

APPENDIX 18

FOUR POWER COMMISSION OF  
INVESTIGATION FOR  
THE FORMER  
ITALIAN COLONIES

REPORT ON ERITREA

LETTER OF TIGRÉ REPRESENTATIVES  
dated Keren 25th November, 1947.

With due respect, we the undersigned, legal representatives of all races (TIGRÉ) of Arabic origin, dwelling in the provinces of Keren - Nacfa - Agordat - Tessenei, have the honour to submit this letter to the Hon. Four Power Commission so that it may be examined and brought to the attention of the DEPUTIES OF THE FOREIGN MINISTERS OF THE FOUR GREAT POWERS, in order to have full justice from the United Nations, justice which has been proclaimed and confirmed by the Atlantic Charter of the United Nations which obligates the world.

As regards the future of Eritrea, all of us (almost half a million people) accept the point of view of the Moslem League of Eritrea, to which we belong unanimously, and we are even prepared to give our opinions individually and also through our legal representatives, properly elected and accepted by us. Our case is that submitted to your Commission in the memorandum of the Moslem League and referred to by its delegation; however we have the honour to state our wishes clearly and briefly; they can be summarised as follows:-

- 1°) We reject categorically any system of annexation or union with Ethiopia or any other nation;
- 2°) We claim the full independence of our country and we consider ourselves to be in a position to obtain this.
- 3°) Failing our obtaining full independence, we accept an international trusteeship for ten years under the control of Great Britain or of an organ of the United Nations itself, with internal independence.

Furthermore it is our duty to explain to your Commission, with great displeasure, the very ugly situation in which we, the Tigré of Eritrea, find ourselves; a situation which has lasted for more than three centuries; a situation which could not even be applied to animals, seeing that there are laws that protect them from ill-treatment, and people who break these laws are liable to punishment.

We, in Eritrea have to face two Governments, one different from the other.

One is the legal government, the other is a disguised government formed by the so-called noblemen of Eritrea (Bet Asghedé - Nabtab of the BENI AMER - Ad Sheck - Ad Shium); and we have to pay two different contributions to each of these governments. The rule is that, when we have to pay one shilling as contribution to the government, we must pay to the Choeves from 5 to 10 times this amount and so on for everything. In other words, we find ourselves in a continuous state of slavery; slavery which has been fought against and abolished in every part of the world, except in our country and in Ethiopia.

Therefore, /



Therefore, it is with great hope that we present this letter to your Commission which tomorrow is to be interrogated by the BIG FOUR; you will also be interrogated by God if you should fail to take into consideration our oppression or should you fail to help the poor humanity crushed on Eritrean soil by the above-mentioned oppressors, so that we may obtain the freedom enjoyed not only by human beings but also by animals.

We represent almost the entire Moslem population of the western provinces of Eritrea, that is about 95% of the population consists of our so-called "Tigré or arabs", who speak local dialect. In spite of this we have no right to hold political posts, nor do we enjoy equality with the so-called noble class, known under the name of "Thanit"; we are forced to plough our land in order to give food to these noblemen; we milk our cows to supply them with milk; we collect fire-wood to keep them warm; we draw water from the wells to supply them with drinking water; we are also forced to supply them with beasts of burden and we transport their luggage for them without any remuneration, not even a word of thanks; when we marry our daughters to them we have to offer them a present, otherwise the marriage is not valid. Our position is worse than any form of slavery, a form that not even the Nazis have given the world, while they are being accused of the ill-treatment of humanity, humanity created partially by God, with all the organs of the body and the senses of man.

Furthermore we beg to clarify our position as follows:

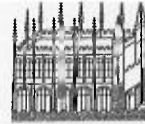
Our most important races are called: ALMADA, RUGBAT, ASFADA, AFLANDA, BET MAALA, AB HASCELA, DEG DEGHE, DOBAAT, AGBO, CHEBBE, HAFARA, BALAU, MAHRAGAB? BET AUAD, BET TESFAI, AD BATUGRI, DENGHEN, AD MACATTAR, BET MARIAITT, BET ABBARIAITT, ANGALAASA, UILIDNORO, AFRID, MAALA, KATTAN, DANCHELE, MAHLIT-KINAB, HARABSO, HIDAREB, SAB MIDIR, AD AMDOI, SEIHO, SAB LAALIT, EL GUDAB, ALLABIA, KARATAB KARAB KINAH, plus about a hundred other groups, kindred to us.

Further, all these races of purely Arab origin came from the East, who, after centuries, changed their Arabic mother tongue into the local dialect called Tigré, and also adopted the local ones. It should be added that the word "Tigré" is applied to the above-mentioned races by the feudal families, with an insulting meaning. For instance, when a feudal family want to insult a member of the above-mentioned races they say "you are only my Tigrai" which means "my servant"; another word which is also used and means "my slave" is "gheberai."

The major part of the above-mentioned races live in the Keren-Agordat Province and is divided into tribes; these are sub-divided into the so called "Bet Asghede, Ad Scium, that is Maria Rossi and Maria Neri, Mensa, Ad Scek, Nabtab and the dominating Tigré."

#### HISTORICAL HINTS

Fuller information on the origin of the Almada, Rugbat, Asfada, Scimaghelle, Maria Neri etc., is to be found in Chapter XXXV of the Manual edited by Pollera, entitled "Le popolazioni indigene" The Native Population of Eritrea, page 191 and further.



## 3.

ASGHEDE

(1) These peoples are of Abyssinian origin from Hamasien and Akkhele Guzai. They were established about the middle of the 17th century on the mountains, called by them "Rore Asghede". As we and the original inhabitants of the country had two means of a livelihood, i.e. breeding of cattle and cultivation, which necessitated our moving from the highland to the lowland, according to seasons, it has been easy for the Asghede to keep us under their subjection.

When Negus Lebna Dinghil (or Uobe) arrived on the spot, having escaped from Imam Ahmad, Negus (Gragne), the Asghede or Asghedom, received him and succeeded in obtaining from him the title of Supreme Head of the Sahel (Nacfa) region, due to his Abyssinian origin and to his Christian religion.

(2) It would be impossible to write with accuracy a story or a chronicle of the events which took place in countries where the custom of writing was not known or, to state it more clearly, in a country which was mute.

To compensate for this official deficiency we have the well known system of genealogical memory, both amongst the Christians and the Moslem populations of the place; genealogical memory which places on record facts and events in support of which tradition supplies details, not only simple erroneous legends.

For this purpose we have avoided putting down names and events which we can only quote from our memory. More convincing and reliable would be the records kept by impartial writers, in publications that we can quote with precision. Equally convincing is the fact that these publications correspond with the evolution of the facts and the present and past state of our society.

3) We read in a speech by Count Rossini, contained in a publication of the "Eritrea Economica" (Istituto Geografico De Agostino - Novara - Roma 1912), where, when speaking of the Asghede (a tyrannically dominating class) he describes as rulers of their tribes a "dominating class whose economic exploitation, with time", ends by becoming monstrous: a human octopus, of a few thousand parasites exploiting a great number of vassals." (page 83).

To start with, the Asghedem were farmers as indeed were the Abyssinians of Hamasien, but, gaining in strength not only numerically, they ended by tyranizing the local populations such as the Almada, Rugbat, Asfada, Deg Deghe, Dobassat, Bet Maala, etc., called Tigré. Such people since then have lived with their flocks and herds, changing their domicile with the seasons. Far from leading them to agriculture and to a better standard of civilisation, the Asghede themselves completely assimilated their customs, their way of life and their language (page 83).

(4) On page 127-128 of the book "Ethiopia e Gente d'Etiopia" (Carlo Conti Rossini - ediz. Bemporad - Firenze 1937) it is stated that the populations of Tigré language are mostly shepherds. Their social composition was characteristic: there was, and there is, much less, a difference between the noble class, of foreign origin (Abyssinian from Hamasien and Akkhele Guzai although the Bet Asghede are from Eritrea) and the vassal classes, who are known as Tigré in general and Tigrai in particular. The relations between the two classes changed much/





much from tribe to tribe according to the manner in which the former succeeded in imposing their will. Sometimes they were subjected to complete economic exploitation, arriving to the point of recognising the lords' right to kill or sell the vassal as "slave" (The Asghede had the right to declare their vassal "slave" for the smallest offence, and the poor slave had to serve his new master until he was able to pay 20 (twenty) Maria Teresa Dollars for a male and 30 (thirty) for a female, in order to obtain his freedom.)

(5) An excellent indication of the origin and life of the Asghede is found in the Manual, edited by Poller, mentioned on page two of this letter. We recall all of it in view of the importance of information contained therein, but we shall only cite certain statements having special importance for our subject.

a) The Bet Asghede (Lords) were originally Christians and remained such for some time, while the populations they found on the spot "Bacrium - Almada - Asfada, etc." were Moslem, nomads and were only engaged in sheep farming (page 195).

b) The Bet Asghede, having subjugated these tribes "making them almost slaves, and living off the products of their herds, ceased to feel the necessity for engaging in agriculture, and this aristocratic class became parasites on their dependents.." (page 196).

c) On pages 196/197 of the same Pollera Manual, are stated ~~the~~ obligations of the Tigré towards their lords. Moreover such obligations were rendered more ~~severe~~ and humiliating by the Bet Asghede by abuse of their power. On page 197 Pollera describes an interesting declaration made many years ago by a numerous group of Tigré to the Regional Commissioner of Cheren of that time, Mr. Fioccardi: "Since the Italian Government came to administer the country, we are quieter within our boundaries, the noblemen limit their requests and leave our wives in peace, a thing that never happened before. Before, they often pulled us out of our beds and took our places - "hospitality" which is not prescribed for in the book.

If we did not present them with a full jug of milk they would not accept it and insulted us, without thinking that in order to give them the milk we had to take it away from our wives and little children.

Cases of the kind happened when the Bet Asghede arrived in the "zeriba" of the Tigré when the men were out with their herds of cattle (page 198).

#### EVOLUTION OF TIME - EVOLUTION OF RELATIONS.

6) From what is stated above, which is the result of enquiries made by educated people, it is clear that there has been a great evolution from the first days of the Asghede's rule to this date.

Backward evolution to a certain degree, because not only did we, the dominated, adopt the religion, customs, and language of the rulers but they adopted the religion, language and customs of the dominated. Those who had been rulers and remained at first agriculturists, abandoned their cultivation, preferring to live as parasites on us, the shepherds. We, the dominated, remained mainly shepherds, but there is also a fair number of us who have succeeded in progressing from pastoral pursuits to agriculture, obtaining state lands to cultivate./



cultivate. (Two thirds of the Eritrean territory is not cultivated because of these noblemen who forbid the people to plough freely, and grant permission to cultivate only to those who agree to share one third of the crops with them;) it is because of this that Eritrea does not produce enough cereals to satisfy her own needs.

Comparing the two parties, it is evident that the ruling class are in the process of retrogression, while the dominated have progressed enormously, passing from shepherds and cultivators to the arts, the free professions, commerce and employment both in government and commercial institutions. Most of the class of employees are sons of Tigrés.

7) What was the result of this evolution on the relations between the two parties? What action was taken by the government in guiding, with time, such an evolution? We have already stated that 'domination' became less severe (without, however, reaching complete freedom, and liberating us from the yoke of this slavery) as a result of the development of events and, without doubt as directed by the Authorities, particularly during these seven years of British domination, without which the Bet Asghede would certainly not have renounced the parasitical benefits which they enjoyed.

Abuses have been abolished and many 'established rights' have also been definitely abolished, whilst the few that remained were abolished in 1947. There now remains personal freedom, equality in rights and duties, and we quote some of the factors which still suppress personal freedom in every form:

The Tigrés have no right to accept any post - they cannot be seated if there is a nobleman present - they cannot speak, nor express their opinion - they cannot contradict the will of the nobleman, not even if it is wrong or detrimental to them or their community - they cannot marry noble girls while the noblemen can marry Tigrés, as the latter are considered "their own animals" and private property.

8) The enlightened, in their publications, generally speaking, did not treat the various questions in detail, tribe by tribe and race by race; their interpreters belonged as a rule to the aristocratic classes.

As stated above, the noblemen gave the land to those who gave them one third of their crops, and this practice has greatly militated against the development of agriculture, in such a way that almost two thirds of the very fertile lands which could be used for the cultivation of tobacco, cotton, sesam, peanuts, corn, castor, etc. are not cultivated because nobody will willingly put up with the various difficulties arising from such hard work, and only to divide their crops with loafers who want to enrich themselves by other peoples' labour.

During the rule of the Italian Government, in the time of His Excellency Signor Gasperini, we, the Tigré (particularly the Rugbt, Almada and Degdeghé) continued to insist on the system of contribution to the ruling classes, contribution which the Asghede unjustly claimed from us; at the same time we asked to have each of us, a separate chief, so that we could become independent and enjoy freedom, thus ending this long slavery; but His Excellency Signor Gasperini, not only did not accede to this last request, but promulgated a law as per attached original sheet, by which he forced us to pay the dues to the Asghede, and amongst these dues was a charge in favour/