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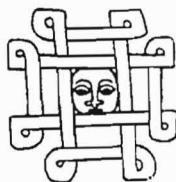
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**HISTORY AND LANGUAGE  
OF THE TIGRE-SPEAKING PEOPLES**

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## CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING THE TIGRE FRONTIER SPACE IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

JONATHAN MIRAN  
(Western Washington University)

This essay proposes a tentative interpretive analysis of the complex historical evolution of the congeries of territories, or regions, inhabited by Tigre-speaking societies from around the second half of the eighteenth century to the early twentieth. It is an examination of the historical construction of the space inhabited by so-called Tigre societies in pre-colonial and early Italian Eritrea in a period of sweeping transformation in multiple frames of reference. My overarching approach is inscribed within a broad multi-focal regional and inter-regional analytical perspective loosely inspired by the historical vision espoused by the French *Annales* School tradition. It goes without saying that the formation of Tigre societies and the region they inhabit involves long and convoluted processes of migration, conflict, the pursuit of security, the adaptation to challenging environments, and the exploitation and management of economic resources, among other variants. Yet, inspired by *Annales* historical scholarship – in particular as exemplified by Fernand Braudel’s magisterial study of the Mediterranean – which has famously divided historical time into the *longue durée*, ‘conjuncture’ and ‘event’, I would suggest that an interrelated set of economic, religious, political and social historical processes which have operated on and within the Tigre area between the mid-eighteenth century and the early twentieth, might represent several overlapping meaningful conjunctures<sup>1</sup>.

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\* I would like to acknowledge the generous support of a research fellowship awarded by the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung enabling me to research and write this essay as a fellow in residence at the Ethiopian Studies Research Unit, University of Hamburg in 2008. Thanks to Kimberly Lynn for reading an earlier version of the essay and for offering helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Translated by S. Reynolds from the revised French edition, vols. 1-2, London, Collins, 1972-73. My thought also owes to the insights of Frederick Cooper on the notions of local, regional and global, and the analytical spaces in between them. In this essay I attempt to think about the Tigre area within a perspective that is, following Co-

The paper is an attempt to approach the subject from the perspective of a *histoire totale*, and I am not insensitive to the fact that such a large-scale approach may appear somewhat loose and vague. Yet the virtual inexistence of any substantial historical or anthropological research carried out in this area for long decades, perhaps paradoxically offers the rare and hopefully momentary opportunity of a *carte blanche*, at least in the conceptual realm.<sup>2</sup>

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per's formulation "more than local and less than global". Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley (CA), U.P., 2005, ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> The following selective bibliography corresponds to some of the major published sources for the history and ethnography of Tigre-speaking societies. It is by no means comprehensive. Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Bakr, *Ta'rīkh Iritrīyā al-muāšir: arḍan wa-sha'aban*, Cairo, priv. pub., 1994; Anthony D'Avray, *The Nakfa Documents. The despatches, memoranda, reports and correspondence describing and explaining the Stories of the Feudal Societies of the Red Sea littoral from the Christian-Muslim Wars of the Sixteenth Century to the Establishment 1885-1901 of the Italian Colony of Eritrea*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2000; Anthony D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea: The History of a Red Sea Society from the 16th to the 19th centuries*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1996; Carlo Conti Rossini, "Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree" in *L'Eritrea Economica*, Novara-Roma, Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1913, pp. 61-90; Id., "Studi su popolazioni dell'Etiopia, iii. Note sul Sahel Eritreo" *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 6, 1914, pp. 365-425; Id., *Tradizioni storiche dei Mensa*, Roma, Tipografia della casa editrice Italiana, 1901 (estratto dal *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana* 14, 1901, pp. 41-99); O.G.S. Crawford, "The Habab Tribe", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 36, 1955, pp. 183-187; Muḥammad Sālīḥ Ḍirār, *Ta'rīkh qabā'il al Habāb wa'l-Hamāsīn bi'l-Sūdān wa Iritrīyā*, Khartoum, Dār al-Kutub al-Sūdāniyya, 1991; Teobaldo Folchi, "Commissariato Regionale di Massaua. Brevi Cenni storico-amministrativi sulle popolazioni dal suddetto Commissariato Regionale dipendenti" 1898 (conserved at the Guglielmo Pecori Girardi Archive, Vicenza), edited by Massimo Zaccaria and published in *Ethnorēma*, 3, 2007, pp. 143-383 (available online [www.ethnorema.it](http://www.ethnorema.it)), also published as Teobaldo Folchi, *Le Note del Commissario. Teobaldo Folchi e i cenni storico-amministrativi sul Commissariato di Massaua (1898)* con una nota introduttiva di Massimo Zaccaria, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2009; Enno Littmann, *Publications of the Princeton Expedition to Abyssinia*, vols. 1-4, Leiden, Brill, 1910-1915; Stephen H. Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945; Didier Morin, "Beni 'Amer", in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2003, pp. 527-529; Werner Munzinger, *Studi sull'Africa Orientale*, Roma, C. Voghera, 1890 (translation of *Ostafrikanische Studien*, Schaffhausen, Fr. Hurtersche Buchhandlung, 1864); S.F. Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, Asmara, British Military Administration of Eritrea, 1944; Id., "Notes on Beni Amir Society", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 26, 1945, 1, pp. 51-94; Dante Odorizzi, *Il Commissariato Regionale di Massaua al 1° gennaio 1910*, Asmara, Fioretti e Beltrami, 1911; Alberto Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell'Eritrea*, Bologna, L. Cappelli, 1935; Karl Gustav Rodén, *Le tribù dei Mensa. Storia, legge e costumi*, Stockholm, Evangeliska fosterlands-stiftelsens, 1913; Giuseppe Sapeto, *Viaggio e missione cattolica fra i Mensa i Bogos e gli Habab con un cenno geografico storico dell'Abissinia*, Roma, Propaganda Fide, 1857; C.G. Seligman & B.Z. Seligman, "Note on the history and present condition of the Beni-Amer (Southern Beja)", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 13, 1930, 1, pp. 83-97; John S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London, Oxford U.P., 1952.

Not unlike the general objectives of the Naples workshop I can only hope that this very preliminary and somewhat theoretical outline will prove useful in stimulating reflection, designing future research, formulating questions, and perhaps point to fruitful ways for thinking about and imagining this space. It is clear that systematic and detailed historical research on Tigre-speaking societies such as the Beni ‘Amer, Bet Asgäde, Mänsa‘ and Marya among others, is required before we can claim to stand on any solid ground in what concerns the history of the area and its peoples. My own interest in the region is grounded in research that has focused on the history of Massawa and the various networks and connections – political, commercial, social and religious – that tied it with its hinterlands, chiefly in the Tigre area.<sup>3</sup> Two points are therefore in order: first, my own perspective might reflect a certain overarching Massawa-centric bias in the examples that I provide, and second, in no way do I pretend to offer conclusive statements. My primary aim is to stimulate directions for further enquiry and research.

Linguistic surveys and maps delimit the geographical areas inhabited by Tigre-speaking peoples in the modern states of Eritrea and Sudan. This essay attempts to historicize this geographic space. In other words, can one think of the ‘Tigre linguistic space’ as a historical space, perhaps a *region* or *meta-region*, shaped by particular political, economic, religious, cultural relations, interactions, networks or constraints and pressures operating on it and within it in different periods? Is this space a meaningful historical unit of study? And may such an angle of enquiry assist us in gaining greater insight into the sources of commonalities shared by Tigre-speaking communities, on the one hand, and the differences that separate and divide them, on the other? I will suggest that certain global and regional trends in the long nineteenth century (spilling over both onto the final decades of the eighteenth and the initial decades of the twentieth centuries) have indeed promoted regional integration, incorporation and cohesiveness while other historical factors have induced fragmentation and division. I said global and regional – yet any sound historical analysis would also have to include the local. Alas, in the absence of specific localized case studies it is here – in the local – that we are perhaps in the least familiar terrain.

As with other regions in the Horn of Africa, nation-based traditions of historiography and epistemologies in this area have usually perceived the space inhabited by Tigre-speaking societies as somewhat on the margins, on the very periphery of the dominant historical polities in the broader area, and perhaps especially so vis-à-vis the highland ‘Abyssinian’ polity in its various historic configurations. While stimulating studies on areas and communities of western and southern Ethiopia have been carried out

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, Bloomington (IN), U.P., 2009.

and published in the 1980s and since, little has been done in that respect in the northern parts of the Horn, including the Tigre area.<sup>4</sup>

Since at least the nineteenth century, modern nationalism and the idea of the nation-state have usually led us to think of frontiers as linear boundaries marking “natural” geographical, political and cultural dividing lines between peoples. Some historians, like Lucien Febvre, one of the founders of the *Annales* School, have dissented from such understandings and recognized frontier zones as culturally complex, dynamic and fluid spaces.<sup>5</sup> From its inception in the context of American history, the concept of “frontier” has also been subject to various definitions, interpretations and reinterpretations.<sup>6</sup> It is neither my intention nor my ambition to propose here a new definition of a potentially slippery concept open to such a broad gamut of interpretations and applications, and hence ambiguous as an analytical category. However, my fundamental understanding of the concept – and I would prefer to use “frontier space” or “frontier zone” – is of an area lying between several larger contending forces, or an area where the control of space is contested. The frontier space, which in its very basic usage may refer to a borderland region, usually develops into a vaguely defined yet culturally complex and dynamic zone of fluid political, economic, social and cultural interaction and exchange both among the inhabitants of that area and between them and the greater powers controlling adjacent areas.<sup>7</sup> To complicate things even further, we can also think that a large territorial expanse may comprise several overlapping frontier spaces

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<sup>4</sup> The reason is obviously not the lack of academic interest but the practical inaccessibility to the area for several decades. A pioneering study of the Bela Shangul in the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands is Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a No-Man's Land, Bela Shangul, Wallagga, Ethiopia (ca. 1800-1898)*, Napoli, IUO, 1981. See also the excellent collection of papers published in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, ed. by D.L. Donham & W. James, Cambridge, U.P., 1986. Donham's introduction to this volume is particularly insightful and effective. This is without overlooking the fact that other insightful research has been conducted on areas and societies of western, southern and eastern Ethiopia.

<sup>5</sup> Lucien Febvre, *A Geographic Introduction to History*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co. and New York, A.A. Knopf, 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York, Holt, 1920. See also Jack D. Forbes, “Frontiers in American History and the role of the frontier historian”, *Ethnohistory*, 15, 1968, pp. 203-235.

<sup>7</sup> In the context of the Horn of Africa I have found the two following texts useful for thinking about territory, boundary, and frontiers. Alessandro Triulzi, “Ethiopia: The Making of a Frontier Society”, in *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. by P. Kaarsholm & J. Hultin, Roskilde, Roskilde University, 1994, pp. 235-245 and Christopher Clapham, “Boundary and Territory in the Horn of Africa”, in *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities*, ed. by P. Nugent & A.I. Asiwaju, London, Pinter, 1996, pp. 237-250.

each forming territorial systems or units characterized by varying degrees of cohesiveness or coherence.

I would suggest that it may well be useful to think about the Tigre area as forming part of a broader frontier space or a meeting place of peoples in which geographic, economic, political and cultural borders were usually not clearly defined. This area, which comprises regions of the eastern Sudan as well as large stretches of modern Eritrea (in some sense all of it, including areas where Tigrinya is spoken), can be imagined – in its broadest sense - as an extensive and very approximate triangle, at its widest extending between Zula (south of Massawa), Tokar (south of Sawākin) and the areas of the modern western border between Eritrea and Sudan and inhabited mostly by what we can simplify as Beja and Tigre people.<sup>8</sup> Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, this area was a contested space and an arena of struggle especially between two northeast African polities with expansion-oriented cultures: the historic highland Abyssinian state and the Sudanese Funj Kingdom of Sinnār.<sup>9</sup> A third force, the Ottoman Empire, could be added, yet its presence on the Red Sea coastlands and its direct influence in the interior of this region was relatively minimal.<sup>10</sup>

It is revealing to observe that some of the Tigre communities and societies inhabiting this space have migrated and settled there either as a result of internal conflict within these same polities or resulting from the dynamics of contestation between the two in various periods, among other factors (economic, ecological, religious forces and pressures). For example, the Bet Asgāde had migrated to the Sahel region from Akkälä Guzay, perhaps in the sixteenth century, as Ethiopia was then ravaged during the so-called religious wars. At about the same period (or earlier) it also seems that the Bälāw, a ruling elite formed as a result of the fusion of Beja and Arabs in the Sawākin area, had begun migrating south, eventually settling in the Eritrean lowlands and attaining positions of power there. The formation of

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<sup>8</sup> My representation includes areas where Tigre is a language of contact. See the map in Saleh Mahmud Idris, "Tigre Dialects", *Journal of Eritrean Studies* 4, 2005 (1-2), pp. 45-73: p. 48. On the Beja see Andrew Paul, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, Cambridge, U.P., 1954; Gudrun Dahl & Anders Hjort-Af-Hornas, "Precolonial Beja: a Periphery at the Crossroads", *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15, 2006, 4, pp. 473-498 and Muḥammad Sāliḥ Ḍirār. *Ta'rīkh sharq al- Sūdān: mamālik al-Bajjah, qabā'iluha wa- ta'rīkhuha*, Cairo, Tawzī' Maktab Ibiks, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> On Sinnār see Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnar*, East Lansing (MA), African Studies Center, MSU, 1985. See also O.G.S Crawford, *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar, with a Geographical Account of the Middle Nile Region*, Gloucester, John Bellows Ltd, 1951. On the relationship between the two polities see also Merid Wolde Aregay and Sergew Hable Sellasie, "Sudanese-Ethiopian Relations before the Nineteenth Century", in *Sudan in Africa*, ed. by Yusuf Fadl Hasan, Khartoum, U.P., 1972, pp. 62-72.

<sup>10</sup> On the Ottoman presence in the area see Cengiz Orhonlu, *Habesh Eyaleti*, Istanbul, Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, 1974.

the Beni ‘Amer also seems to be rooted in its checkered relationship with the dominating, then declining, Funj kingdom. Although not a ‘Tigre’ group, but inhabiting the Tigre-area, the Bilin also trace their settlement in the area to migrations from Lasta in the northern Ethiopian highlands around the ninth or tenth century.<sup>11</sup> It would not be far-fetched to argue that the very formation of some such groups (their ethnogenesis, in some cases) is intimately related to their migration and settlement in the frontier zone. Inhabiting a space that was often subject to contestation between larger polities, Tigre societies vacillated between varying degrees of independence, autonomy and political dependence that were usually reflected in particular tribute relations, the granting of grazing rights and the control of structures of authority, especially the appointment of chiefs.

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In the long nineteenth century I identify two macro-level sets of concomitant processes that in some senses were causal and interconnected. The first level is characterized by an increasingly dynamic integration of the area into large-scale global commercial, religious and political structures and movements which culminated at the end of the nineteenth century with the imposition of European colonial rule. The second level is one of regional integration and incorporation through the weaving of intra-regional political, commercial, religious and social networks and alliances within and across the areas inhabited by Tigre-speaking communities. What follows is a tentative exploration of the dialectics of expansion of scale on the one hand, and integration, on the other, in a period pregnant with change. My particular analytical framework is conceptualized in a way that selectively focuses on and emphasizes religious, political and economic dynamics.

### **Expanding Interregional Connections**

The enlargement of scale was chiefly characterized by the expansion and amplification of interregional interactions and connections between the Tigre area with the Nilotic Sudan and Egypt, as well as with the Red Sea area (including the Arabian Peninsula) and the western Indian Ocean at large. It involved the integration of the Tigre space within the broader

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<sup>11</sup> I have written “historically not a ‘Tigre’ group”, and I should add that more recent multi-directional linguistic and cultural assimilations (Bilin-Tigre, Tigre-Bilin) propose a more complex picture. On the Bilin see Wolbert Smidt, “Bilin ethnography” and “Bilin history”, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2003, pp. 585-588.

area of northeast Africa and the Red Sea. Three sweeping historical processes epitomized it: the ramifications of the so-called 'Islamic revival' on the Tigre space, the Red Sea commercial boom and the gradual integration of the area into global economic structures, and the increasing intervention and encroachment of outside powers over regions inhabited by Tigre-speaking communities (or a renewed wave of imperialism). All three processes involved the intensified circulation of 'things', people and ideas, and integrated the Tigre space more closely into global historical trends during this period.

The so-called 'Islamic revival' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries originated in the Ḥijāz and manifested itself in the missionary activities of a broad gamut of reformers and renewers (revivalists) who sought to spread Islam among non-Muslims on the fringes of the Islamic world on the one hand, and, on the other, to deepen Islamic practices and piety among those Muslim societies whom they perceived as morally and religiously adrift. In northeast Africa and the Eritrean region in particular, the 'revival' was marked by the emergence of several new Sufi orders, most of which drew their inspiration from the teachings of the Moroccan mystic and Ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad ibn Idrīs (1749/50-1837).

The most important example in our context is the Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa*. Some evidence suggests that Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (1793-1852), the Ḥijāzī founder of the order, had conducted several missionary tours in the northern and eastern Sudan as well as Eritrea in the 1810s and 1820s.<sup>12</sup> He toured the western parts of modern Eritrea, where he was successful in initiating followers from among the Ḥalanqa, Sabdārat, Alghe-den, Beni 'Amer, Barya and Marya groups. He also conducted missionary tours in Saḥel and Sāmhar where he appointed *khalīfas* and *khalīfat al-khulafā'*<sup>13</sup>, and was thus able to incorporate them into a broad-based cross-regional organization covering a sweeping area in northeast Africa (especially the Sudan, but also Egypt) with important cross-Red Sea connections in the Arabian Peninsula (Ḥijāz and Yemen).

Such initiatory tours were pivotal in spurring a spectacular wave of religious change in which other religious formations and movements, holy families and holy men in the area had participated. All in all it induced the adoption of Islam by most Tigre-speaking communities in the middle dec-

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<sup>12</sup> On Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrghanī's missionary tours in the area see Aḥmad b. Idrīs b. Aḥmad al-Rubāṭābī *al-Ibāna al-nūriyya fī sha'n ṣāḥib al-ṭarīqa al-Khatmiyya*, ed. by M.I. Abu Salim, Beirut, Dār al-Jīl, 1991, pp. 66 ff. and my "Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrghanī" in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, III, Wiesbaden, 2007, pp. 1060-61. For the Khatmiyya in the Sudan see Ali Saleh Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, Evanston (WY), Northwestern U. P., 1994.

<sup>13</sup> *Khalīfa* is 'successor' in Arabic. It refers to the representative of the head of a Sufi-brotherhood in a particular region or country. *Khalīfat al-khulafā'* refers to the 'chief of the *khalīfas*'.



ades of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Islamic propagation activities generated amplified connections across the area, galvanized the circulation of learned men, and connected and integrated Muslim communities in the area with the wider Islamic world (through pilgrimage, travel for learning, exposure to Arabic literacy, etc.). Among the myriad questions that the phenomenon of religious change evokes - namely those concerned with cultural, social, political, and identity transformation - the issue of linguistic influences and the relationship between Tigre and Arabic is an important one. The matter is not without its particular complexities since both languages are Semitic, signifying that similarities are not necessarily due to borrowing, but may reflect more remote affinities in the course of the evolution of both languages.<sup>15</sup>

The second historical trend characterizing an enlargement of scale is the expansion of commercial activities and its impact on areas of western, northern and eastern Eritrea. With the Red Sea port of Massawa serving as a gate or outlet for the importation and exportation of commodities, the area has of course been connected to a complex web of long-distance trade routes and networks originating in northern and western Africa for a long time. Yet, what has been termed the ‘transportation revolution,’ namely the introduction of steamship navigation to the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean in the late 1820s and early 1830s, gradually transformed the commercial structures, roles and activities of all adjacent areas. It accelerated connections between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean and was characterized mainly by the amplified trans-regional flow of capital, labor, commercial expertise, and services. Intensified interconnections placed higher demands on producing areas in the Red Sea hinterlands and along the corridors through which commodities were transported towards port towns on the coasts.<sup>16</sup>

The Tigre area too was significantly affected and evidence clearly points to the redynamization of the Kassala- Keren-Massawa caravan trade corridor which animated a regional trade and exchange system that grew increasingly brisk with the general trends of commercialization in the wider area. Commercial intensification along the caravan trade route drew to it a wide variety of producers, porters and small-scale traders. Pastoralists

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<sup>14</sup> On Islam in the Eritrean area see Jonathan Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea” *Die Welt des Islams*, 45, 2005, 2, pp. 177-215. See also Muḥammad Sa‘īd Nāwād, *al-‘Urūba w-al-islām bi-l qarn al-īfrīqī*, Asmara, 1991 and Id., *‘Umq al-‘alāqāt al-‘arabiyya al-iritriyya*, Kuwait, Maṭba‘at al-Kuwayt, 2004. For perceptive first-hand descriptions of recently-converted Tigre-speaking communities see Sapeto, *Viaggio e missione cattolica fra i Mensa*, cit., pp. 145-262.

<sup>15</sup> See Lusini’s introduction to this volume and Wolf Leslau, *Arabic Loanwords in Ethiopian Semitic*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1990, pp. 141-157.

<sup>16</sup> On the global and regional dimensions of commercial transformation in the area in the nineteenth century, see Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, cit., ch. 2.

and agro-pastoralists traded hides, butter, milk, camels, cows and agricultural products in return for a wide variety of cloths and manufactured products from India, Egypt and beyond which were imported at Massawa. Commercialization also increased agricultural production in important ways. Products brought to regional markets along the trade route or directly to Massawa were increasingly destined for exportation, marking a shift from previous commercial patterns.

To summarize, the economic history of the area suggests that prior to mid-century, trade occurred largely within two discrete spheres of exchange: one involving luxury goods and another subsistence goods. Prestige goods were exchanged for goods in the same category and subsistence goods for other subsistence goods, thus constituting multi-centric economies. With the expansion of global, interregional and regional trade, the borders between the two spheres of exchange broke down and an increasing shift towards market trade took place. This came about largely through growing monetization and the appearance of new regional and local markets where subsistence goods could be exchanged in return for prestige goods. The gradual penetration of money relations from Massawa to the inland and the development of regional and local markets in its surroundings are emblematic of the transition to a more market-oriented economy. In other words, commercial expansion prompted the diversification and intensification of modes of production and exchange, leading to the *commodification* of the regional economy, which ultimately also transformed social relations among the inhabitants of the area. Commercial intensification generated the dynamic movement of people and ideas across the area. It goes without saying that the diffusion of Islam often went hand in hand with trade.

The third aspect of the expansion of interregional connections is grounded in the political realm and is highly germane to the economic developments discussed. Increasingly sought after by regional northeastern African and European imperialist powers, the Tigre frontier space (as well as other adjacent areas) grew increasingly integrated with northeastern African regional political spaces and ultimately European colonial empires. Both the decline of the Funj sultanate of Sinnār – culminating in its demise in 1821 – and the disintegration of centralized political authority of the highland Abyssinian state, known as the *Zāmānā māsafint* (1769-1855), had important effects on the areas that lay between them, including the Tigre space.

Egyptian imperialism under Muḥammad ‘Alī and the conquest of the Sudan in 1820 only propelled mounting imperialist interest and encroachment in northeast Africa at large. In 1840 Muḥammad ‘Alī’s army took Kassala. From there a progressive takeover of Tigre areas was set in motion. Here too, the spread of Islam is highly connected with Egyptian encroachments in the area, particularly through Egyptian association with the

Khatmiyya Sufi order. The three spheres – politics, the economy and religion – are intimately intertwined. The introduction of steamship navigation and the commercial revival in the Red Sea area also spurred European interest, roughly starting in the 1840s, but also before. Several Europeans, for example the Swiss Werner Munzinger, famously attempted to prompt European governments to take control over the Bogos area, by underlining the area’s promising economic potential. Such efforts eventually led to a pattern of checkered diplomatic and imperialist somewhat fantastic contestations between several European governments.<sup>17</sup>

Mounting struggles between Ethiopians and Egyptians over the lowlands and the northern escarpments put Tigre and Bilin societies under considerable pressure. In the later years of the *Zämänä mäsaḥint*, one writer illustrated the point by referring to the lowland nomad populations as those “flying-fish” who “are preyed on by all.”<sup>18</sup> From mid century onwards the newly reorganized Ethiopian polity to the south of the area emerged out of the *Zämänä mäsaḥint* and participated even more forcefully in struggles for power and dominance in the areas lying along its northernmost limits.

Clearly, I am touching on very complex historical processes involving a host of actors in metropolises and “on the spot” (government envoys, missionaries, traders). What is important to highlight is that throughout the nineteenth century, the competition between Egyptians, highland Habesha and Europeans had several effects on the area and its inhabitants. First, it put Tigre societies under considerable sets of pressures propelling the development of multifarious political allegiances and affiliations in these communities’ pursuit of security and livelihood. Second, it resulted in the crystallization or rigidification of notions of sovereignty and the gradual sharpening of political borders which were much more flexible, interconnected and porous before the mid nineteenth century. It culminated with the European demarcation of colonial borders towards the end of the nineteenth century.

To conclude this section, the three macro-level tendencies generated intensified migration and circulation, greater mobility and greater exposure to other areas, products, peoples and ideas which circulated more dynamically across northeast Africa and the Red Sea area. Yet, paradoxically, the imposition of colonial rule in the end of the nineteenth century restricted mobility and confined Tigre societies – at least formally – within the

<sup>17</sup> On relevant dimensions of what famously became the “Bogos question” see Wolbert Smidt, “Discussing ethnohistory: The Blin between periphery and international politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” *Chroniques Yéménites*, 13, 2006, pp. 131-144.

<sup>18</sup> Consul Plowden to the Earl of Clarendon (No. 184), Massowah, July 9, 1854. Report. *Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers. Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868* (London, 1868), 124. See also Michael Ghaber, *The Blin of Boghos*, Baghdad, Sarafian, 1993, pp. 12-22.

boundaries of Italian Eritrea. Cross-border trade, smuggling and population movement continued and posed a challenge to the colonial authorities both in Italian Eritrea and British Sudan. The episode which epitomizes this in the most vivid terms is the famous “Habab defection” in January 1895, when almost the entire group left northwestern Eritrea and crossed into the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan as an act of protest against Italian authoritarianism and in order to escape from the heavy taxation imposed by the Italian colonial government. After several weeks in the Sudan most crossed back into Eritrea.<sup>19</sup>

### **Regional Integration and Incorporation**

The second level of large-scale trends is one of regional integration and incorporation. The emphasis here is the laying out of social, political, commercial, and (Muslim) religious networks, relationships and alliances which contributed to the molding of an interconnected space, a *region* or *meta-region*, in areas of eastern, northern and western Eritrea. Here again, I briefly discuss several processes that follow the previous categories, namely the role of Islam, economic dimensions and political aspects. I also suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century, as European colonial powers – chiefly Italy – partitioned the region, the same networks and connections came under considerable pressures that undermined their very foundations.

The activities of Sufi orders and holy families in the spectacular wave of conversion of Tigre-speaking peoples characterized the creation of what can be termed an ‘Islamic space’ in areas of western, northern and eastern Eritrea. I have already noted the central role of the Khatmiyya in conversion, in rooting Islamic practices among societies of the area and in creating both cross-regional and intra-regional networks of representatives (*khulafāʾ*) of the order. In some ways religious change in the middle decades of the nineteenth century represents quite neatly the formation of a sort of ‘Muslim arch’ in the eastern and western lowlands as well as the northern appendages of the plateau. It materialized a *boundary* on one level, even though other factors which may be understood as characteristic to a frontier situation (the multiplicity of political loyalties and its relationship to religious allegiances), also bred divisions, even within groups and between groups in the area (for example the Bilin and Mänsa‘, both of whom are divided in religious affiliation between Muslims and Christians).

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<sup>19</sup> Marco Lenci, “Gli Habab d’Eritrea e il governato di Ferdinando Martini: dalla defezione alla sottomissione”, *Africa*, 54, 1999, 3, pp. 349-378.

The Khatmiyya was not alone in the diffusion of Islam. Tigre holy families and clans such as the ‘Ad Shaykh, ‘Ad Darqī, ‘Ad Mu‘allim and others also transmitted Islamic education and religious expertise within essentially recently-converted Tigre-speaking societies. Some of these clans operated in close collaboration with the powerful Hergigo-based Nā’ib family. One of the holy families whose territorial establishment in the Tigre space exemplifies neatly regional incorporation and the creation of an ‘Islamic space’ is the ‘Ad Shaykh.<sup>20</sup> Claiming a founding ancestor who had reached the Eritrean area from the Ḥijāz, the ‘Ad Shaykh family split at some point, possibly in the eighteenth century, and began to spread throughout the western, northern and eastern regions of the Eritrean lowlands. Several of the founding ancestor’s sons settled in the ‘Ansāba and Barka valleys while others stayed in the Saḥel, and others migrated to the north, as far as Tokar in the Sudan. The most influential branch settled in Sāmhar where it established its center in Emberemi. Territorial dispersal broadened the family’s influence and networks, and considerably increased its access to resources.

The role of holy families and clans also led to the proliferation of holy men (*awliyā’*) across the Tigre area. One of the best examples is the ‘Ad Shaykh holy man *shaykh* Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Amīn from Emberemi who could be counted among the most influential religious figures of the coastal region from the 1840s to his death in 1877. Local and regional holy men attracted followers from a wide region cutting across localities. After their death, yearly *ziyāras/ḥawliyyas* developed around their tombs and shrines bringing together people from a broad region of Tigre (and also Saho) speaking areas. Holy men’s tombs appealed to people since it was common belief that the soul of a saint lingers around the tomb, and that the saint’s *baraka* - even after death - had the power to aid people seeking saintly intervention through prayers, the performing of rituals and offerings. *Ziyāras* and *ḥawliyyas* were wide-ranging and instrumental in creating and crystallizing spaces and circuits of religious and social confluence among Muslims chiefly in the Tigre region and also beyond it.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the same ‘Islamic space’ whose development I have outlined, came under momentous pressures as a result of the Mahdiyya revolt in the Sudan beginning in the early 1880s. The spillover of the Mahdiyya into Eritrea constituted a divisive factor for Tigre communities. Indeed, the Muslim groups inhabiting the region between Kassala and Massawa found them-

<sup>20</sup> For more detail on the ‘Ad Shaykh see Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, cit., ch. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Shaykh* Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Amīn’s *ḥawliyya* is performed in Emberemi on 13 Ṣafar. Other holy men whose importance was projected on a regional scale were, for example, the Khatmi leader *sayyid* Hāshim al-Mīrghanī (d. 1901, *ḥawliyya* on 2 Jumāda II in Hetumlo), the Qādirī holy man *shaykh* Aḥmad al-Najāsh (d. 1872 in Hetumlo) and many others, throughout the area, in Af’abāt, Keren and in other localities. See more on pilgrimages in Miran, cit., *Red Sea Citizens*, ch. 4.

selves in a delicate situation, increasingly divided and caught in between pro-Mahdist and anti-Mahdist positions and loyalties. The struggle between these two positions was mirrored in competition and antagonism between the Khatmiyya and the 'Ad Shaykh, the former allied with the Egyptians and later the Italians, while elements of the 'Ad Shaykh were identified with the Mahdists. Early Italian colonial 'practice' in this context is also revealing. In attempting to undermine the authority of the 'Ad Shaykh family – whose influence across the broader area (and especially among the Habab and the Beni 'Amer) was ever growing – Governor Ferdinando Martini (in office 1897-1907) devised a number of measures. In 1903 he deliberately severed the group and its structures of authority by placing the Barka and Sahel/Sāmhar branches under distinct *commisariati*; in 1904-5 he also ended their exemption from tribute. Martini's strategy aimed at empowering the Khatmiyya so it would exercise its control over Tigre communities instead of the 'Ad Shaykh which it sought to weaken.

As for economic factors that promoted regional cohesion and incorporation on the basis of what I have already outlined, one thinks of the establishment and development of market towns and regional markets located on the re-dynamized caravan trade routes, as well as the organization of specialized and complementary regional transportation networks. For example, it appears that a specific clan of the 'Ad Tāmāryam as well as Habab cameleers provided transportation services between Massawa, Keren and the Barka region. The older system of complementary modes of production – pastoralism, agro-pastoralism and farming, in addition to a growing number of trading communities or individuals – adjusted to the new exportation-oriented regional economic configuration.

An important aspect of economic determinants as integrating factors was the role and development of the port of Massawa as a regional capital which drew to it a wide variety of producers, traders and transporters. Massawa's rise to its position as a major Red Sea hub crystallized and cemented even further its hinterlands. The port's role as the focal point for economic and political, but also social, religious and cultural activities and influence throughout the region was further enhanced. Keren too grew to be a relatively important urban centre, whose markets served both its area and the broader regional economic system. Yet it could be argued that growing economic diversification, commercialization, and monetization also bred new kinds of inequalities and opportunities for Tigre communities. Moreover, the imposition of colonial rule and the demarcation of boundaries at the end of the nineteenth century hindered the smooth and brisk flow of commerce across the wider region.

The last aspect of regional incorporation concerns the political sphere. It highlights the central role of the Hergigo-based Nā'ibs in forming and cementing regional networks and circuits and imposing a hegemonic order

on an area inhabited chiefly by Tigre and Saho-speaking communities. The Nā'ib family traced its presence in the Sāmhar to several Bälāw families who had migrated from the eastern Sudan into Eritrea around the fifteenth century. The family developed into a potent local-regional dynasty in the coastal and lowland areas of Eritrea. At some point after having occupied Massawa in 1557, the Ottomans devolved power to the dynasty by appointing its chief as their *nā'ib*, or 'deputy'. In contrast with what I have conceptualized as the Islamic and economic factors, which are essentially nineteenth-century phenomena, the heyday of the Nā'ibs goes back to at least the early to middle decades of the eighteenth century. The conjunction of the weakening of the Funj polity, the state of political instability in the central and northern highlands, and the decline of Ottoman interest in their province of *Habesh* provided a sort of power vacuum and fertile ground for the expansion and consolidation of Nā'ib dominance in regions of eastern, northern and, to some degree, western Eritrea.<sup>22</sup>

Under Ottoman indirect rule, the authority of the Nā'ibs as regional power brokers grew significantly and in the second half of the eighteenth century they were the most powerful rulers in a vast area of modern Eritrea. At the peak of their power they extended their hegemony over the totality of Tigre-speaking pastoral and agro-pastoral populations in the regions of Sāmhar, Saḥel, and the northern coasts. The Nā'ibs and their associates controlled valuable grazing lands, caravan stations and routes, the means of transportation, strategic market villages and centers of commercial exchange in Massawa's orbit (eg. 'Aylät, 'Asus, Gumhot). They also collected tribute from those societies coming under their influence and were heavily involved in "tribal" politics by investing chiefs, administering justice and forging marriage alliances. They operated energetically in spreading Islam among mostly Tigre-speaking communities through their alliances with several holy families such as the 'Ad Shaykh, the 'Ad Mua'llim and the 'Ad Darqī.

Among several outcomes, the methods and strategies by which the Nā'ibs have established and developed their control laid down the infrastructure of networks, alliances and spheres of influence that gravitated towards Massawa as the chief urban center in that region. The role of the Nā'ibs in the region molded political, commercial, social and religious networks and fields of action which contributed directly to the shaping of an interconnected and interrelated space in eastern and northern Eritrea. The Nā'ibs maintained their autonomy under Ottoman indirect control until the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, during

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<sup>22</sup> On the role of the *nā'ibs* in the region see my "Power without Pashas: the Anatomy of *Na'ib* Autonomy in Ottoman Eritrea (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c.)", *Eritrean Studies Review* 5, 2007, 1, pp. 33-88. See much information on the *nā'ibs* in Munzinger, *Studi sull'Africa Orientale*, cit. (translation of *Ostafrikanische Studien*, cit.).

the 1840s and 1850s, they found themselves in the midst of escalating power struggles between Ottomans, Egyptians and northern Habesha highlanders, amounting to a sort of ‘Scramble for the Coasts’. These trials of power culminated in the establishment of direct Egyptian administration in Massawa and the coastlands (1865-1885) – followed by the advent of Italian colonialism (since 1885). They heavily eroded the power of the Nā’ibs and diminished their political influence. Like with the Mahdiyya, which undermined notions of regional cohesiveness established up to the 1880s, the gradual erosion of Nā’ib dominance by external imperialist powers also thwarted structures and patterns of regional integrity formerly laid down.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Dialectics of a Frontier Space**

By way of conclusion I would like to cautiously advance several points. When thinking of the Tigre area as a frontier space we can identify a marked transition from one regional ‘order’ to another during the long nineteenth century. The ‘old’ order, characterized by the regional power balance between the Funj kingdom and Ethiopia, and its ramifications for adjacent areas, significantly waned and crumbled in the latter half of the eighteenth century, as Sinnār was weakened by internal social and political challenges (the rise of a literate merchant class and a religious elite who challenged the monarchy) and as Ethiopia entered the *Zāmānā māsaḥint*. This resulted, I would further suggest, in a period roughly extending between the later middle decades of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth (approximately 1760s-1840s) during which the Tigre space had been subject to a lesser degree of externally-driven pressures. Benefiting from the power vacuum created by the declining regional powers (including wavering Ottoman ambitions or capabilities in the region), it is precisely during this period that the Nā’ibs were at their most powerful. This transitory period witnessed the formation of political, economic and religious trends that promoted some degree of regional integration, cohesiveness and continuities across the Tigre area.

Yet from mid-century a new order was set in motion. A renewed imperialist drive brought, first, the Egyptians, then Europeans in a gradual process of territorial conquest in northeast Africa. A revitalized and centralized Ethiopia also participated in the ‘scramble’ and the Mahdiyya in the Sudan too shaped the imperialist dispositions of all concerned actors and their inter-relationships. All in all, these trends exerted pressures on Tigre-speaking communities, generating a variety of responses which increasingly challenged and divided them. The establishment of Italian colonial rule in the final decades of the century marked the crystallizing point



of the ‘new’ order and the territorial confinement of the Tigre within the boundaries of a colonial state, Italian Eritrea.

A second set of concluding remarks stems from some of the issues that I have raised, but focuses the picture on the local-regional level. The comments are made especially with an eye towards future research, particularly on those local aspects and dynamics that are so lacking in the current state of our knowledge. How exactly, in other words, has the “big history” outlined in broad brush strokes, played out in specific local settings? What were the effects on local communities, and in what ways did these communities respond and adapt to macro-level transformation? It is clear that the very position of these groups in between large polities or forces entailed special kinds of challenges of which the pursuit of security is probably the most important, followed by the ability to produce for their livelihood. Vulnerability and various pressures meant that the options, choices and opportunities provided by different political and religious allegiances and loyalties were instrumental in pursuing existential needs. I would further argue that in some cases communities could operate within a narrow margin of choice for action largely imposed by external constraints.

A point that deserves further research and reflection is the important role of amplified circulation and the movement of people, or mobility both across the Tigre area as well as across the broader region of northeast Africa and the Red Sea area. To what extent has mobility influenced questions of language change, as well as cultural, ethnicity, and identity formation? How can we think about the development of different Tigre dialects/variants and the evolution of Tigre-Saho, Tigre-Beja and Tigre-Tigrinya interactions and zones of contact in light of intensive inter-regional and intra-regional mobility in the long nineteenth century? It is clear that people moved across linguistic spheres, sometimes settling permanently in new locations, new market towns and villages and gradually either adopted Tigre as their language or used it as a second language. A case in point is the movement of Saho speakers from the Zula area and the eastern escarpments to Tigre areas in central Sāmhar (Assus, Zaga, etc). Epitomizing this is the holy clan of Bayt Shaykh Maḥmud, originally from Zula and Saho-speaking, but through its alliance with the Nā’ibs, increasingly active and influential in the Sāmhar and other Tigre areas, where many of its members have settled. What can such examples and others along the Tigre-Beja and Tigre-Tigrinya seam lines teach us about the Tigre area as a zone of cultural and linguistic contact? Which historical circumstances favored the spread of Tigre language and culture? I contend that the ‘window’ opened between the two supra-regional ‘orders’ and that was characterized by the hegemony of the Nā’ibs, may represent one such period.

Another theme is the question of religious change. What are the reasons accounting for the widespread success of Islamic diffusion among Tigre societies in the space of several decades? Did conversion to Islam represent the quest for a “supra-tribal” sense of identity in the lack of the development of a specifically Tigre ethnic consciousness? The question is intimately connected with the ‘enlargement of scale’. In that context Islam could offer a universal sense of attachment to Tigre communities. And on a more ‘cultural’ level, in what ways have Tigre communities appropriated Muslim beliefs and practices and accommodated them with their own cultural systems and myths? An interesting point of departure for future research about the relationship between the appropriation of Islam and notions of Tigre identity is the ‘Islamization’ of various traditions of origin and clan genealogies following conversions. Many such traditions tell of distant founders coming from the Arabian Peninsula in past centuries (what some – like Trimingham – have referred to as “fictitious” lineages and genealogies).<sup>23</sup> In what ways do the features of these stories mirror nineteenth century realities or perceptions? Too little is known about the relationship between Islamization and the transformation of Tigre social and political structures and institutions. Most importantly, perhaps, what was the precise impact of the appropriation of Islam on the “ruling/master” caste (*shemagalle*) and the “serf caste” (*tegre*) and the relationship between the two?

Religious change begs the question of the impact it had on language change, literacy, education and the formation of religious specialists. I have hinted at the political instrumentality of religious conversion in a frontier situation. An interesting phenomenon in that respect is the question of Sufi affiliation and the switching from one *ṭarīqa* (brotherhood) to another in response to particular political interests. For example, in early Italian Eritrea the ‘Ad Tāmāryam, the ‘Ad Tākles, and the Marya seem to have switched affiliation from the Qādiriyya (vehicled by the allegedly “pro-Mahdist” ‘Ad Shaykh, which had been instrumental in converting these same groups) to the “anti-Mahdist” Khatmiyya with which the Italian authorities attempted to develop relations of cooperation.<sup>24</sup> The politicization of religion in the context of the Mahdiyya revolt deeply affected Tigre communities as they were increasingly caught and divided (also internally) between pro-Mahdist and anti-Mahdist positions and loyalties.

A last point comes back to the conceptualization of the Tigre area as a ‘frontier space’ and more specifically its articulation to local, regional and imperial politics since the late nineteenth century. Tigre-speaking political

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<sup>23</sup> Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>24</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato, *Ministero dell’Africa Italiana*, b. 1066, Allegato no. 9, ‘Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren’, by Amerio Liberati, Cheren, July 1928, pp. 26-7, 48.

elites adopted different relationships with the powers contesting for dominance in the region. This may be considered as one defining factor of a frontier zone - the possibility to choose different political affiliations based on constraints, self-interest, local and regional affiliations and loyalties and so forth. I would argue that on a broader, regional scale these same political dynamics weakened and divided the inhabitants of the region in the face of external challenges in the second half of the nineteenth century. Divisions and fragmentation in this context might also have hindered the formation of a “supra-tribal” sense of group cohesiveness, or ‘Tigre ethnicity’ for political solidarity. Nevertheless, politics were multifaceted and protean, and one could also ask whether some communities could capitalize on opportunities and emerge strengthened as a result of the role they played in the new regional commercial, Islamic and political dynamics. In what ways has that influenced political allegiances and orientations in the colonial period? Deeper scrutiny of the relationship between Tigre groups and the Italian colonial authorities would be important in unveiling the different *constraints*, *options*, *possibilities* and *opportunities* that local leaders had when coming to deal with colonial administrations. Such research might also shed fresh light on aspects of subsequent nationalist politics, for example the deeper social and ideological roots of parties such as the Muslim League.