some of these relied heavily on religion with the aim of easily achieving their political objectives. The two parties which greatly influenced the Blin were the Unionist Party and the Moslem League, which in their respective areas increased religious consciousness. The Unionist propaganda made strong appeals based on Christianity as well as to the purported blood relationship of the Blin with the Agaw in Ethiopia. On its part, the Moslem League, established by an assembly of over 3,000 provincial representatives gathered in Keren in late 1946, and from the start headquartered in that town, won to its side most of the Moslem Blin, and in particular those of Tawqe. The Moslems in the region were also unable to oppose a party whose honorary head was Seedi Bakri of the Khatmia sect, a 'holy' and top religious figure in the entire region. The fact that the Blin in big numbers belonged to the two religions now posed a serious problem threatening their unity. Finally, they found themselves divided in two opposed blocs. No other linguistic group in Eritrea was to suffer internal division as much as the Blin did. This is because, unlike the Blin, the other communities belonged in their great majorities either to Islam or Christianity.

Many elements from the Blin, who disliked the confessional politics joined the New Eritrea (Pro-Italy) Party which, anyhow was also attractive by its being materially rewarding. Likewise, it is to be noted that the minority ethnies (the Afar, Baria, Blin, Kunama and the Saho) showed interest in the return of Italy and supported the New Eritrea Party. A British official in Eritrea during that time, Kennedy Trevaskis observed that the minorities in the territory believed that their interests would be better promoted under Rome than by a solution brought about by the Unionist Party or the Moslem League, both of which, the minorities perceived, were controlled by either one of the two dominant ethnies of the country. Like the Moslem League, the New Eritrea Party was headquartered in Keren. It was also to be observed that the political competition among the three most important parties of the 1940s was very intensive in Keren.

THE BLIN IN THE 1950s

The 1950s was a period during which party politics subsided giving way to non-party life, with individuals vying to obtain State posts through winning the friendship of Unionists and Ethiopian officials. It was also a period in which Ethiopia did its utmost to further divide the people and prepare the ground towards dissolving the Ethio-Eritrean Federation.

The election of deputies to the Eritrean Assembly was one of the means used to divide the people. The Blin had two representatives to the legislative, one for the Senhit (the Tarqe and the Neged grouping) and another for the Tawqe of the Halhal region. The Tawqe had no problem: Cavalieri Abbe Nedel was the undisputed representative for the entire federal period. The Senhit, however, found the matter very contention. Their legislator to the Eritrean Assembly was to be selected by a college of electors consisting of six persons, four from the Tarqe and two from the Neged. In the mid-1950s, the Tarqe tribal leaders alleged that the Neged were "betraying" the Unionist camp by siding with the

Moslem League of Ibrahim Sultan, a party supported by most former serfs and tribal minorities in the region. The Neged, with only two representatives in the college of electors, had no chance of electing a candidate of their choice to the Eritrean Assembly. But when differences arose among the three key protagonists of Ethiopian interests in the region – Embaye Habte, Sifaf Hiyab and Idris Lijam – the Neged seized the opportunity to ask for a separate paramount *Sim* which they did not have till then. The disagreement among the said three Unionist actors started during the parliamentary elections of 1958 when Idris Lijam opposed the re-election of Sifaf Hiyabu to the Eritrean Assembly and, instead, supported the candidature of an anti-unionist figure by the name of Hummed Ibrahim Neberai of Keren Lalai. During this period, Embaye Habte and Sifaf Hiyabu worked with the then Chief Executive of Eritrea, Asfaha Woldemichael, to stop the two Neged electors from supporting Neberai by promising the Neged side to have their own paramount chief soon. The anti-unionist Hummed was thus defeated, but the Neged got what they wanted and deserved. Eventually, Yosief Mihsun was appointed as the first ever *Sim* of the Neged in September 1962. The number of senior chiefs in Senhit thus rose to seven. The Tawqe had nine chiefs.

The Blin chiefs, whose remuneration from the State consisted of 10% of the tax revenues they collected from their respective communities, deepened disunity and administrative inconveniences to the people they insisted to maintain the kinship groups as units of tribal administration instead of accepting a territorial unit for administrative purposes. (According to the tribal unit of administration, each person, no matter where he lived, had to pay his tax through his *Sim* and also travel to the village of his proper *Sim* whenever legal disputes arise). This was a complex system which continued until it was terminated during the armed struggle.

THE BLIN DURING 1961-1991

Like the other Eritrean groups, the Blin were no doubt influenced by the legacies of the party politics of the 1950s, and the effects were well reflected during the initial period of the armed struggle which was started in Barka. Youth from the Blin joined the struggle from its early years, but most of them were from the Tawqe section. This was mainly because there were many Bet Tawqe youth in the Sudan when the armed struggle started in Eritrea. It is to be recalled that the British in 1951-52 organized a yearly recruitment of 6,000 seasonal cotton workers in the Sudan from Halhal. Many of those seasonal workers managed to stay in the Sudanese towns of Medeni, Hasahiṣa and others and later joined cells of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) or the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) when they were established in 1958 and 1961, respectively. Almost all of the Tawqe youth were Moslems.

On the other hand, the Senhit, many of whom were Christians and members of the Unionist Party in the 1940s, remained alienated from the Tawqe. Most of the Christian Blin youth joined the Commandos, an Ethiopian force formed from amongst Eritreans starting in 1965 to fight against the ELF. Many of the Senhit also became armed militias of the Ethiopians until the late 1960s and early 1970s. The people of the region fully embraced the armed struggle when Ethiopia's wanton destruction and killings became indiscriminate.

Social relations and the internal administration of the Blin underwent radical transformation with the growth of the liberation movement. The tribal chiefs struggled to perpetuate the rural administration on the basis of tribal unit, as noted earlier. This system was replaced by territorial unit of administration by the ELF during which time the tribal chiefs lost power, money and prestige and continued to oppose the liberation front. Many of the chiefs left the semi-liberated countryside and fled to the towns which were under Ethiopian control. Many of them tried to work

for Ethiopia and the ELF had to execute some of them. Prominent among those executed by the front for suspected activities for Ethiopia included Cavalieri Abbe Nedel of the Tawqe and Fitewrari Yosief Mihsun of the Senhit, two prominent Blin personalities mentioned earlier.

To conclude, the Blin are, like most of the peoples of the Horn of Africa, Kushitic in origin but heavily influenced by Semitic culture. It might not even be very long before they are inundated by the strong cultural wave which already prevailed over most parts of the region.

At the present time, none basic differences seem to strain internal relationships among the various groups that make up the Blin, especially the Senhit around the town of Keren. The old primordial sentiments of the 'aristocratic' Tarqe clans and the other Blin (Senhit) groups commonly known as Neged seem to have been again instigated in the 1980s by quarters with vested interests to keep the minorities further fragmented.

On the other hand, the fact of their being a dwindling minority in the area is already impacting on the Blin, thus partly engaging the various tribal groups on a search for an identity beyond the borders of their home, Bogos. It still seems that the Senhit part of the Blin have yet to appreciate that having a common language and culture, common tradition, a common economic way of life and sharing a common territory far outweigh any claimed blood ties and legendary accounts beyond one's immediate environment. The narrow primordial sentiments should not, therefore, be allowed to divide the people of this region whose lot has so far been destruction and endless suffering, from Wibe's period to the present.

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ORAL INFORMANTS

Andemariam Arey (Ato), Tarqe group, 73 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 10/11/1970.

Arey Abdalla (Ato), Tawqe group, 70 years old, interviewed in Asmara on 6/9/1970.

Kiflemariam Fidel (Ato), Tarqe group, 54 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 10/5/1971.

Masqal Takruray (Ato), Tarqe group, 53 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 20/4/1970.

Mussa Gidar (Ato), Tarqe group, about 130 years old, interviewed in Keren on 7/8/1969.

Osman Kantiba Hamid (Ato), Tarqe group, 30 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 15/4/1970.

Petros Himoshim (Ato), Tawqe group, about 90 years old, interviewed in Keren on 24/4/1970.

Tsaggay Bayan (Ato), Tarqe group, 70 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 13/4/1970.

Tesfamariam Petros (Graz), Tawqe group, 56 years old, interviewed in Keren on 13/7/1970.

Tewolde Beyene (Amsalaqa), Tarqe group, 52 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 15/11/1970.

Tiluk Hammad (Balambaras), Tarqe group, 90 years old, interviewed in Keren on 15/8/1969.

Wolde Selassie Maharzgi (Ato), Tarqe group, 59 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 14/12/1970.

Wolde Tinsae Takruray, Tarqe group, 56 years old, interviewed in Addis Ababa on 10/11/1970.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Ghaber was born circa 1940 in the village of Musha, 8 km north of the town of Keren where he completed elementary and middle school grades. He attended high school at the Prince Makonnen Secondary School in Asmara (1961-65) during which time he played a leading and historic role in the then nascent Eritrean student movement. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in history in Addis Ababa and taught in government high schools for five years in Abi-Adi (Tembien, Tigrai), Mendefera and Agordat. He joined the ranks of fighters in the liberated areas in 1975. Between 1977 and his accidental martyrdom in May 1992, Michael served for nearly 17 years as instructor and director of the UNHCR-financed and ELF-administered refugee high school for Eritreans in Kassala, Sudan. He is survived by his wife, Ghimja, and two children, Weini and Reda'.

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