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**THE DECADENCE OF THE BET-'ASGÄDÄ ARISTOCRATIC SYSTEM AND
THE EMANCIPATION OF THE TəGRÄ
(1890-1948)**

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List of Abbreviations

SCAO	Senior Civil Affairs Officer
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
RICE	Research and Information Center of Eritrea
BMA	British Military Administration
RDC	Research and Documentation Center
CA	Chief Administrator

Important Təgrä Terminologies

Təgrä	Refers to linguistic group and subjected class.
Šumaglä	Originally a Təgrña word referring to elders, but in the aristocratic relationship the word was representing to the ruling class.
Nägarit	A drum used as a sign of power and beaten to notify war and other campaigns.
Käntibay	Title of the chief of the aristocratic class.
Dəgä	A residential camp of the ruling class including the Käntibay.
Rora	A Təgrä term for a mountain.
Mələç	A name for the clusters of camps of the Təgrä.
‘Aylät	Basic social organization of the Təgrä equivalent to family.
Fära‘ə	A social organization consisting group of families/‘Aylät descended from the same father.
‘Ad	A group of families equivalent to Fära‘ə
azan	A combination of ‘Ad/ Fära‘ə
Zareba	A compound made of a thorny acacia containing the residence for the people and the livestock. It was
Qäbila	Originally Arab word equivalent to a clan.

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When I begun to work on this dissertation, I discovered that the issue of Təgrä-Šəmaglä aristocratic relationship especially the Bet-ʾAsgädä was plainly mentioned in the published literatures. The overshadowing of the subject seemed to have been due to the lack of relevant sources on the area. I realized the truth was to the reverse when I freely accessed the mass of archival and documentary collections preserved both in the RDC head office and Tiravolo. Hence, I am grateful to both Zemhret Yohannes and Azieb Tewolde for their support and confidence. Luca Puddu played vital role in the very beginning of this study. He had shown much interest on the topic and guided me to apply for this program, so I express my heartfelt gratitude. I am also thankful to RDC personnel; Salhadin Ali, Yusuf Ahmed, Belay Araya (wedi keshi) and his secretary Hadas Fanuel and others for their assistance during my investigation. my work experience in RDC was an advantage and the success of this research was the outcome of the constant support of the institution. I would like to acknowledge and show appreciation to the Scuola di Dottorato di Ateneo (SDA), University of Macerata for funding my study. The SDA also was generous to funding my research and fieldwork in Eritrea.

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Abstract

For centuries the northern highlands of Eritrea was home to immigrant groups of different origin. The sixteenth century resettlement of the family of B'əmnät (ብእምነት), later to be known as the Bet-'Asgädä (ቤት ኣስገደ) after one of his son's migration to Sahəl (ሳሕል). They departed from 'Adi-Nəfas (ዓዲ ንፋስ), of Ḥamasen (ሓማሴን) together with numerous families and people of various professions and settled in the highlands of the Sahəl.¹ Owing to the geography and the given climate, the various ancient residents of the Sahəl area were leading a pastoral life. Seasonally moving from highland to the coastal plains in the east and to the western lowlands as far as parts of present day Sudan. The smallness and mobile nature of the nomadic social organization had made the clans victims of any organized warring forces. The B'əmnät family's power struggle and sedentary economy back home gave them relative warrior and organizational superiority over the host herding Təgrä (ትግረ) clans. At no time, the Bet-'Asgädä imposed themselves as lords over the land and people of the region with responsibility of defending any raids and grazing rights, in return the subjects offer dues and services. Such provision of dues and services made the lords also known as Šumaglä (ሹማግለ) to abandon their farming tradition and entirely dependent on the Təgrä gifts.

The well established Təgrä-Šumaglä aristocracy of the Bet-'Asgädä continued with predominant nomadic economy. Such binary classification and relationship between the landlords and herders was almost a unique experience in its kind than the conventional feudal practices until it finally collapsed in the late 1940s. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to discover the weakening and decline of the aristocratic relationship. In the face of varying political dynamism of the region, the aristocratic order endured to last to the twentieth century. Numerous political forces and religious movements got around and settled in the region of Bet-'Asgädä, numerous regional empires and viceroys subjected the region but with no fundamental shift in the nature of the aristocratic bond.

Hence, this thesis is striving to unpack, why the aristocratic demise that heralded the emancipation of the Təgrä took place in the British period than before or after? Finally, the thesis findings argued that, similar to the weak and unorganized nature of the Təgrä that put into

¹ Sahəl (ሳሕል) is the northern part of Eritrea. It borders with the Sudan and the Red Sea, to the north west and east respectively. The Northern Highlands or the Bet-'Asgädä territory under investigation is located with in this region.

subjection, their emancipation was achieved thanks to the elements that caused for the inevitable decadence of the aristocratic system. These were including; the formal and informal capitalist intervention of Italian colonial system, the strong resistance and unity of the Təgrä under the guidance of conscious and educated individuals and the good will of the British Administration. As a historical investigation, this work will follow the chronological developments to demonstrate a relative veracity of explanation and reconstruction of the process of the decline Bet-'Asgädä aristocracy.

Introduction

Since the seventeenth century, the western lowlands and northern highlands of Eritrea experienced a Təgrä-Šumaglā based aristocratic social relationship. The system was characteristically subjecting the Təgrä people equivalent to the feudal serfs; demean and lowered them as sub-humans and made to serve the numerically few land owning Šumaglā masters. The aristocratic arrangement being the fundamental relationship was practiced not only in the Bet-’Asgädä of Sahəl but also in the various clans occupying the western lowlands including; the Bāni ‘Amär (በኒ ዓመር) bordering the Sudan, the Bilen (ቢሌን) in the central part of the lowland known as the Bogos (በጎስ) area, the Marya (ማርያ), Mānsa‘ə (መንሳዕ), Bet ġukə (ቤት ጁክ), ‘Ad-Šākə (ዓድ ሹክ) etc of the Sahəl and Sāmhar (ሰምሃር) regions. Despite the differences in geography and origin of the lords, the practice was comparably similar. The lords with Təgrña (ትግርኛ) language and Orthodox Christian background from Ḥamasen subordinated the native Təgrä peoples of Sahəl who used to creed in Islam for around three hundred years. The main focus of this research is on the gradual weakening and consequential decline of the aristocratic system under the Bet-’Asgädä of Sahəl.

Despite some modifications on the extreme cases of exploitation, the aristocratic system was actively maintained during the Italian colonial period. However, the beginning of the Second World War brought about change. After two years of the start of the war in April 1941, the Italians lost Eritrea, and the colony fell under the British control. As the Italians were indifferent to the condition of the Təgrä, the coming of the new force was a fortunate occasion. Therefore, they instantly demanded the administration to end the appallingly notorious and outmoded system. Thus, the 1940s was a watershed and an optimistic decade when the oppressed Təgrä of the western lowlands and the northern highlands hoped to liberate from their centuries of aristocratic bondage. During the previous colonial administration, the Italians were not interested in emancipating the Təgrä as the aristocracy was a necessary for its administrative convenience. However, the Italian period (1890-1941) was a time when the Təgrä exposed to the colonial capitalist intervention and started to question and protest against the aristocratic bondage.

Owing to the British liberal and democratic tradition at home and the war time pamphlets promising independence and liberty, the Təgrä anticipated British Military Administration (BMA) to deliver their liberty. However, managing social revolution was beyond British mandate

and decided to maintain the status quo. Despite the indifference of the administration, the persistent and sometimes violent emancipator appeal became a thorny issue in the British day to day governance of the country. From the very beginning the BMA decision was to postpone the case and to be managed by the Eritrean government expected to be set up by the end of the war. However, in the mid of 1940s the Təgrä intensively revolted and compelled the British to change their policy. The British considered the Təgrä demands and finally supported them in winning their liberty. This study is, therefore focused on the weakening and terminal decline of the Bet-ʾAsgädä aristocratic order. Hence, the core issue of this study is extending from early periods of Italian colonial occupation to the later parts of the 1940s. Based on the findings, the first official reforms or mitigation on the aristocratic practices took place in the early days of the Italian colonial administration. As explained in chapter six (pp 206-207), in 1890 *Tenente Persico*, the newly assigned residente of Ḥabab and Vittorio Fioccardi, the regional commissioner of Kärän in early Italian period reported that, they discovered some duties the lords enforced up on their Təgrä were intolerable and nullified it immediately. Therefore, this is the reason why I considered these measure as a time when the weakening of the aristocratic order and the extenuation of the Təgrä subjection started and used as an outset in the heading.

In presenting this study, I felt it is essential to go some centuries back in time so as to reflect the historical background and give a clear picture on how and what condition the aristocratic system was developed, the characters it had etc. For this purpose, I divided the thesis into three thematic sections; the origin, consolidation and demise of the aristocratic system, where the latter theme holds the core issue of the study and answers for the main research question. Thus, this research is an attempt to reconstruct the history of the social transformation that was fundamental in the 20th century social and political history of Eritrea. The following section discusses about the research problem, main research questions, elemental sources used, methodology applied and conceptual framework of the research and presentation of the organization of the chapters.

Research Problem

This research is aimed to study the diachrony (change over time) of the aristocratic system of the Bet-ʾAsgädä. It examines two episodes of social transformation by the people of the Sahel region. These are the imposition of aristocratic order and the emancipation of the subjects. More

specifically, the focus is on the struggle of the subjects and the resulting decline of the aristocratic system of Bet-'Asgädä. The aristocratic system was performed for centuries which had a debilitating effect on the subjected section of the society. In dealing with this study, three periods of time the aristocratic system run through will be examined, notably (a) The precolonial period which covers the period before the coming of the Italian colonial system, which gives a historical background. This period of time covers the origin and development of the aristocratic system. (b) The colonial period, this category covers the Italian colonial period. During which the aristocratic system shows some improvements through reforms on the exploitative nature of the system. (c) The British Military Administration period, during which the Italians left the colony and the British set up caretaker administration. Due to the relative liberty and growing consciousness they acquired, the serfs strongly protested and loudly demanded for their emancipation. With increasing defiance and protests of the Təgrä, the administration was compelled to avow their cries and won over their liberty.

Aristocratic order was an institutionalized mode of production and social organization in the western lowlands and northern highlands of Eritrea; therefore geographically it covers wide area and it affected the subjected groups so deeply. However, it is among the least studied topics of Eritrean history and the emancipation movement with its subsequent events is one of interesting events of the mid 20th century. Although, there are no research works dedicated to inquire the trajectories of aristocratic system and the emancipation movement, but owing to the significance of the topic in the political history of Eritrea, it is almost uncommon to see books and other academic research works without saying something on this area. In the post Second World War politics, the history of political participation of the Muslim parts of Eritrean community through the Muslim League Party was associated with the serf emancipation movement. And the narration in the subsequent nationalist political developments including the armed struggle will not have complete picture without considerable understanding of this subject. Hence, the absence of broader studies on the aristocratic system can be considered as a gap in Eritrean history. Therefore, this study raises the stimulus and responsibility of undertaking examination on the issue and play once part in filling the missed part of the national history.

Research Question

Viewing from the historical point of view, the emancipation movement took place in the 1940s, when Eritrea was experiencing fundamental social, political and economic transformations. However, in order to have a better understanding on the issue, this thesis is attempting to study from the origin to the demise of aristocratic order in the Bet-ʾAsgädä. Consequently, the main research question this study seeks to investigate will be; why it collapsed in the 1940s? And why not the emancipation took place in the years before or after this specific period of time? However, to come up with complete picture of the main research question, I feel it is relevant to inquire the sources of the aspiration of emancipation among the Təgrä serfs. Thus it is vital to add at least two sub questions; why and how could the desire and initiative of emancipation developed from within the serfs themselves? And what was the role or advantage of the post Second World War developments for the Təgrä towards the achievement of their freedom?

This study also presents the historical explanation of the Təgrä-Šumaglā aristocratic system, thus examining the chronological order of proceeding developments is vital. The various occupying and colonial powers during their respective periods implemented various policies in their intent to transform the preexisting indigenous social order, thus reviewing these policies is vital in order to historically understand the dynamics of the Təgrä emancipation movement. More specifically the focus of the main research question is to discover the development of the Təgrä's own initiatives from within and the post war developments in the country that lay the favorable condition to instigate the revolt. Thus, it needs particularly to investigate the policies applied and opportunities opened by the British Military Administration throughout the decade and its impact in facilitating the emancipation.

As the emancipation granted freedom to almost ninety percent of the Təgrä ethnic from their centuries of bondage, it would have inevitable impact in socioeconomic and political situation of the then Eritrea. Therefore, the product of this study is expected to contribute in the historiography of Eritrean studies and toward a better understanding of the social transformation in terms of the shift from subordination to a more equal status and enlighten the consequential events including the partisan party politics of the 1940s and the birth of the armed struggle.

Methodology and Sources

As a historical research, this study is solely attempting to reconstruct the aristocratic past in the Bet-'Asgädä clan. The study is historical in nature, with more emphasis on the social and economic aspects, thus tends to follow a time series or chronological order of events in the case under investigation. In producing this study, qualitative method of data collection tactics is employed. The sources are mainly primary. Archival data supplemented with interviews, published and unpublished materials from library, internet and various research institutions. The approach in this study will narrow into a case-oriented and presenting it in a case specific method. The case-study leaning approach will emphasize on the history of the Təgrä-Šumaglā relationship in the Bet-'Asgädä in general and specific emphasis will be on the emancipation process in the 'Ad-Täkles (ዓ.ድ ተኸሌስ) clan.

The materials for this study have been gathered from a variety of sources. It comprised a combination of both primary and secondary sources of books, archives, journals, biographies, letters, interviews etc. Primary sources are the most essential materials in historical studies. It used as evidence in developing and building an argument and to support interpretation. The written primary source materials used in this research are mainly of two origins that are entirely available in the Research and Documentation Center (RDC)² in Asmara. These are; the British Period administrative archival materials and the unpublished documentary collection produced by Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1983. Generally, the primary sources referenced in this study were produced by ethnographers, colonial officers, Italian Colonial Government, British Military Administration, Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and independent authors that giving emphasis on the condition of the aristocratic system of the Təgrä-Šumaglā in general and the process of the struggle for emancipation in particular. For that reason, the materials are written in Italian, English, Təgrəña (ትግርኛ) and Arabic languages reflecting the political condition of the time periods. As Barbara W. Tuchman said in her book, *Practicing History*;

² It is the main custodian of Eritrean documentary collection, acting as a *de facto* national records office and national library. It was established as Research and Information Center of Eritrea (RICE) in mid 1970s, in Rome, Italy. Eritrean nationalists supporting the EPLF initiated it as part of the efforts for the war of independence. Since then, the center gathered the documents both from abroad and the field through interview, conferences, private donations etc. Hence, RDC is rich in data including archival documents, published materials, photographs, audio-visual, cartography etc dealing with pre-colonial, colonial, federal, Ethiopian and post-independence documents in various languages. It also introduced modern innovations and upgraded its records management through digitizing and microfilming of its documentation.

Selected Essays; the most essential of all primary source are the unpublished material: personal correspondence and diaries or the reports, orders, and messages in governmental archives etc.³ Hence, this thesis has richly utilized such primary sources in all parts, particularly in the final chapter.

Basically the primary sources chiefly used are the archival, documentary and interviews that I conducted in Eritrea. During my first research trip extending from June to October of 2019, I devoted most of my time in Research and Documentation Center in Asmara. There, I had the privilege of full access, thus I conducted an exhaustive archival and documentary examination.⁴ The primary materials employed in this study, especially in relation to the final chapter are the firsthand accounts of the British Military Administration (BMA) in Eritrea. The archives brought the Təgrä-Šumaglā circumstances of the 1940s into live. These are including the personal and administrative correspondences and reports, diaries, journals, biographies, interviews and other government documents. The essence of these archival collections is mainly administrative. In relation to this research, the archives are consists of reports on the progress of Təgrä protests, and the grievances from Bet-'Asgädä, land based claims and conflicts, court cases and penalties, reports on the exile of Təgrä protesters, and various proposals, opinions and exchange of ideas among British Administration's governing officers in different levels.

The archive also illustrates the British policy on the Təgrä-Šumaglā disputes, the process of emancipation, the final implementation and procedures of the reorganization of Təgrä clans etc. One of the main authors of the documents was G.K.N Trevaskis who was serving as Political Officer in Kärän division of the time and seemingly an architect of the *modus operandi* of the official termination of the Təgrä-Šumaglā aristocracy. His works includes, but not only, the ethnographic and cultural details of the clans, administrative correspondences with his superior officials in 'Asmära (አስመራ), comments on the settlement of the cause, the course of action of the emancipation, the reorganization of new clan units and clan courts etc. The essences of his manuscripts signify his decisive role in the settlement of the issue.

However, despite the wealth of information, the materials are with many shortcomings; (1), the authors of the information were colonial agents with insufficient knowledge and understanding of the people's language and culture. They interpret the feelings of the people and

³ Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays*, New York: Knopf, 1981, p 8.

⁴ My two years of work experience in the center as a university service extending from September 2003 to April 2005 became an asset that made me familiar with the personnel and documents of the center.

the reality from their own outsider's and colonial perception and hypothesis. Thus, the materials somehow mirror the colonial values and interpretation. Such limitation might have dwindled the credibility of the information as it fails to give the full picture of the situation on ground, which affects the main target of the current study. (2), although it has a microfilmed and digitized copy, the archival materials are in weak condition; blurred in color, and physically torn, missed and misplaced pages etc. On the other hand, the archives are still experiencing the deficiency of; absence of dates, name of authors and place of publication. However, due to the relevance of their substance and as the only recorded accounts in that matter, they are indispensably use in this research.

The other archival material that I examined was the bulk of documents stored in Tiravolo, RDC's branch in the Asmara. There, I come across with ample primary documents. It is the unpublished voluminous text compiled during the armed struggle for independence by the Public Administration section of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1983. The document is quite deep and hard to believe such size and depth of study had been conducted during the armed struggle parallel with the unrelenting fight and other intensive duties. This data is covering the ethnographic and historic description of the people of Sahəl and provides very essential and valuable information for this research. The document was collected through interviews of knowledgeable elderly people of various Təgrä speaking clans by the learned fighters of EPLF. Its importance in this study is weighed because Eritrean traditional communities, particularly the communities under investigation, despite their wealth of oral history, they lack the culture of documenting the past in written form. Hence their history has been transferred from generation to generation in oral form.

Therefore, the documents examined the history of almost all clans living in the Sahəl region. It goes back in time for some centuries and tries to disclose the ethnographic history and origin of the various clans, lineage and blood relationships, religion, territorial possessions, demographic data, socioeconomic history, conflict and extensive description on the Təgrä-Šumaglā aristocratic relationship in the area etc. The various subjects raised in the documents are relevant in the whole body of this research. Particularly, its information on the ancient inhabitants and migration of the Bet-'Asgädä, the establishment of aristocracy and its characteristics, the subsequent occupational and invading forces and their impact on the system etc. are greatly impressive.

As a matter of fact, the document covers broad topics and vast expanses of time, thus most of which was beyond the scope of my study. It is also not without limitations. It lacks relevant information including; the date, place and names of individual authors took part in the compilation. The materials also needed careful utilization as they exhibit emotional and subjective information. For example in the ethnographic part of the texts, almost all of the informants claim descent from Arabia across the Red Sea which makes the data to some extent ambiguous. However, as it was mostly interview based and empirically gathered by the learned EPLF members, the then informants were older generation that had lived the aristocratic system in person and observed its demise. Thus, it increased credibility and might have reduced the potential weaknesses. Therefore, in many respects the level of reliability was preferable than the information gathered from the informants that I conducted interview last autumn. While I was in Eritrea, in search of supplementary data, I visited the High Court archive room in 'Asmära which is home to such untouched bulk of files that goes back in time to around 1889, the Research Library at the Asmara University and the Pavoni Center in 'Asmära, both the later are known for big sum of collections probably next to the RDC; however I could not find any relevant materials for this thesis. Generally the British and the armed struggle periods' archival and documentary collections in RDC constituted the backbone of the material sources in this research work.

Besides the above documentary examinations particularly from RDC, during my fieldwork in Eritrea from end of July to November 2021, I traveled to Kärän and conducted interviews with the people believed to have sufficient knowledge on the aristocratic system of Bet-'Asgädä under investigation. Netsereab Azazi, a trained historian living in Kärän was the one helped me in selecting the informants. The number of informants I interviewed were twelve, however I found only six of them with the most significant information. All in all I gathered information from nine informants. Three of which were living in Asmara and the remaining six interviewees were from Kärän. All had good knowledge of the aristocratic system as they were descendants of both the ex Təgrä and Šumaglā classes. The age range of the informants was between mid forties and late eighties. With regard to language, although I command basic Təgrä, but all were found to be fluent in my mother tongue, Təgrña. Therefore, I was not in need interpreter.

The interview was somehow valuable and its expected outcome was for two reasons; collecting new and independent information, and checking and filling the information gaps in the

primary and secondary sources. As a matter of fact, owing to the longevity of time since the end of the aristocratic order some 70 years, the memory within the society was relayed orally from generation to generation; hence naturally it diminishes its authenticity. The worst encounter in this interview was the visible and still surviving passive grudges between members of the two classes that vie for the scramble of the past. For this reason, the information they offered was diluted with subjectivity. In their information, the Təgrä presented the Šumaglā were unfairly oppressive and exploitative of their ancestors. The Bet-ʼAsgädä in their part defended themselves that their ancestors were generous enough to offer them land and their own life protecting against any local or external enemy or raiders. And reiterated that the Təgrä were treated well, safe and enjoying justice. Hence, their information was full of biases and from the stand point of such subjectivity, thus it requires cautious appraisal in using it as a source material. However, the poems and songs as part of the oral history were significantly impressive. They were helpful as reflections of historical reality and relevant basis in hypothesizing and fixing missed blocks of historical realities. Although beyond the scope of this study, the interview results were also good providers of pertinent information on the oral tradition of the society. It also identified the remnants of the old practice that are still performing and the prohibited ones. For example, the issues of intermarriage, land ownership, degree of honor by the Təgrä to their ex-lords etc. that encourage for further research.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 was a global concern that hampered everyday activities of humans around the world. Consequently, for months local and international movements were restricted, the libraries were closed, instead became online. As part of this problem, therefore in 2020, I was unable to travel to Eritrea for field research. The examination of the documents in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome was not possible due to the COVID-19 new procedures introduced in the library that permitted only few researchers for short hours per day that had produced long queue that clashed with my other activities. However, the four volumes compiled vast diary by Ferdinand Martini, the first civilian Governor of Eritrea from the Municipal Library of Macerata was so important for the early periods of Italian colonial period. The research plan through the University Mobility Scholarship to the United Kingdom for examining the private collections of G.K.K. Trevaskis at Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford University was not successful for my visa application was rejected.

Major G.K.K. Trevaskis was the Political Secretary in the Kärän Division during British

Administration. The Division was home to the aristocratic system under study, and the officer was well acquainted of the people and its socioeconomic and historical aspects. Owing to his knowledge and position, Trevaskis played a leading role in the settlement of the Təgrä-Šumaglā aristocratic disputes and the final emancipation of the Təgrä and demise of the aristocratic order. He wrote a bulk of accounts in the form of reports, letters and books during and after his service in Eritrea. His writings are by far the most broad and referred sources in the academic works of the British Period in Eritrea. Hence, his works are organized and preserved as private collection for research purposes. As reference, his literary works on the British Period holds a lion's share in this dissertation. Fortunately, the copies of almost all of his works are preserved in RDC, and I believed that I have exhaustively examined during my research in 'Asmära.

The secondary documents on the other hand comprise another source material for this study. The secondary sources in contrast refers to a historical documents composed by writers that do not attended the events in person. So they are materials that processed and interpreted by researchers from primary sources and personal experiences then published to be considered as second-hand versions. In this category of sources, all sorts of its kind have been utilized. In reality, the published literature on the area under discussion is very little and the existing texts written on political and social history of Eritrea are mainly for other purposes and gave less weight to the issue of Təgrä aristocratic system as part of their broader scholarly works. However, there are few Italian and British colonial officers who wrote texts as part of administrative cause mostly with an anthropological approach mainly aimed for the expediency of colonial policy planning. These authors studied the Təgrä people in detail and the works commanded greater significance in all respects. Such authors whose works' considerably referenced in this thesis are including; Alberto Pollera, Carlo Conti Rossini, Longrigg, S. F. Nadel, Trevaskis, Antony Anthony d'Avrey and others. The former in his well known book, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea* gives a detailed account of the genealogical origin, patterns of migration, socioeconomic life and the aristocratic relationship of the Təgrä particularly of the Bet-'Asgädä. Conti Rossini on the other hand contributed two books; *Principles of the Customary Law of Eritrea* and *The History of Ethiopia*. Although the Bet-'Asgädä are not part of the story as they lack the tradition of written customary laws, the first book provides detailed principles and practices of customary rules governing the various tribes in the western and northern lowlands and the ancient history of the Sahəl areas respectively. S. F. Nadel,

anthropologist by training and British colonial officer wrote a book; *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*. It highlights the ethnographic picture of the Eritrean people and a detailed description of the northern tribes etc.

Anthony d'Avray, a British administrative officer, contributed two interesting books mainly on the history of Bet-'Asgädä; the *Lords of the Red Sea* which is fully devoted to provide a thorough description on the history of Bet-'Asgädä covering the time from the migration of the their ancestors and beyond up until the expansion of Italian colonial administration. His second compilation, *The Nakfa Documents* was composed from the Italian colonial archives he encountered in Naqfa. After the defeat of the Italians, he was assigned as administrator of Naqfa (ናቕፋ) district. Then he composed the Italian administrative archives in a book form. The domain of which is mainly portraying the early times relations between the Italians and the Bet-'Asgädä. It represented various administrative and socioeconomic conditions of the 'Asgädä people in general during the Italian colonial period.

Hitherto, the majority of the books and journals published during the armed struggle are with the objective of justifying self-determination of the Eritrean people. In the post independence too, the chief concern of the books was on the contemporary situation of the country. Therefore, in the publications of both categories of time, the issue of aristocratic system holds a trivial position with little attention given particularly to the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic relationships under investigation. Owing to the lack of documentation culture in the Bet-'Asgädä and Təgrä communities, the author eventually depended on the above mentioned primary and secondary materials supplemented by interviews in reconstructing their aristocratic past. As it is exemplified in the whole body of the study, in the transliteration of the local words, I employed the Aethiopica transliteration system of Hamburg University.

Feudalism: a Conceptual Framework

Feudalism as a socioeconomic and political institution and mode of production has been practiced differently in different communities in varying geography, and this makes analytically contesting to scholars.⁵ The term “serf” or its equivalents have been greatly used to peasants extending from people with nearly a slave status to virtually free men.⁶ Beyond this, the

⁵ Jerome Blum, The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe, *The American Historical Review*, Jul., 1957, Vol. 62, No.4 (Jul., 1957), pp. 807-806.

⁶ *Ibid.*

argument goes in questioning several societies' experiences whether or not qualify to be serfdom. Therefore, so as to be able to ascertain if the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system qualify the criteria, it is quite essential to discuss on terminological meaning, definition and some general ideas on the historical origins, and conceptual meanings of serfdom. Then, the author will attempt to compare and contrast the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä community with that of generally accepted characteristics of serfdom.

Serfdom was a phenomenon and part of the human history, in different parts of the world. Historically, the term 'serf' is originated from an old French word that evolved from Latin 'Servus' which refers to a slave.⁷ Based on the historical realities and experiences, serfdom is associated with a subjugated people working on agriculture, under the control of the land holder or the lord. Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology defined serfdom as, "an agricultural laborer who is bound to the land to such an extent that he may be transferred with the land to another owner. He cannot leave the land or refuse to work."⁸ The definition is mainly on the European context and describes the serf as member of the lowest class, mandated to serve the landlord by selling his labor for subsistence and restricted his movement attached to the land. Jerome Blum argued that, defining a serf for a person who was bounded to a soil was an inadequate and for different places and many times was a mistaken thought for a lord was able to hold an absolute authority on his peasant about he wished.⁹ The common feature for the European feudalism was that in all times and places, a serf was considered as unfree and bound to the will of his lord.¹⁰ To deal with the aristocratic system of Bet-'Asgädä, one need to define the complex social phenomena and trends exist in feudalism in order to ascertain if the Bet-'Asgädä experience was feudalism in an organized system of institutions. So far, the existing literary works categorize Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system as serfdom.¹¹

As an accepted paradigm, serfdom is directly associated mainly with agrarian economy

⁷ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/serf>

⁸ Seymour-Smith Charlotte, *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986, p 255.

⁹ Jerome Blum, *The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe*, *cit.* pp. 807-808.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 809.

¹¹ G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition: 1941-52*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960. Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*, New Jersey, The Red Sea Press, INC. 1989, Bereketeab, R, Eritrea: *The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991*, Uppsala, Uppsala University Press, 2000. , Kibreab. Gaim, *Critical Reflections: On the Eritrean War of Independence; Social Capital, Associational life, Religion, Ethnicity and Sowing Seeds of Dictatorship*, Red Sea Press, Inc., 2008, Venosa. Joseph, *Paths Toward the Nation: Islam, Community, and Early Nationalist Mobilization in Eritrea, 1941-1961*, Ohio, Ohio RIS Africa Series, 2014.

and particularly with the basic means of production, the land. Contrary to the above generally accepted understandings of serfdom, the system under investigation was not of agrarian economy, but nomadic. Hence, the basic means of economy was nomadic pastoralism. As briefly described in Chapter Four, the Təgrä material and service provision to the masters was entirely live animals and dairy products. Therefore, it had unique characteristics from the other aristocratic frameworks in European feudal experience; therefore, it can be labeled as a nomadic serfdom. The definition holds the concept of transferability of a serf with the sale of the land. In this case we found similarity in the case of the Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocracy, where the serfs were considered as an object commodity inheritable to the next generation and transferable from one master to another on the lord's will and consent.

As a different experience, the aristocratic system in the Eritrean lowlands in general and the Sahəl area in particular emerged and developed in the nomadic mode of production. The Sahəl masters, the Bet-ʿAsgädä have been practicing sedentary economy in their original homeland, in Ḥamasen (ሓማሴን) and their early days in Sahəl, but as they satisfied their needs through barter and the provisions from their new subjects, they soon abandoned agriculture and became totally dependents of their Təgrä.¹² The masters also forsaken their Tigrigna language and Christian religion and totally assimilated to that of numerically dominant Təgrä subjects.¹³ Therefore, the reality of the Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocracy was contrary to the European political economy and mode of practice described in the definitions given above. Unlike the European feudalism that was imposed on the serfs that shared culturally, linguistically and religiously the same to their lords, in the aristocratic order of the Bet-ʿAsgädä, both classes initially had different religion, language, modes of production and other customs. The the Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocratic relationship was founded through the right of conquest. As a matter of fact, the moment the ʿAsgädä family downcast the indigenous people into servile subjects, they declared the ownership of the land, however, its utility was not for sedentary agriculture, but mainly for pastoral way of life.¹⁴ They practiced nomadic economy with a transhumance according to the

¹² Alberto Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, Manuali Coloniali; A Cura del Ministero delle Colonie, Bologna, Licinio Cappelli, 1935, p. 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ According to Alberto Polera's description, the provisions of the masters from their Təgrä was entirely animal product and supplement their extra demands with durra and sorghum through barter trade from the coastal port cities and trade routes along the Red Sea. However, depending on the geography and availability of rain parts of Bet-ʿAsgädä families used to practice agriculture in minimum capacity.

rain seasons of both the highland during summer and the eastern lowlands in winter. Therefore this study is focusing on a distinctive social relationship.

The majority of the literature illustrated serfdom under the political economy of feudalism on two basic parameters; associated with the fundamental means of production, 'the land', and geographically to medieval and early modern European experience. As part of the debate on the origin of medieval European serfdom, Pierre Bonnassie argued that the decline of the Carolingian empire in the tenth century AD brought about various changes in Europe; the end of slavery, degradation of independent peasants into serfdom and the emergence of private army maintained by fiefdom.¹⁵ To strengthen the above position of historical changes in Europe of tenth and eleventh centuries, Thomas Bisson stated that, the customary public courts were weakened and substituted by weak lords and prevalent insecurity.¹⁶ These two arguments are claiming that serfdom has been developed in a condition where strong central authority was absent and multiple feudal lords divided the territory and subdue the insecure peasants in a deal of providing security in exchange for servitude. However, the above debate was criticized. Though it was chiefly based on the existing verifiable documents of the time, but represents only limited regions that lacks to symbolize the greater part of European society.

Hamburg M. Gary on the other hand proved the Russian feudalism to have been uniquely evolved from the rest of European counterparts. With the emergence of strong monarchical authority, while in Europe yielded the emancipation of the serfs from the grip of the oppressive lords, to the contrary, in Russia serfdom was strengthened under the growing autocratic monarchical government.¹⁷ Opposite to such reality, the Bet-'Asgädä aristocracy emerged with no significant effect from any polity. The paradox is that, despite some basic reforms the Bet-'Asgädä aristocracy survived under the strong Italian colonial government as it was necessary for administrative purposes. Hence, the presence or absence of strong state was not to that extent a factor affecting the aristocracy of the Bet-'Asgädä as it did in Europe or Russia. I believed that, Even if it was collapsed under the British period, the capitalist intervention and the outdated nature of the system was the greatest factor than the presence of a strong state.

In comparison with the European feudalism, the aristocratic experience of the Bet-

¹⁵ Pierre Bonnassie, *From Slavery to Feudalism in South-western Europe*: (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), p. 104.

¹⁶ Thomas N. Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present*, no. 142 (Feb. 1994), pp. 6-42.

¹⁷ Hamburg M. Gary; "Peasant Emancipation and Russian Social Thought: The Case of Boris N. Chicherin", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1991), p. 893-904.

'Asgädä community for all intents and purposes was distinct. Despite the absence of local records that narrates the origin, nature and development of the aristocratic institution similar to that of the European Feudal past, it is clear that there was no such historical coincidences of a kingdom which grew in strength and unite the region or fall apart to give chance for local lords with private army to provide security for their dependent peasants. The seemingly possible regional scenario to create such development was the Gondran (ጎንደር) era. Since the seventeenth century, the Abyssinian kingdom in Gonder, introduced new models of landownership that deteriorated the status of peasants.¹⁸ Consequently, a semi-feudal order similar to that of European model was emerged in northern Abyssinian provinces. Such land tenure system was maintained until the early twentieth century. In relation of the Bet-'Asgädä with the Gondarian kingdom; Həbtyäs (ሁብጥሶስ)¹⁹ of Ḥabab (ሓባብ) visited Gonder hoping protection of aggression coming from the central plateau. The nəgus or king confirmed him as the chief of Ḥabab clan and other clans in the region with the title of *Cantibai, Negarit*²⁰ and other gifts as a sign of his rank.²¹ However, due to the weakness and distance of the power center, the promised protection was not practical as a result the relation does not last long and the Ḥabab decided to cease seeking investiture, the customary gifts and taxes.²² To connect the Gonderian influence on the Bet-'Asgädä aristocracy with the impact of the declining European empires to give rise feudal lords as discussed above is totally incongruent. Therefore, if the patterns of the origin and decline of European feudalism and the Bet-'Asgädä aristocracy were different, hence the latter holds special reality.

Evidently, coerced labor has been an organized means of production throughout human history, however, it has been an ambiguous concept for which scholars gave little theoretical attention to build systematic framework to enlighten its origin and abolition.²³ The prominent theoretical argument with much following of historians of feudalism was the Domar's hypothesis on the origin of serfdom. His theory states that, in a time when there is abundance of agricultural

¹⁸ Mengistie H. Tegegne, "Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900," (Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), pp. 6-10.

¹⁹ Həbtyäs was the fifth descendant of 'Asgädä, the founder. Həbtyäs was chief of the Ḥabab clan, the largest clan and his authority was honored by the members of Ad Tekles and Ad Temarian clans.

²⁰ Negarit was a drum given by the king/ nəgus as sign of a title of Kāntibay during the Gondarian era.

²¹ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 116 -117.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Conning Jonathan; *On the Causes of Slavery or Serfdom and the Roads to Agrarian Capitalism: Domar's Hypothesis Revisited*, 2004, p. 30.

land, but scarce labor to work on it, authorities compelled for coerced labor that lead to serfdom.²⁴ In other words, because the ratio of land to human labor was high, serfdom as a system of production emerged. In doing so, free peasants dispossessed of their land and personal liberty, lowered to serfdom and restricted their movement.²⁵ In such situation the control of labor at hand rather than possession of landed property become the measure of power, status and wealth.

Domar being criticized for his trivial hypothesis, he augmented his theory by stating that land-labor ratio was not the only factor, but the involvement and influence of the land lords in the politics determine the extent to which landowners utilize coerced labor. Therefore, this hypothetical explanation which centered on the control of agrarian labor and influence of the state does not adequately explain the reality of the subject under this study as there was no organized political system or state polity in the Northern Highlands to develop such hierarchy and the fact that agriculture was not the main economy of the society. Therefore, to deal with the aristocratic system of Bet-'Asgädä, one need to define the complex social phenomena and trends exist in feudalism in order to further ascertain if the Bet-'Asgädä experience was feudalism in an organized system of institutions.

Another parameter to prove the claims of the existing literary works that categorized Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system as serfdom is vital. To demonstrate if it was appropriately congruent with the characteristic features of feudalism; here is Otto Hintze's attempt to sort out functional characteristics of serfdom of different countries. The three factors which in combination he believed to express feudalism were the following: (1), the military features: the establishment of well-organized order of warriors touched to the ruler by oath of loyalty in the form of private contract. (2), the economic and social features: the establishment of a manor farms which supply the privileged worriers with rent income. (3), the institutionalization of the noble warriors as local rulers and their self-affirmation with regard to the highest authority of the state.²⁶ Hintze's description of defining factors of feudalism was fairly understood general expressions, however George Vernadsky criticized this definition for its narrow approach maintaining the orthodox

²⁴ Domar Evsey D. "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis," *The Journal of Economic History* Vol. 30, No.1 (1970): pp. 18-32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ O. Hintze, 'Weseii und Verbreitung des Feudalismus,' *Sitzungsberichte der preuss. Akad. Der Wiss.*, Jahrgang 1929, p. 321. In Vernadsky George; *Feudalism in Russia*, Speculum, University of Chicago Press, vol. 14, No. 3 (1939): Pp. 300-323.

definition of feudal economy based on agriculture and disregard the possibility of the development of nomadic feudalism.²⁷ Assuming Hintze's characterization as a standard model of feudalism, it fails to congruent with the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system. Therefore, comparing with the European feudalism, I support/agree with the Vernadsky's criticism as the subject under discussion fail/disproportionately correlate with the above/ the latter's aristocratic system holds distinctive nature.

On the other hand, Marc Bloch described European feudalism as:

“A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority—leading inevitably to disorder; and, in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, family and State, of which the latter, during the second feudal age, was to acquire renewed strength—such then.”²⁸

Bloch, in his defining characteristics of European feudalism stipulated that, the system was featured by the existence of serfs, the superior warrior classes and the State. The serfs deliver services and work on the field for subsistence instead of a wage, the warrior class was hierarchically organized with the duty of protection including to the subjects. The decentralization of state authority and the consequential fragmentation of power, which paved the local nobles to hold power in their hands and take the duty of protection of their subjects in return for fief. However, categorizing as feudal every fragmented polity seemed to have created confusion by the scholars of the time on various states in different times.

During the second feudal era, the state subdued the nobles and acquired strength and centralized the authority. Steven Nafziger on the other hand defined serfdom to involve “restrictions on the mobility and the economic decision-making of peasants.”²⁹ This explanation supports the expression given by Domar on the Russian experience where he described the state put restriction on the mobility of the peasant labor force to support the needs of work force by the nobility. Waldemar Kuligowski on the other hand defined serfdom by comparing their status

²⁷ Vernadsky George; “*Feudalism in Russia*, Speculum,” University of Chicago Press, vol. 14, No. 3 (1939):Pp. 300-323.

²⁸ Bloch March, *Feudal Society II, Social Classes and Political Organization*, trans. L.A. Manyon (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), p. 167.

²⁹ Steven Nafziger, *Russian Serfdom, Emancipation, and Land Inequality: New Evidence*, p. 6.

with that of slavery; “serfs were not slaves. They were not goods at slave markets nor were deprived of primary identity. Serfs were subjects forced to work. They were clients of the landowner.”³⁰ In explanation of the economic exploitation and the firm class division based on power differences, Marc Bloch described feudal system as a thorough economic subordination of a mass of lowly people by a few but powerful men.³¹

As it has been explained above, in all works of historical studies, feudalism is pertained in particular to medieval Europe. A sharp critic of the approach comes from Elizabeth Brown and Susan Reynolds, both arguing that the concepts of feudalism and serfdom in medieval European situation are unsuitable methodical models in non-European historical studies.³² The explanation best suits to the methodical realities and approach of this study. However, the available historical works which offer some highlight on the Bet-’Asgädä aristocratic system did not attempted to interpret it in comparison with that of medieval European serfdom which enhances the above critical view on the relationship of European and non-European feudalism. Therefore, in this thesis analytically the Təgrä–Šumaglā relationship will not be mentioned as a feudal, but an aristocratic system. The people in both classes of the relationship; the landlords will be referred as Šumaglā, lords, masters, Bet-’Asgädä, and the subjected group as Təgrä. The term Təgrä implies to the subjected group of people in the Eritrean lowlands and the northern highlands of Sahəl. These days, the term Təgrä is a name representing both peoples used to be subjects and masters alike with no discrimination. However, *Aba Yisshaq Gebreyesus*³³ presented some five different meanings given to the term Təgrä; first, in present day Eritrea, Təgrä is representing a name for one of the languages derived from Gə’əz and its speakers. Second, until the end of the European colonialism, Təgrä was signifying to the lower subjected caste, representing the greater part of speakers of the language. Third, Təgrä as a language also had been used to be known as *Hasa* (ሃሳ) or *Khasa* (ኸሳ). In ancient times the larger part of Eritrea was known in that term. Fourth, in Amharic language, the word Təgrä (ጥገሬ) denotes to all

³⁰ Waldemar Kuligowski, *A History of Polish Serfdom; Theses and Antitheses*, CzasKultury/English3/2016, Pages 110-126, p. 124

³¹ Bloch, *Feudal Society II*, cit. p. 164.

³² Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), pp. 1063-88; and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1994), pp. 1-13. In Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne, “Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2011), p. 10.

³³ Ghebreyesus Isaak, “*Tereyo Tigre or the Phenomenon of Tigre*” a paper presented in the first conference on languages and literature, 11-17 January 2000, Intercontinental Hotel, Asmara, Eritrea. ብኣብ ደስሓቕ ገብረኢየሱስ፣ ተርጓሚ ትግረ፣ ኣብ 1 ደ ዋዕላ ቋንቋታትን ስነጽሑፍን ካብ 1-17 ጥሪ 2000 ዓም፣ ኣብ ኢንተርኮንቲነንታል ሆቴል ዝቐረበ። p. 17-18.

Təgrəña speakers (a sister of Təgrä language derived from Gə'əz). Fifth, Təgrä represents for the land where an ancient Aksumite (አክሱም) or 'Ag'azyān (አግአዝያን) civilization was flourished. He furthered his argument to the extent that 'Təgrä' as a people, language and land might have a pre- Aksumite existence.

Apart from the first four explanations, the last account of Aba Gebreyesus seems too generalized and presented in the *histoire totale* perspective whereby he concluded the Təgrä as a people, land and language survived for the last two millennias at a second class status. Masters originating from different cultural and geographic backgrounds abandoned their customs to be absorbed by the Təgrä language and culture. We have proved supporting realities during the last three centuries. The occupying groups from various cultural backgrounds, (Eg. Bet-'Asgädä, Marəya, Mänəsa'ə, Bet ġukə, 'Ad-Šäḳə, Bāni 'Amär etc.) migrated to the Təgrä lands to impose themselves as ruling classes, but finally lost their cultural identity and adopted the Təgrä language, culture and religion. However, in relation to his declaration of the existence of Təgrä culture in time span back to the pre- Aksumit era requires a thorough investigation. Similarly, Conti Rossini also described Təgrä as; "since ancient times it designated only the ethnic origin of the subject as opposed to the lords of another race."³⁴ Therefore, the term Təgrä stands for the people, land and language, but in this study, I will apply the term to identify exclusively to the subjugated people and their language.

According to Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman, the term Təgrä was referring to a member of a lower class. Therefore, it was not used for the identification of the ethnic group but was only a linguistic identification. It was designated only to represent the speakers of the language. As identity, the speakers of Təgrä were known as the Bāni 'Amär. Even the Bet-'Asgädä used to disdain to identify themselves as Təgrä for it implied a lower caste. But only during the armed struggle for independence that the Təgrä became the name of an ethnic group that encompassing the speakers of the language.³⁵ The term Šumaglä on the other hand refers to the lords. Its origin seems to be from Gə'əz language. In Təgrəña language also implying to elderly, honored and it also denotes to a committee of elders. In the aristocratic order of the Bet-'Asgädä, the word Šumaglä refers to the privileged minority elite that controlled the Təgrä subjected groups. The Šumaglä controlled the land and its resources that was their primary means of wealth and

³⁴ Conti Rosini Carlo, *Principles of the Customary Laws of Eritrea*, Rome 1916, translated by Joan E. Collemacine-Parenti, PhD. 1996. p. 303.

³⁵ Interview, Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman, 10 September 2021, 'Asmära.

sociopolitical positions.

Organization

As described above, this dissertation is an attempt to explore the general past of the aristocratic system of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. However, its main focus is the gradual weakening and ultimate decline of the system. Hence, it is organized in seven chapters. The first chapter deals with the main concepts of serfdom in comparison to the realities of the aristocratic system of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. This chapter discusses the literary works on serfdom in three thematic divisions that symbolize the whole study. The themes are mainly the origin, the consolidation and the emancipation or dissolution of aristocratic order. In this section, the historical explanations of the three themes of feudal experiences that took place in Europe, Asia, and Africa are presented in comparative form. Such comparative approach was essential to give a relative clarity whether the Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocratic system was a feudal similar to the European feudal system or not. The second chapter deals with the geography and people of the Saḥəl. In this part, the topography of the Bet-ʿAsgädä territory and its wealth of diverse flora and fauna are enlightened. The effect of such diversity on the nomadic economy of the clans is discussed in detail. The description of the different clans residing in Saḥəl and their socioeconomic and political organization are explained. The introduction and developmental accounts of both Christianity and Islam in the pre-Bet-ʿAsgädä communities of Saḥəl is enlightened through examination of its historical remains. This chapter also disclosed the fault lines or weaknesses of the societies' organizational nature that led them into subordination under the new masters that came from different environments with different socioeconomic and political culture.

The third chapter assesses mainly the origin of the aristocratic order of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. In this part, the genealogical origin, the pattern of migration of the family to their new settlements and the nature of interaction they had with and the consequent subjection of the indigenous people of the area is analyzed. The power struggle within the family of the Bet-ʿAsgädä and the ensuing division of the group into three sub-clans is discussed. In this chapter, the oral traditions of the people are employed greatly as sources of historical reconstruction. The fourth chapter of this dissertation deeply detailed the consolidation and continuity of the aristocratic system or the second theme of the study. Here, the process and nature of the system is analyzed, including; the different mechanisms used by the lords to subject the people and to

own the land. The various duties of the Təgrä and reciprocal obligations and privileges of the Bet-'Asgädä aristocrats are clearly revealed. The cases on the maintenance and management of the aristocratic practices employed by the Bet-'Asgädä lords especially in the 'Ad-Tämaryam (ዓድ ተማርያም) is offering clear picture of the system. In the final part of this chapter, the women as essential part of any community, their role in both classes is described well.

Chapter five is a discussion on the interplay of the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system with the Islamic revival of the nineteenth century and the different external forces of the time. The foreign forces, with much emphasis in this chapter are including; the Ottoman and Egyptian Empires and the Abyssinian raids in the domains of the Bet-'Asgädä. For centuries, Islam was already the religion of the subjects however it was not active and lacks the power to unite them and work towards improving their condition. The movement for the revival of Islam took place in the early nineteenth century that converted the lords from their old Christianity, and the Təgrä were hoping these religious movements would liberate them according to the philosophy of the religion. Hence, this chapter will discover the outcome of these utopian hopes of Islamic revival on the Təgrä and the effects of these foreign occupiers.

The explanation on the Italian Colonial Administration period holds the whole of Chapter six. With varying degrees, their role was significant in mitigating the situation of the aristocratic system in general and the condition or status of Təgrä in particular. Starting from the early days of Italian period, the most dreadful part of the Təgrä obligations were reversed, but complete emancipation was far away from reality; however the Italian era implanted the seeds of liberty by increasing the awareness and worldview of the Təgrä community through various forms. The Italians laid the foundation and initiated the early mitigation of the burdens of the Təgrä to be accomplished by the succeeding administration. These basic foundations were including: militarization, agricultural and infrastructural works etc. that considered as bearers of modernization that created alternative means of livelihood and mobility that detached the Təgrä from the customary attachments and increased awareness. Therefore, this part of the thesis discovers the various formal and informal reforms introduced on the aristocratic system during the five decades of Italian rule. This chapter therefore, holds the initiation of the main focus and the answers to the main research question.

Chapter seven is focusing on the British Period. During which the centuries' old aristocratic rule was terminated as a result heralded the emancipation of the Təgrä. In this part,

the thesis narrows its scope chiefly to the 'Ad-Täkles (ዓድ ተክሌስ) clan, one of the three divisions of Bet-'Asgädä. Owing to the 'Ad-Täkles' geographic proximity to the regional town of Kärän and their partial sedentary life, the members of this tribe had relative advantages to be pioneers of the struggle. Individuals of Təgrä background that exposed themselves to the modern mode of practice or colonial capitalist intervention played the pivotal role in guiding the mass of the Təgrä into the dispute. The leading roles and sacrifices by these key personalities during the emancipation movement signify the lion's share of the struggle to the 'Ad-Täkles. As this chapter discusses on the abolition of the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic order and the emancipation of the Təgrä, it tried to give details of different mechanisms the Təgrä employed and various factors helped to get rid of the centuries' old outdated exploitation. Therefore, it is in this chapter that the main research question; why emancipation took place in the 1940s than before or after than that time will find its final answer. The final part is the conclusion and description of some realities in the post-emancipation that envelope the whole thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

SERFDOM AND THE BET-'ASGÄDÄ ARISTOCRATIC SYSTEM

Introduction

This study is inquiring about the historical trajectory of a peculiar form of aristocratic system that took place in the Northern Highlands of Eritrea in the Bet-'Asgädä community. The aristocratic system emerged more than 300 years ago³⁶ with the migration of a small family of Bet-'Asgädä.³⁷ The small but relatively stronger family subjugated the numerous pastoral communities inhabiting the Sahäl. The history is primarily a narrative of social and economic inequalities with far-reaching influence in the political and social history of the country in the last century. This chapter is discussing the literature of feudalism on the three themes namely the origin of serfdom, the process of consolidation of serfdom, and the termination or the end of serfdom in which the serfs emancipate from their bondage. Therefore, it will provide a broader methodological understanding and help viewing the topic under discussion with a better glance.

1.1 On the Origin of Serfdom

There is a generally accepted paradigm on the origin of feudalism mainly the European perspective. Feudal ties developed in a given community once the existing social order is disbanded and the kinship proved insufficient to protect its members or when a centralized political authority is weakened particularly in protecting capability.³⁸ In a nutshell Bloch suggested that the European feudalism should be taken as a product of the drastic termination of existing societal order. The characteristic human bond developed when the weak entered into a form of contract where both sides employ duties and obligations. The few and powerful ruling men held protecting and judging obligations while the subjected classes paid revenues and

³⁶ Many writers provided different dates on the migration of the Bet-'Asgädä; According to Alberto Pollera the date is stated to be in 1600 AD (Pollera, Alberto. *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*. 'Manuali Coloniali; A Cura Del Ministero Delle Cononie', Bologna, Licinio Cappelli, 1935, p 193). The research conducted in the 1980s by the research section Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (Origin of the People of Sahäl, መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል, p 107) put the date around 1500 AD, and the third writer Antony d'Avray stated the family used to live in the karnäšm (ካርንሻም) around the end of the sixteenth century (Antony, d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*; 'The History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996, p. 6.)

³⁷ 'Asgädä, the founder of three tribes (Ḥabab, 'Ad-Täkles and 'Ad-Tämaryam) is said to have lived in the 17th century, and to be descended from the Šənə'a Dägälä (ጽንዓ ደግለ), in the 'Akälä Guzay (አከለ ጉዛይ) moved to 'Adi-Nəfas in Ḥamasen and then to Sahäl.

³⁸ Bloch, *Feudal Society II*, cit. Pp. 164-165

provide services.³⁹ Steven Nafziger on the ‘origin of Russian serfdom’ stated that it developed as a solution to the inadequate supply of labor force to the extensively available agricultural land.⁴⁰ This argument firmly augmented the theory developed by Domar on the origin of serfdom. For him the origin directly connected to the Tsarist military and territorial expansion during the 15th century. The empire distributed the densely populated areas to the artillerymen and the cavalry together with the farmers to be their subordinates, in return of their service to the state.⁴¹ Thence, the military men transformed into landowning elites, the serfs live and work in the farms and the state severely restricted tenants’ mobility and other basic rights.

Different experiences proved that serfdom was introduced not only by the strength of the dominant caste, but in almost all cases, there exists the strong support from the state or the chiefdom as a means of control, taxation and army conscription. In his attempt on comparative study of the American slavery and Russian serfdom, Peter Kolchin supported the arguments by Steven Nafziger on the origin of Russian serfdom. He stated that, the origin of forced labour in both cases goes to the time of widespread labour scarcity and as a remedy the states gradually introduced forced labour as a means of agricultural production.⁴² Thus, Peter boldly stated that the early modern European and American serfdom and slavery were the reactions to a widespread shortage of labor, where the states fully support the application of free labor.⁴³ The Russian serfdom was promoted by the Tsar state as a means of production, taxation and means of controlling the allegiance of the lower nobility, church and monasteries, at the cost of the serf class that was representing more than ninety percent of the total population of the kingdom.⁴⁴ In similar terms, Jerome Blum argued that in the Russian feudalism, a free peasantry was destined into serfdom after the withdrawal of the central power from its involvement in the lord- peasant relationships.⁴⁵

Polish serfdom was one of the European experiences, Waldemar Kuligowski stated on the origin of the Polish serfdom that; during the 16th century, the state was chief producer and exporter of cereal grains to Holland, which was its main market. The trade was the main source

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Nafziger, *Russian Serfdom*, cit. p. 5.

⁴¹ Domar, *The Causes of Slavery*, cit. pp. 18-32.

⁴² Peter. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor; American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Blum, “The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe”, cit. p. 809.

of wealth for the Polish nobility and only outlet to the international markets. Thus, increasing production for the growing export market was in the interest of the landowning gentry. As a result extensive farms were established near major urban areas or on the Vistula river banks and its tributaries, through which was convenient for transport to the foreign market. Therefore, expansion of serfdom was an inevitably important in order to develop large scale farms mainly for export purposes. As a result, serf labor became the main economic basis of the state for around three centuries.⁴⁶

Considering the geographic and cultural proximity to the subject under investigation in this thesis, it is essential to look on various African ‘might have been feudal’ experiences of social relationships in diverse ‘model regions’ in the continent for a comparative purposes and general understanding. Despite the uniqueness of institutions or events at a time, examining societies’ socioeconomic and political experiences and categorizing whether feudal or not requires a reference point in looking through comparative approach. March Bloch exponents it saying; ‘Yet just as the matrilineal or agnatic clan or even certain types of economic enterprises are found in much the same forms in very different societies, it is by no means impossible that societies different from our own should have passed through a phase closely resembling that which has just been defined, if so, it is legitimate to call them feudal during that phase.’⁴⁷ And Bloch admitted the difficulty of the work of comparison of different societies’ experiences with different form and in different geography. Jack Goody, adopting the general agreement of studying and using the term ‘feudal’ should be applied in a comparative method, he attempted to study and employ it in African context. In comparison with the European feudalism, he took case studies of different pre-colonial states of Buganda and Ruanda in East and the Ashanti of Ghana and Nupe of northern Nigeria in West Africa based on documents of studies mainly by colonial anthropologists and historians.⁴⁸

In comparing the above mentioned African experiences with that of European feudalism, the authors used the following two trends; the first, associated to political structure and the second one is related to economic conditions. The first idea is that feudalism is basically associated with the existence of fiefs and weak central government. Where the fief holder administers those living in his farm and the weaker central authority is dependent on the

⁴⁶ Waldemar, *A History of Polish Serfdom*, cit. p. 112.

⁴⁷ Bloch, *Feudal Society II*, cit. p. 267.

⁴⁸ Goody Jack, “Feudalism in Africa,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1963), pp. 1-18.

vassalage for military services. The other trend is mainly a Marxist approach concentrated on economic part sees mainly on the productive order that counts on the stages of human development vis-à-vis to the dynamics of mode of production.

According to Nadel's findings on his study of Nupe state in northern Nigeria, the *modus operandi* of revenue collection and the administrative divisions of the kingdom up to the village level which were dependent units administered by the feudal lords as their fiefs. In this case the lords were raised by merit, thus including slaves had the opportunity to elevate their social and political class to the level of lordship, and feudal nobility were required to provide conscripts to the king particularly from their personal clients.⁴⁹ In the States of northern Nigeria, political protection was the main reason for the clients voluntarily joining the lords and forms including military service where Nadel associated the institution comparable to that of Imperial Rome and medieval Europe.⁵⁰ M. G. Smith studied one of the Hausa kingdoms and he analyzed that; 'a system of ranked and title holders conducted the government and each office is permanent unit that characterized such attributes as fiefs, patrons, praise songs, allocated farmlands, compounds and other possessions.....'⁵¹ Hence, the existence of fief, client and other land and farming related elements resembled to a form of feudal order. Generally, the findings of the studies in the western part of Africa including Nupe, Zaria, Bariba on northern Dahomey, politically the power of chieftainship was hereditary limited only to kingship and major feudal chiefs.⁵² However, as mentioned above the lower strata were achieved based on performance and their office was accountable and controlled by the king. Therefore, based on the findings of the characteristics on the economic aspect of fief holdings, the subordination of the clients and the power structure of the political offices showed some forms of feudal system.

The East African equivalent aristocratic relationship brought into inquiry was the Rwandan experience. It was the work of Maquet, where he claimed the practice of a feudal system comparable to the European feudalism in other form. The relationship was between the pastoralists 'Tutsi' as masters and the agriculturalists 'Hutu'. In proving it to be feudal order, as a reference point for his argument, he developed his own definition of feudalism centered on bilateral agreement or contract;

⁴⁹ Goody, "Feudalism in Africa," *cit.*p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

“Based on an agreement between two individuals who unequally partake in the symbols of wealth and power culturally recognized in their society. The person, who, in that respect is inferior to the other, asks the other for his patronage, and, as a counterpart, offers his services. This is the essence of the feudal regime.....”⁵³

In supplementing his argument, Maquet substantiated using evidences including; the tradition of the time that for a Rwandan to have a lord was a must and a matter of existence. The clients could belong either to the ruling estates of cattle-keepers or the inferior agriculturalists; however the loan of cattle to the inferior partner was an established means of transaction in both cases where Maquet consider equivalent to the provision landed fief in feudal Europe. ⁵⁴ Some basic dissimilarity reflected in the Rwandan so-called feudal order with the European feudalism. Maquet claimed fiefs were rare in Africa as it was not administered by the Roman Law which gave the ownership of the land to the king. In the Rwandan and Nupe cases the kings doesn't own the land but cattle and tribute respectively. Lucy Mair looks at the Rwandan client-ship where the contracts entered between the pastoralists and agriculturalists was based on ‘choice’, and the cattle transaction relationship between the cattle keeping Rwanda and Ankole was mainly because of the need for protection rather than for economic reasons. The relationship among the agriculturalists Ganda and Soga being landlords and peasants respectively was established by the transfer of rights in land. In the system, landlords were chosen by and being representatives of the king. Mair treat the transfer of rights in land from the lord to the tenant as equivalent to that of the patron-client and the client-chiefs relation of the lords and the king.....⁵⁵ On the other hand Mair expressed her observation that for two reasons client-ship was the main source of social differentiation; first it created the boundary and relationship between ‘superiority and subordination’, second is ‘the main channel of social mobility’ especially in states such as Buganda.

In comparing the African experiences with that of European feudalism, the application of the generally accepted parameters of European feudalism is necessary; politically, the fragmentation of centralized authority which led for the growth of feudal institutions in Europe was incongruent with the African states’ experiences, however the client-ship, assuming it as a form of personal dependence was the basic element in developing a centralized institutions

⁵³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

through the development of hereditary transfer of power and the ability to build authority to attract and keep a following outside of their kin. Economically, it was related to mode of land holding. There appeared special cases in Africa where the land ownership resembles feudal order. According to I. I. Potkhin, a typical feudal form was experienced in the Ashanti state. There, land ownership was on the hands of the ruling upper class. However, the argument of landownership to create class based society could not have a convincing value as in pre-colonial Africa land was not scarce resource in comparison to Europe. Thus absolute ownership of land must have been loose but might have been applicable in densely populated areas or a society with stratified society like the slaves and freemen.

Jack Goody, after observing the above cases, summarized his idea that the presence of client-ship or fiefs could not lead him to conclude the existence of feudal practices in Africa comparable to that of medieval Europe. Applying the political and economic criteria to define the African experiences as feudal was difficult for the following reasons; the absence of clear definition of the term and the limit of European feudalism as an experience of a particular period of time in the Middle Age. Goody criticized particularly to the Marxist approach which presented development of human society through stages and consider feudalism as one of the human sequential social institutions. Goody identified the rigidity of using European feudalism as the sole reference and points of comparison, and criticized for applying ideological reference and the inability to see beyond the European cultural tradition as the weaknesses of the studies. He put his synopsis in a concise form as; “To suggest that there appears little to be gained by thinking of African societies in terms of the concept of ‘feudalism’ implies neither a rejection of comparative work that includes European society, nor yet of the contribution of European medievalists can make to the study of African institutions. ” And he suggested avoiding the overall comparison of studies involving terms including tribalism, feudalism, and capitalism in the future comparative historical, sociological and anthropological studies.⁵⁶ In this way Goody was not convinced to affirm the supposed existence of African feudalism comparable to that of European feudal order.

For me comparing, the unparalleled factors of African and European situations; state formation and power control, revenue extraction, land ownership and arrangement, the ratio of men to land, the nature of human to human relations and other cultural and social pluralism and variations and the role of trade were so wide and difficult to reconcile. Therefore, I support the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

strong critics of Elizabeth Brown and Susan Reynolds, that questioned the importance of ‘feudalism’ as analytical means and argued that a number of concepts that dominate the studies of “pre-modern land tenure – feudal, fief, and vassalage – are not only inappropriate analytical study categories in historical studies of non-European societies, but also are incongruent with the medieval European setting itself.”⁵⁷ Thus, attempts to congruent African cases to that of European feudalism are inappropriate and the comparison based on supposed similarities required cautiously specified rather than based on generalities.

Many studies suggest that, Ethiopia was one of African states with feudal mode of production. Tamrat Tadesse, based on the available monastic documents and imperial chronicles discovered that feudalism was tradition in the northern provinces of Ethiopia and at least starting from the reign of Amdezion in the 14th the newly conquered territories in central Ethiopia particularly in Showa, the newly conquered lands were given to the military officers, monasteries and churches in the form of fiefs locally known as *gult*.⁵⁸ Based on Frederick C. Gamst and Allan Hoben studies on the Ethiopian peasantry, John M. Cohen suggested the existence of feudalism in Ethiopia. The findings of these studies portrayed the Ethiopian feudalism to have similarities with that of Bloch’s conceptual characteristics of European feudalism.⁵⁹ Characteristically, in analyzing the notion of feudalism to Ethiopian reality there existed commonality with that of medieval European norms of feudalism.⁶⁰ Donald Crummey studied the Ethiopian social relationship through the prism of liberal and Marxist views in comparison to the European feudalism. His finding shows that; the society was divided into two fundamental classes mainly; the cultivators and the rulers. And economically, since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the state and the nobility were dependent on the peasantry.⁶¹ He treated the *gult* land equivalent to the fief holding in European feudalism, where the *gult* allocation was a royal monopoly and the *gult* holder lives on the revenue from the peasants farming in his possession and was expected to supply troops in times of war.⁶²

⁵⁷ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), pp. 1063-88; and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1994), pp. 1-13. In Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne, “Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2011), p. 10.

⁵⁸ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 98-103.

⁵⁹ John M. Cohen, “A Survey on the existence of a Feudal Peasantry,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1974), pp. 665-672.

⁶⁰ Donald Crummey, “Abyssinian Feudalism”, *Past & Present*, No. 89 (1980): 115-138.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

In comparison to the European feudalism, the patron-client relation was stronger in Ethiopia especially in association with the submission and protection relationships. The similarities with the European feudalism and Bloch's characteristic definitions of feudalism coincided in the fragmentation of the central authority during the Gondarine period or in the 'reign of princes' era where the nobility hold the power in their localities outside of the central state.⁶³ However, vassalage the central to European model and the property relation of the fief were points of difference. In comparison to European counterparts, in Ethiopian the degree of the ruling class to direct access to the land was low and the level of peasant land ownership was high. The peasants own the *rəst*, a hereditary land and they paid royal tithe and miscellaneous taxes including corvée. In this case a village or a district with *rəst* owning peasants could be endowed to a noble or a monastery as a *gult* land, but this doesn't mean they lose their *rəst* rights, but expected only to pay periodic tribute to the *gultäñä*⁶⁴ and the peasants were not serfs.

The relationship of men to the land was another dimension of Crummey's study. He treated the famous Gə'əz saying, "*Sab'a harā wagabbār meder*", literally meaning, "Man is free, and land the tributary", issued as an edict in 1880s as an epitome of fundamental social relations that: men were legally neither attached to the soil nor to the master but obligation to pay tax tied them to the land use.⁶⁵ In this case, the Ethiopian peasants enjoyed a relative freedom contrasted to the European tenants. However, according to Crummey viewing from the Marxist concept of feudalism and employing class analysis, he divided the Ethiopian society into two classes: "those who cultivate and those who live off surpluses produced by the cultivators."⁶⁶ For Marx the defining characteristics of feudalism were; "serfs status for cultivators, a high degree of direct access to the land for the rulers, and the presence of towns in which were concentrated artisanal labor."⁶⁷ This characterization was undoubtedly incompatible with the Ethiopian reality and seems to categorize the Ethiopian social order as Asiatic⁶⁸ mode of production.⁶⁹ However Crummey concluded that; feudal concepts are relevant in studying Ethiopian society hoping that they help raise a series of questions, and the discussion of which might enlighten important

⁶³ Ibid., p. 125.

⁶⁴ *Gultäñä* signifies a possessive degree implying to the owner of *gult*.

⁶⁵ Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *cit.* pp. 130-131.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 131.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ According to Marx's category of Asiatic mode of production as "the self-sustaining unity of landed property as occurring within a framework of essentially communal property."

⁶⁹ Donald Crummey, p. 131.

characteristic aspects of the history of Ethiopian social order and opened for further research. Based on the accounts of Donald Crummey, considering the European feudalism as a standard reference and viewing from the liberal or Marxist view point, I believe the Ethiopian social relationship, despite some commonalities seemed not compatible to be called feudal order.

Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne's research contributed an original result which altered the existing general assumption of historians on Ethiopian society.⁷⁰ He discovered the existence of a serf class controlled by the landed gentry, of which its existence was neglected in the previous literature. Ethiopia as part of its resource extraction and territorial expansion, from the 17th to 20th century employed a Feudal state system, where a minority Semitic speaking 'Amhara (አምሓራ) and Təgrayans (ጥገራይ) confiscated fertile lands and imposed their lordship up on the different ethnics and nationalities in the Southern, Western and Southeastern parts of Ethiopia.⁷¹ In this case he proved that the relation was mediated by land and characterized by the domination of a small group with full support of the state. The lords came from the north that practicing Christianity and spoke Amharic, while the exploited serfs were speakers of different languages and adherents of diverse faiths. Edmond J. Keller clarified in clear terms that, "the northern Ethiopian colonists promote the formation of a well-defined and firm class division between; the colonists and the colonized; those who own the land and those who cultivated it or 'Amhara and non-'Amhara."⁷²

With regard to Eritrea, Alberto Pollera viewed the origin of the aristocratic system in the northern highlands of Eritrea as an extension of the tradition of waves of domination and subordination in the region's historical past. He stated that, the vanishing of peoples one after the other and the rise of other new peoples in their place through military conquest has been part of the history of the northern Eritrea.⁷³ The analysis further stipulated that, it was the super imposition of the superiority of such a new ruling minority group emigrated from other places and managed to impose its name on the numerically larger previous inhabitants, then another cycle of arrival of new immigrant dominators imposed their superiority and rule upon the existing ruling elite, or associated themselves with it. Such happenings seen evidently in the nomadic peoples of the northern highlands of the country, where due to the hot and arid nature of

⁷⁰ Habtamu Mengistie, "Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900," p. 5.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Keller, Edmond, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1988, p. 59.

⁷³ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 193-196.

the environment, they wondering after water and pasture, and they do not establish large permanent settlements. However, they had small residential centers know as dägä (ደግ) where the tribal chiefs live together with the women and children. During the dry season men left in search of pasture sometimes for hundreds of kilometers, in such situation the defense capability of the people in dägä is obviously weak, and then any warrior group can take control of the settlement by surprise mostly with no killing, and easily impose their rule on the unprotected residents. As the nomads are peaceful and for whom war was an alien thing and have no patrimony of land to defend, they easily submit to the new ruling caste until sooner or later other dominators came to take the ruling position.⁷⁴ In such condition as has been seen in many Eritrean lowland communities, the minority ruling group of Bet-’Asgädä could impose their rule and the numerous subjects impose their language up on the new ruling caste. Therefore, for Pollera, the origin of serfdom on the Təgrä clans of the Northern Highlands can be seen in the above common historical explanation.

Anthony d’Avray associated the origin of Bet-’Asgädä aristocratic order with the organizational superior qualities of the family. In their original homeland, agriculture was the main economy and practice feudalism, and they brought system to their new destination. For the introduction of serfdom he stated that, “In Sahəl there was, however, no agriculture on to which the *māzadärya* system could be imposed, and the Bet-’Asgädä substituted it on related to the large animal populations they found there.”⁷⁵ The Bet-’Asgädä easily put the ancient pastoral clans under their domination peacefully and acquired much excesses of products for their daily living; consequently they abandon farming and adopt the nomadic mode of production where they depended for services and provisions on their Təgrä.⁷⁶ Anthony d’Avray, to substantiate his argument on the superiority of the Bet-’Asgädä’s historical roots, he went as far as to the description of general makeup of the people where he believed the Bet-’Asgädä originated from an area with higher caliber and character as follows;

“The ’Akälä Guzay- like all the Abyssinian races – are of haughty character and arrogant; they are voluble in fair words, obstinate in their quarrels and vendettas. Strong and warlike, they interpret justice and trials of strength as but

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea; The History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996, pp. 33-35.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

forms of force. They are brave, even foolhardy, conceited; they make a parade of their personal warlike qualities...”⁷⁷

Therefore, according to d’Avray the migration of the Bet-’Asgädä was a providence, that due to their alleged superior military, political and organizational capacity could have enchained the numerous and diverse submissive communities. There, they ascend to nobility, inherited fertile land, live easy life on the shoulder of their serfs. At the same time, fortunately the neighboring strong powers in Massawa, in the Ḥamasen and Təgray, in Swakin and Tokär, in Käsäla and across the sea in Arabia, mostly left them in solitary as a Christian clan ruling over a vast number of Muslim groups.⁷⁸ The Bet-’Asgädä enjoyed the superior caste that lasts more than three centuries until it was terminated by the emancipation of the Təgrä in the late 1940s.

Michael Hasama Raka, based on his book, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛገታ ኤርትራ), has held a similar to d’Avrey’s argument; ’Asgädä and ’Atošäm (እቶሻም), kinsmen used to live together in plains of Ḥamasen, later quarrel broke out, ’Asgädä lost the fighting and fled to Karnäšm, where he would have founded ‘Adi-Nəfas and migrated to the Sahəl tracking his missed mule where he finally found her in the Sahəl Plateau, later known as Rora⁷⁹ Baqla.⁸⁰ ’Almäda, an ancient people were known for their fair and democratic rule over various communities of Sahəl. For their justice and egalitarian system, families from various tribes joined their jurisdiction, and their leader was a peaceful man known by the name ’Almäday. ’Asgädä, took advantage of the ruler’s passive and humble character, started providing some material services including bed for ’Almäday used to sleep on ground, he built a house for ’Almäday used to live in cave and he made a chair for he used to sit on ground. ’Almäday, pleased of ’Asgädä’s deeds, appointed him to rule and arbitrate on his behalf. Through time, thanks to Bet-’Asgädä’s skills and manipulation, brought the people to their side and attained full authority. The various democratic clans of Təgrä submitted, consequently suffered to the extreme in the hands of the house of Bet-’Asgädä.⁸¹ The Təgrä became their shepherds and required to provide full supply from their dairy products. However, the Bet-’Asgädä were responsible for the security and protection of their

⁷⁷ Ibid., P. 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid. In this case various sources including Trevaskis (A Colony in Transition pp 30-31) affirmed that although the Ḥabab claimed to be free of all regional powers, but coastal Naybs and Abyssinian Christian kings never accepted that the Ḥabab were independent.

⁷⁹ According to F. Martini’s explanation, Rora is a Təgrä word signifies a complex of plateaus of great elevation and of little extension and of the surrounding mountains, Rora Baqla is around 2236 meters above the sea level.

⁸⁰ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛገታ ኤርትራ), cit. pp. 77-79.

⁸¹ Ibid.

respective Təgrä. Normally, any of 'Asgädä does not betray his Təgrä, and for him misdeed on his Təgrä was implied to be offense on himself. Therefore, for the sake of keeping his personal dignity securing his Təgrä was a firm obligation.⁸² Trevaskis also provide similar argument that when 'Asgädä reach the plateau;

“Accepted the submission of some minor Shepherd king of the Fung race and made his temporary headquarters. Soon afterwards he moved to the present Nacfa plateau where he was met by a certain Həmeda, Chief of the 'Ad 'Agədubay who kissed his feet and sought the protection of the newcomers.”⁸³

Both Michael Hasama Raka and Trevaskis stated a compatible idea that theorizing the aristocratic origin of the Bet-'Asgädä was a peaceful one. In comparison with the European feudalism, in my opinion the aristocratic experience of the Bet-'Asgädä community for all intents and purposes was distinct. Despite the absence of local records that narrating the origin and development of the aristocratic institution similar to that of the European Feudal past, it is clear that there was no such historical coincidences of a kingdom which grew in strength and unite the region or fall apart to give chance for local lords with private army to provide security for their dependent peasants. The seemingly possible regional scenario to create such development was the Gondarine era. As Habtamu Mengistie stated that; since the seventeenth century, with growing in strength, the Gondarine kingdom being hand and glove with the church, introduced new models of landholding that worsen the status of peasants.⁸⁴ Consequently, new social hierarchy emerged in northern Abyssinia including in Goğam (ጎጃም), Bägämdr (በገምድር), Təgray and Wälo (ወሎ) where the rights and obligation of the landholding system shared the same characteristics. Thus this new pattern of land tenure created a lasting class hierarchy until the early twentieth century.

In relation to the Gondarine kingdom; the Bet-'Asgädä under the leadership of Hbtyäs,⁸⁵ in order to stop the frequent raid by the people from Həmasen, he appeared in person and seek the protection from the king in Gondar. The king accepted him as head of the Həbab, recognized his authority to administer and rule the tribes in Sahəl and bestowed him the title of Kāntibay

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Eritrea*, p.18.

⁸⁴ Habtamu Mengistie, “*Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900*,” *cit.* pp. 6-10.

⁸⁵ Həbtes was the fifth descendant of 'Asgädä, the founder. Həbtes was chief of the Həbab tribe, the largest clan and his authority was honored by the members of 'Ad-Täkles and 'Ad-Tämaryam clans.

(ከንቲባይ) and given him silk robes, a bracelet, and Nägarit (ነጋሪት)⁸⁶ as a sign of his rank.⁸⁷ He was also conferred additional title of Bahəri Nägasi (ባሕሪ ነጋሲ), the title ordinarily used by the dignitaries of the plateau.⁸⁸ However, due to the weakness and distance of the power center in Gondar, the king was not able to defend the Bet-’Asgädä and the promised curbing of the hostilities from the Ḥamasen chiefs was not materialized. Consequently, generations later the Ḥabab decided that the Gondarine kingdom was not powerful enough to defend them and cease asking for investiture and offering the king the traditional gifts offered in place of a tribute.⁸⁹ In my outlook, such historical past seems not that much strong to influence the Bet-’Asgädä to introduce aristocratic system for the following reasons; because the system in the Bet-’Asgädä seems well established ahead of the Gondarine era, no credible document is available proving such influence and the Gondarine kingdom had less effect in the Sahäl area as it is not only far but also geographically not easily accessible.

Despite the historiography on the origin of serfdom that most literature inclined to emerge in a state of anarchy or absence of centralized political system like the Charlemagne or the presence of strong central government like the Tsarist Russia, Polish, Abyssinian, Tibet, etc. the Bet-’Asgädä experience is incongruent with both frameworks. For many reasons; geography, weakness or lack of interest of the regional powers including Gondarine, Funj of Senar, the Ottoman viceroys in Hærgigo etc let the Bet-’Asgädä aristocrats to remain without major intervention that disturb its social order. For me, with regard to the points provided in the literature that claimed the origin of the aristocratic system of the Bet-’Asgädä through persuasive or peaceful means seems to provide relatively closer to the reality. However, considering the origin of the Christian Bet-’Asgädä in the central highland and their familiarity with the semi-feudal orders in the central highlands that the residents were demanded to fulfill the obligations by the Abyssinians and the *gulti* holders were expected to offer supplies for the warriors of the Negus and his viceroys and other obligation.⁹⁰ It seemed that the Bet-’Asgädä were familiar with the Abyssinian *gulti* systems. Though not like the classical European serfdom, such might had impact on the initiation of their aristocratic order. Jordan Gebremedhin affirmed that in Eritrea,

⁸⁶ Nägarit was a drum given by the king as sign of a title of kântibay during the Gondärine era. It was a ceremonial drum used to call men to arms by the king or his agents.

⁸⁷ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 195

⁸⁸ Anthony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Anthony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 32.

feudalism had developed neither to its classical form nor to that of Ethiopian sort.⁹¹ Therefore, the application of feudal terminology to the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system is cumbersome as it lacks many of the fundamental features of feudalism.

1.2 Consolidation of Serfdom

Following the coercive or persuasive establishment of the aristocratic system, through time the relationship between the upper class and the servant class consolidated through various mechanisms. In almost all cases, both positions took a firm hereditary succession, where once status is decided at birth and with no possibility of changing class. The lower class are expected to be loyal to accomplish their duty and deliver services to their lords and the lords in return provide protection. In the Russian serfdom, so as to consolidate the serfdom, the *Tsars* introduced consecutive decrees which limit the rights of the serfs. The *Ulozhenie* of 1649 declared to limit the serf's mobility.⁹² In 1729, a proclamation prohibited the serfs from taking military services on their own free will, the 1730 declaration prevent serfs from ownership and inheritance of land, and in 1736 another two edicts declared that worsen the status of serfs to the level of movable property and marketable commodity, where the law empowered the land lords to sale their serfs without the land and the right to punish deserter serfs, which until then reserved exclusively to the state.⁹³

In the Polish serfdom, the land lords applied a range of mechanisms to strengthen its upper position. Starting from the 15th century, several edicts passed that empowered the landlord to be an owner and judge of the serfs inhabited in his land, secure the monopoly of political offices, ecclesiastical positions and military ranks only to the noblemen.⁹⁴ To identify themselves from the peasants, the noblemen and the priesthood developed a belief which put them genetically superior over their serfs. Therefore, the ethno-genetic myth defined the noblemen as descended from the Sarmatians, while the serfs from Dacians or the Gepids. According to the Bible, the former are descended from Japheth and the later are from Ham. Both Noah's children however, Ham was cursed by his father and degraded together with his successors to the level of

⁹¹ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Nationalism, Peasant Politics*, cit. p 66.

⁹² Steven Nafziger, *Russian Serfdom*, cit. p. 13

⁹³ Arthur M. De Buschen, "On the Origin and Numerical Development of Serfdom in the Russian Empire," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1861): pp 311-327, p. 315.

⁹⁴ Waldemar, *A History of Polish Serfdom*, cit. pp. 110-126.

slaves.⁹⁵ Another method employed by the nobles in demeaning the serfs and consolidates the serfdom was defining serfs to have aggregate natural features as: indolent, cunning, dishonest etc. Consequently, the serfs were known as Cham, derived from Ham which developed into a given name and a common name. Two assumingly convincing factors were used as a basis for the naming; in the Bible, divine power had degraded Ham into a *servus*, and the other, the Roman law (*servus* as a subject of the will of law), both historical factors served as a source of Sarmatia's self designation, and Cham remained to portray serfs, and became a shared standard last name for the whole social class.⁹⁶

Consolidation of serfdom also involved discriminating marital system. Because the nobility assumed the serfs as inferior creatures, they do not enter into marriage relationships. In the perspective of the lords, marriage between the two classes is described as; "when a nobleman marries a serf woman, the Virgin Mary is happy that the noble family is expanding, but when a noble girl marries a serf, the Virgin Mary cries with heavy tears as the noble blood will get spoiled by the peasant one."⁹⁷ Therefore, if a serf married a noble girl, it is considered as a shame to the noble side, which causes a heavenly retribution. Hence, in such manner the Polish lords ascertained the subordination of the serfs and consolidated the system in a way that serves their interests for long period of time.

In his extensive examination on the Tibetan society, Melvin C. Goldstein observed a form of institutionalized inequality and concluded it to be pervasive serfdom; thence he categorized Tibetan social institution as serfdom. However, Mr. Cox, opposed and criticized Goldstein's idea for reasons of; the absence of empirical evidence and its effect to the Tibetan political interests. Thus, Cox labeled Goldstein's work as 'irresponsible'. In opposition to Mr. Cox's assertion and to prove the Tibetan experience was one of serfdom, Goldstein made an in-depth field research for four years (1986-1990) on the nomadic serfdom in present day 'Tibetan Autonomous Region'.⁹⁸ He stated, Land in the Tibetan feudalism was mainly owned by the state, the aristocrats, the monasteries and private. The lords controlled up to 70 percent of arable land, and the serf labor was responsible to work the farms.⁹⁹ Each land holdings consisted of two parts;

⁹⁵ Ibid., P. 116.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

⁹⁸ Goldstein C. Melvin, "Nomadic Pastoralists and the Traditional Political Economy-a Rejoinder to Cox, Himalaya", *Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, vol. 12, (No. 1 and 2), 1992, p 54.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

arable land and pastureland, and the serfs, hereditarily bounded peasants supply the lord of the estate a free labor services. The Tibetan feudalism on the other hand was consisted of; agricultural serfdom and nomadic serfdom. Similar to other societies' experiences, Tibetan serfdom was solidified through a range of ways; mobility restrictions and commodification of serfs like property. The lords even had the authority to move them to another place for a corvee labor. The relationship of a serf to his lord was transmitted hereditarily; a new born son of the serf became the subject of his father's lord, and a women's daughter became servant of their mother's lord.¹⁰⁰ During the transfer of estates either through selling or other means, serfs remained with the land and became serfs of the new landlord.

For example, the Tibetan nomadic serfs of Pala¹⁰¹ were structured in the same way as those of farming peasants; they were hereditarily attached to the land and restricted from unilaterally ending their relationship and were fully incorporated into the social, political and economic system of the state.¹⁰² In order to collect tax and implement subordination, the lords appointed three local nomadic officials as overall leaders. Each of the ten sub-units of nomadic territories had one or two headmen appointed by the three nomad officials who execute the extraction and control. In the same manner as in the farming estates, in Pala region, land was owned by the lords, nomads had the right to usufruct on the land, but no ownership, they owned their livestock, but they were bound to their estates' lord.¹⁰³ In the Tibetan nomadic serfdom, tax collection was analogous to the taxation in the farming estates; it was conducted based on the number of the animals. The individual household held pastureland and paid tax to his lord proportional to the number of animals he owned. The payments were mostly in items of; butter, baby sheep skins, soda, yak saddles, salt, money, wool carrying bags, felt yak saddle pads, yak skins, woven wool, rawhide ropes, and cheese.¹⁰⁴

Officially, the nomad-lord relation was similar to that of agricultural serfs. The nomads were hereditarily subordinated to their lord, even nomad families with no animals were required to pay tax, and they do not have the right to permanently change their lord or territory except for some instances with convincing reasons and in coordination with other lords. In other parts of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

¹⁰¹ Pala was one of the ten sub-units of the pastoral estates spreading for hundreds of square kilometers and surrounded by other nomadic pastoral areas.

¹⁰² Goldstein, *Nomadic Pastoralists*, cit. p. 57.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

Tibet, the nomads were directly linked to the Tibetan Government and administered in the same manner as those of under lords and the farmers.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the Tibetan nomads were integrated to the political economy of the state in a similar way to the farmers. Serfs in nomadic economy had lords through their ownership of the productive resources that is the pastureland. They controlled the nomads as their subordinates, extract taxes and labor services applicable to the farming estates.

On the Ethiopian feudalism, Habtamu's main study was on the two social groups associated with land ownership; the *rim*¹⁰⁶ and *zéga*¹⁰⁷. The first was associated with the landed property of the church, monasteries and the ecclesiastical personnel, and the latter was related to the landless peasants, equivalent to those of serfs in European feudalism.¹⁰⁸ Habtamu stipulated that, *zéga* was landless labourer class subjected by the *rim* holders. However it is not recognized in the literary works of Ethiopian history. Therefore, the main target of Habtamu's dissertation was to expose the existence of this subjected social group that was humiliated and confiscated their hereditary land property to be granted to the privileged elites and the church to be known as the *rim* land. In this way, the peasants forced to work as labourers in the same manner as those of the Russian serfs.¹⁰⁹ Originally *rim* land ownership was the phenomenon of the 17th century Gondarine Ethiopia. It was practised mainly in the northern provinces of the empire, and radically changed the peasantry's relationship to the land and increased the authority of the *rim* holders. Thus, it was *rim* ownership that consolidated serfdom through the subordination of *zéga* as labourers and the *rim* owners as totally dependent on the *zéga* labour for cultivation.¹¹⁰ As a result the *rim* holders controlled administration of land and justice.¹¹¹

Basically the Gondarine era's rural society was consisted of *rim* land owners, landless

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ "*Rimə* is not strictly linked to the concept of tenure, but is associated with a particular form of gifts, donations, remunerations given to the church for its upkeep. At the same time *rim* is a peculiar right, a prerogative, a gift of services, animals, clothes, a deed of gift of material goods to a particular institution rather than the government." *Rim* was practiced differently, holding different names in different parts of Eritrea and Ethiopia. See I. Taddia, G. Dore, A. Bausi (eds), "*Materiale antropologico e storico sul rim in Etiopia ed Eritrea*" "*Anthropological and historical documents on "rim" in Ethiopia and Eritrea*", Torino L'Harmattan Italia, 2001, pp. 9-18.

¹⁰⁷ *Zéga* is a landless peasant labourer working in the *rim* land. In contemporary 'Amharic and Təgrəña the term *zéga* denotes for a citizen.

¹⁰⁸ Habtamu Mengistie, "Land Tenure and Agrarian Social Structure in Ethiopia, 1636-1900," p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 17.

*Zégoch*¹¹² and free peasants who lived on their *rəst*¹¹³ lands held through inheritance.¹¹⁴ However, the relationship between the landlords and the landless peasants (*Zégoch*) was purely economic, the *Zégoch* were personally free and their relation with the *rim* holder was land. With the expansion of the Ethiopian empire, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the northern tradition of *rim* land ownership was instrumental in the newly occupied southern part of the country. Shiferaw Bekele put the expansion of the aristocratic system of the northern Ethiopia to the south in the following term;

“The tenure structure in the south was in most or less pure form of communal ownership, where there had been no exploited peasant or exploiting lords. This structure was profoundly modified by the arrival of the *näfəṭäñöč* (ነፍጥኞች) who imposed a system only distant similar to their own northern system but essentially different from it. They rather proceeded to introduce private ownership of land (something that had not existed before in the region) and a new form of the *gäbar* (ገባር) system.”¹¹⁵

The Gondarine land ownership was implemented as a model to consolidate the system into the southern Ethiopia. The state coercively confiscated the inheritance of the indigenous peasants, subjugated and practised a form of serfdom under the northern military lords speaking Amharic and creed Orthodox Christianity.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the consolidation of Abyssinian serfdom in the southern part of the country was characterized by the deprivation of land ownership of the inhabitants and made them subjects to the system administered under homogenous ruling elite from the north. Similar to the feudal societies in other parts of the world, the consolidation of the superior positions of the Bet-’Asgädä on their subordinates took various mechanisms including; bounding of serfs to individual Šumaglä.¹¹⁷ In the absence of a centralized government that furnished strong security apparatus, the serfs were weak and vulnerable; as a result they seek protection. Therefore, looking for safety and security each serf family or clan was required to be attached to a master household in a contract form. In return, the Təgrä became a subject with

¹¹² *Zégoch* is a plural form for *zéga*.

¹¹³ *Rəst* is a communal land ownership of families/village inherited genealogically from the founding father. It cannot be sold but inherited from generation to generation.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

¹¹⁵ Bekele Shiferaw, “Historical outline of land tenure studies,” In *Anthropological and historical documents on “rim” in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. A. Bausi et al. Torino: L’Harmattan Italia, (2001), pp. 34-35.

¹¹⁶ Keller J. Edmond, Ethiopia: “Revolution, Class, and the National Question”; *African Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 321 (1981), pp. 519-549.

¹¹⁷ Šumaglä is an aristocratic name given to the ruling elite of the Bet-’Asgädä.

mandatory to supply necessary surplus to his lord.¹¹⁸ The position of the Təgrä diminished to the level of property of the master. The attachment took a hereditary form, whose descendants became serfs of the master's children and at the will of the Šumaglā a serf could be sold, granted to others, punished etc. Such relationship was at the cost of the clan identity of the serfs. For some time, the ruling class kept their distinctive linguistic and religious features, but later as the subordination goes to its highest level, the serfs' clan identity faded¹¹⁹ as a result identified themselves by the major tribal identities of their protector clan of Bet-'Asgädä.¹²⁰

Preserving once social division is indirectly delimiting a border, an important mechanism in keeping the two groups socially apart and consolidating the class stratification as protector and protected invader and invaded ruler and ruled etc. Around early nineteenth century, as the Bet-'Asgädä lost their linguistic and religious values and adopted that of their subjects, the cultural division was faded, but the class division was maintained stronger as the ruling elites prohibited intermarriage with their serfs. Like the *Nabətab* of the Bāni 'Amār,¹²¹ the Bet-'Asgädä practiced endogamy and kept their tribal purity through marriages mainly from within their tribe.¹²²

As we have seen in the above reading, consolidation of serfdom was performed in various feudal experiences in a different manner suitable to respective circumstances. By exacerbating the political, economic, cultural, social and security weaknesses were exploited by the ruling elites to advance their position. In the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system, the ruling elites primarily controlled the two vital components of mode of production; ownership of the land and the subjection of the labor, hereditarily tied to their position in the form of contract with definite duties and obligations of both sides and with no accepted possibility of liberation. In addition to the control of the mode of production, I have a conviction that the customarily subjugation of the Təgrä was possible through the prohibition of intermarriage and absorption of the tribal identity of the serf into the ruling elite's umbrella clan identities. Therefore, these were the main instruments employed by the Bet-'Asgädä to materialize the consolidation of their aristocratic

¹¹⁸ Gebremedhin Jordan, "Nationalism, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea"; *Review of African political Economy*, No. 3, Conflict in the Horn of Africa (Sept., 1984): pp. 48-57.

¹¹⁹ As the Təgrä households, families or clans of the same tribe scattered in different places it cannot be concluded that the whole tribe was integrated in to the identity of the ruling class.

¹²⁰ Venosa Joseph, "Adapting to the new path: Khatmiyya Sufi authority, the al-Mirghani family, and Eritrean nationalism during British Occupation, 1941-1949", *Journal of East African Studies*, 2013, pp. 5-6.

¹²¹ Gebre-medih Jordan, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1989), p. 49.

¹²² Seldom had the Masters still used to marry a woman from the serfs but the frequency was not to the extent that affecting the racial purity of the ruling class. But vice versa was strongly prohibited.

position in a way that serve their superior position.

1.3. Abolition of Serfdom.

In most cases of feudal experiences, emancipation of the subjects was achieved through serf's uprising and protest or revolutions conducted by ideologically organized groups in a way reflecting the sufferings of the serf class as a cause and brought about the final remedy. With the advancement of modernization, serfdom proved itself outdated mode of production, and becomes intolerable by the serfs for they had alternative livelihood and economies. Through time it touched the conscience of political leaders and developed willingness to free the serfs, however it was not without the opposition from the nobility and as a result with some requirements to be performed in the interest of the ruling class as an appeasement to accept the gradual decline of their status. In other words, this was similar to the arguments mentioned above that; the presence of strong central political authority had contributed in the decline of serfdom and the protection the lords offered was transferred to the state. In all cases under discussion, emancipation was not attained overnight but a number of reforms were introduced before the declarations were ordered to end the system.

In the Russian case, Jerome Blum stated that serfdom was weakened when the sovereign began to interfere itself between the lord and the serf that broke the lords' legal and administrative authority and introduced standards for duties that he could require from his peasant.¹²³ There were some emperors sympathize with the serfs' condition and tempted to minimize the exploitation and declare emancipation. Tsarina Catherine (1762–1796) clearly believed that serfdom was evil and contrary to Christian ethical values and decided to abolish it, however for fear of social crisis, and opinion from her advisors postponed to take place steadily in the future.¹²⁴ But her contribution was remarkable in the life of the serfs; she opened schools, permitted lords to free their own serfs, put an end to the law that placed orphans and unlawful children into serfdom, and she banned the practice of enserfing a free individual who married a serf.¹²⁵ Hence, these reforms played an inspirational role on the awareness of the society to honor and dignify serfs as human-beings.

Gradually, in the 19th century Russian nobility relaxed their grips and allowed serfs to

¹²³ Blum, "The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe," p. 809.

¹²⁴ McMahon Flatt Joan, *Powerful Political Women; Stirring Biographies of some of History's Most Powerful Women*, iUniverse, Inc. Bloomington, 2012, p. 93.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

work outside of their farming provided that they fulfill their obligations.¹²⁶ The restrictions on the mobility of the serfs had negative impacts on the industrialization of the Tsarist Russia, because it created shortage of labor supply. The 1861, emancipation decreed by Alexander II was in part to flatten the potential of serf revolt and it doesn't provide absolute freedom, but the procedure of the emancipation demanded the serfs to buy their freedom with 'redemption payments'. Thus, gradually the landlords' anarchic position gave way to the state.

In Poland, the serfs had long years of passive and active forms of resistance before emancipation was achieved through decree. In their endeavor to get rid of the exploitation and suffering, they used various forms of resistance. According to Kuligowski, serfs regularly used passive resistance, which include: "coming late to work, using worse and constantly breaking tools, slowness in performing the prescribed work, organized refusal to do serf work....."¹²⁷ Individual and group level escape from farm villages was also another form of resistance. Sporadic armed resistance was the most radical form of struggle during the 15th and 16th centuries, but the most serious move was known as "boiling" of the 18th century that took place throughout the state.¹²⁸

In Ethiopia, traditionally land was the basic means of social, political and economic security. However, land was in the hands of the few privileged elites, for example in 1974 around 65 per cent of the population was landless, living in the private lands of the elites mainly in the peripheral areas by paying taxes. Thus, tolerating such burden was difficult and rebellion seemed inevitable. Gebru Tareke examines the various peasant revolts in three different regions of the country extending from early 1940s to 1970. These were; the 1943 Raya and 'azebo revolts (first *Woyanä*) in Təgray, the 1963-1970 revolts in Bale, and the 1968-1969 in Gojjam. These rebellions were mainly instigated because of; "the reorganization of feudal power, attempts to increase national revenues by abolishing rights and privileges of the traditional aristocracy, attempts by the state to capitalize agriculture, and the ethnic chauvinism of highlanders in the south."¹²⁹ Edmond J. Keller; on the other hand enlighten the demonstrations organized by young intellectuals and students, known as 'student movement' of 1965 conducted before the

¹²⁶ Nafziger, *Russian Serfdom*, cit. p. 13.

¹²⁷ Waldemar, *A History of Polish Serfdom*, cit. p. 115.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest; Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*. (African Studies Series, number 71.) New York: Cambridge University Press. *The American Historical Review*, Volume 98, Issue 3, June 1993, p. 920-921.

parliament, mainly against the legitimacy of feudalism and imperial absolutism.¹³⁰ Then after, such demonstrations became common and towards the end of the decade pamphlets attacking directly against the Emperor openly circulated by the students demanding fundamental social, economic and political reforms.

The Emperor's social and economic policies were benefiting the 'Amhara, Təgray, and Amharanized-Oromos¹³¹ at the cost of the tenants in the peripheral areas of the country; as a result resentment was strong in the marginal regions.¹³² In early 1970s, as the Emperor's policies failed to answer the public demands, consequently the state mired with multiple challenges. The Emperor's pillars relevant for his survival began to fail. The demonstrations by students and various urban classes of the society against the unsuccessful socioeconomic policies supplemented by the catastrophic drought of 1973 and military mutiny put the centuries old dynasty to an historic end. The rural peasants particularly of the south took part on a class basis in changing the *status quo* of social order. In some parts of the country, poor tenants, peasants and landless farmers took the allocation of the land in to their hands; destroy property and symbols of the landed class.¹³³

In the Northern Highlands of Eritrea, the Bet-'Asgädä used to enjoy absolute privileges through the ownership of the land and subjected the people for three centuries. However, for several reasons, the Bet-'Asgädä position faded gradually starting from early 19th century, all the way to the Italian colonial era and finally crumbled during the British Military Administration. The Šumaglā authority's foundation was attacked and their position was dwindled under the Italian colonial administration. As pointed out by Jordan Gebremedhin; the Italians substituted the nobles of Bet-'Asgädä as a guarantor of protection and safety of the Təgrä. In early 1920s, during Gasparini administration, tired of the injustices and exploitation of the Bet-'Asgädä, the Təgrä community leaders approached the Italian colonial government to further limit the authority of the masters and seek protection. However, the colonial government declined the request, in response the Təgrä decided not to pay the customary dues to their traditional chiefs.¹³⁴ Jordan Gebremedhin further argued that the Təgrä attempted several unsuccessful localized

¹³⁰ Edmond Keller, *Ethiopia, cit.* p. 541.

¹³¹ The term Amharanized-Oromo stands mainly for those of Shoan Oromo that culturally assimilated to the ruling class 'Amhara through privileges, expansion of the feudal and modern education system.

¹³² Edmond Keller, *Ethiopia*, p. 541.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

¹³⁴ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Nationalism, Peasant Politics, cit.* pp. 48-57.

revolts against the Bet-ʼAsgädä lords. During the late 1930s, the colonial system further weakened the capabilities of the aristocratic nobles by introducing a salaried colonial office instead of the office of the chiefs. Another factor which undermined the position of the Bet-ʼAsgädä was the technological advancements introduced by the Italian colonial system; the accessibility of veterinary services radically transformed animal husbandry in Eritrea.¹³⁵ The two classes benefited the veterinary advantages differently. The Təgrä used the opportunity more than the Šumaglā who were less prepared to increase their property and animal wealth.¹³⁶ Consequently, the wealth accumulation possibility of the Təgrä increased tremendously and inevitably the negotiation confidence in their denial to pay the customary dues.

The colonial system introduced cash economy and through waged labor created alternative work opportunities for the serfs including; military conscription, urbanization, and agricultural labor works in plantations in Eritrean and the Sudan free of the social relationships with their overlords.¹³⁷ The colonial administration increased security and allowed nomadic wondering away from the traditional tribal pasture lands and this undermined the master's authority of control. Although not that much significant, Islam was also another factor to play a role in weakening the position of the masters in two periods of time. The first was with the coming of the ʼAd-Šäḳə from Arabia in the early 19th century. As a religious holy family they won the hearts and minds of the Təgrä under the Bet-ʼAsgädä. The unsatisfied Təgrä joined the new family. Trevaskis described the situation as follows;

“Dissident serfs were attracted to Šäḳə El Amin and his family both because they respected him as a form of saint, and because they followed him as a subject and not as serfs. This relationship has endured and such dues as the ruling family has received are voluntary offerings and not obligatory payments.”¹³⁸

Attached to the post World War II political developments in Eritrea, for the second time in the 1940s Islam played as a mobilizing means for the Təgrä. Especially with the organization of Moslem League as a vanguard political party advocating for the emancipation of the Təgrä, Islam played a great part and later utilized as a cause for Eritrean nationalism demanding for

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government; The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*, East African Studies, Ohio University Press, 2001, p. 45.

¹³⁸ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Eritrea*, cit. pp. 33-34.

independence.¹³⁹ In the late 1940s, the Muslim League led by 'Ibrahim Sulṭan linked the serf emancipation movement to nationalism, so Islam and Eritrean nationalism fused together as a means and an end respectively leading to independence. Joseph Venosa argued that, the struggle of the Təgrä for attaining their freedom in the early and mid 1940s served as the preliminary major push toward decolonization. The colonially educated Təgrä spearheaded the challenges of both the traditional aristocratic lords and the longstanding colonial system.¹⁴⁰ The weakened lords on their part, in reaction to the serfs move and in their attempt to retain their lost privileges, appealed to the feudal Ethiopian crown in alliance to extend their support for union.

The final termination of serfdom in the Western Lowlands and Northern Highlands of the country came in to being because the caretaker British Military Administration was suffocated by the strong and consistent demand of the Təgrä for emancipation. Trevaskis indicated that during the early days of the administration, the Northern Highland was hosting the struggle for the dissolution of the old aged aristocratic system. He also affirmed that the order was in process of collapse associated with the defeat of the previous Italian colonial establishment and the coming of the British Administration. In 1946 the fierce emancipation movement spread throughout the aristocratic areas of the Western Lowlands and Northern Highlands and was troublesome to the British Administration, where ninety percent of the Təgrä population were united in dismantling the remaining aristocratic elites.¹⁴¹ While the British Administrators were in fear of unmanageable chaos and inevitable anarchy, a lasting solution was proposed from Ibrahim Sulṭan; a colonial Italian educated with serf origin and was leading the serf emancipation movement. The proposal was the reorganization of new Təgrä groups through the resurrecting ancient Təgrä clans. These clans were involuntarily disintegrated and dispersed into the dominant tribal umbrellas of the masters during the early days of the domination in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁴² Initially, though seemed impossible but found to be the lasting remedy and emancipation brought tens of new Təgrä clans with newly elected chiefs.

The above description claimed the practices of the aristocratic system doomed not solely with the establishment of centralized political systems that seeks to control and respect human dignity, but also through an increased advancement of modern science and technology which outdated the old aged mode of production instead introduced new methods of making which

¹³⁹ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*, cit. p. 24.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Venosa, *Adapting to the new path*, cit. p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 72.

demanded technical know how rather than human labor. In the Təgrä-Šumaglā case, the new ideas of colonial system transformed existing mode of production and the post WW II developments which created an opportunity that increased awareness of the Təgrä to conquer their freedom and provided the alternative solutions of livelihoods. The role of the educated elites from the serf background was the cornerstone of the emancipation and without whom the liberation of the Təgrä would have been bleak.

Considering all above characterizations, ‘if’ assumed a standard model of feudalism, undoubtedly, I believe that the Bet-’Asgädä aristocratic social relationship was exceptional and incompatible in character. Therefore, in proving my argument, it is essential to look again on the three thematic sub divisions I applied in my presentation above. On the origin part of the aristocratic order, the Bet-’Asgädä family’s aristocratic position has been explained as an extension of the existing tradition in the region. However such superiority was achieved either through persuasion or using force. Under this theory of continuity and change of aristocracy, for thousands of years, in Eritrean in general and the Northern Highland area in particular, there is a tradition that, waves of migration of communities was common. In such condition, most of the time the new comers due to their material (military) and/or cultural superiority impose their superior position on the existing communities. To demonstrate this claim, in ancient time there were customs and traditions, racial and linguistic blend, folklore etc that are still active throughout the country.

In explaining the coming of Bet-’Asgädä into aristocratic position in the Saḥəl, it is believed that, the family had a relatively material, cultural and organizational superior over the existing indigenous communities. However, there are two diverging ideas on the procedure of the application of the Bet-’Asgädä superior advantages on the indigenous residents; peacefully or forcefully. Assuming either of the mechanisms, at the moment the Bet-’Asgädä family downcasted the indigenous people into servile subjects, they declared the ownership of the land, to be utilized for pastoral way of life.¹⁴³ At this point, in comparison with other origins of aristocratic practices, the Bet-’Asgädä had neither concerted goals for imperial expansion and fulfilling shortage of agricultural labor like in Russian nor commercial interests of the Polish realities. Hence, it reflects dissimilar characteristics in its origin with other feudal realities.

¹⁴³ According to Alberto Polera’s description, the provision of the masters from the Təgrä was entirely animal product and supplements their extra demands with durra and sorghum through barter trade from the coastal port cities and trade routes along the Red Sea. However, depending on the geography and availability of rain parts of Bet-’Asgädä families used to practice agriculture in minimum capacity.

Once the aristocratic order was established, the ruling class required some mechanisms to consolidate the system. Generally in all experiences, the position of the two classes took a firm hereditary form. The psychology of the subordinated class had to accept itself as hereditarily inferior and servile position. In doing so, the Bet-'Asgädä family, declared the ownership of the land, fragmented Təgrä clans and allocated them in to different families of the ruling class, this was done in order to weaken their strength and further loose their blood ties so as to avoid future concerted revolts. Following their split, the Təgrä due to their organizational weaknesses and few in number per kin, they felt insecure, thus they needed the protection from the ruling class in return for servile duty. Keeping cultural purity too was implemented by the Bet-'Asgädä family, their retained Christianity and avoided matrimonial relationship with their subordinates who adhere to Islam. These were some of the various mechanisms employed by the Bet-'Asgädä.

Given the governmental positions on the aristocratic orders in Russia, Poland, and Ethiopia, the consolidation of the aristocratic relationship was strengthened through various methods. Government declaration was widely used in imperial Russia in consolidating the feudal system. Under such numerous decrees the life of the serfs was made to be strongly bound to the manors and their right of movement was restricted to that particular farming where their residential houses were located. Mixed cultural and religious means was applied in Polish feudalism, where the ruling class and the clergy identified themselves as superior race and blessed to rule from heaven. On the other hand the serfs were told to believe that they were from inferior race that destined to remain servants of their superiors. In this case intermarriage was forbidden and both classes despite their cultural union; adhering Christianity, speak the same language and originally from the same roots, but socially and economically remained distant each other.

In the Ethiopian case, the ruling class belonged to the northern Orthodox Christians of Semitic origin who speaks 'Amharic and Təgrña, both evolved from Ge'ez. Therefore, they belong to a common cultural background, but their newly conquered subjects were culturally different; adhering either Islam or various traditional beliefs and spoke different languages that belong to other language families. The means they use in consolidating their superior position was similarly by declaring the imperial ownership of the land and through confiscating the land of the free people, down cast them in to servile subjects and made them to remain tenants under the new owners of the *gult* lands who spoke Semitic languages. Therefore, in all cases

consolidation of once superiority was affirmed through the creation of seemingly immutable boundaries separating the two classes apart.

The third theme, the downfall of the aristocratic order or emancipation of the subjects was in most cases achieved through declarations, protests and revolts. The order proved itself inappropriateness with the contemporary mode of production and social relationships. In most cases feudal orders demolished through the struggle of the subjects spearheaded by intellectual personnel of serf background supported and guided by sympathizing groups. The system was found to be obsolete and cumbersome to the status quo, and its demise was inevitable. In the case of Bet-'Asgädä and other western lowland Təgrä emancipation process, their given situation was a unifying agent. All the Təgrä determined to deny paying the customary tributes. The circumstances convinced the then British Military Government in Eritrea, and agreed to approve their freedom by capitulating the political, economic as well as social privileges and interests of the *Nabətab* of Bäni-'Amär and the Bet-'Asgädä of the Northern Highlands ruling elites. The end of Russian, Polish, and Ethiopian aristocratic social relationships was mainly through the combination of revolts and declarations, especially in the Ethiopian case the change brought a milestone in the social, economic and political orders of the society.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND CULTURE

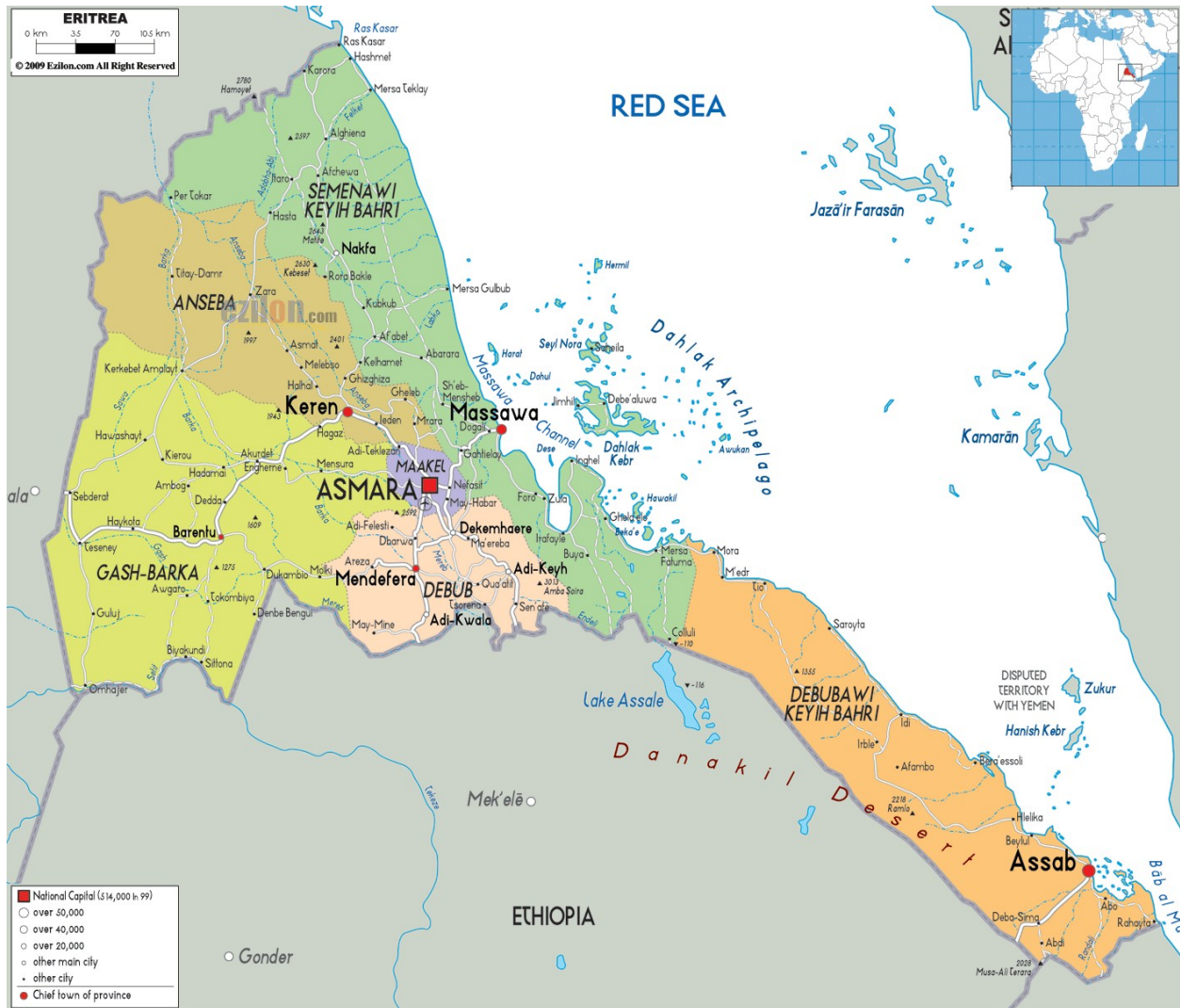
Introduction

This chapter is about the general condition of the Northern Highlands or the Sahel region before the migration of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. It highlights; the physical geography and the various resultant climatic and seasonal variations in relation to their influence on the socioeconomic and political lives of the inhabitants. The region is believed to have been the habitat of an obscured and little known ancient groups, commercial thoroughfare, an *en route* and destination of communities of migration and invading forces of different social groups from all directions including across the Red Sea. Therefore, this part of the thesis is reviewing the consecutive human experiences in the region. Assessing the religious and social history of the ancient inhabitants is important. In this chapter, the early days of the two main beliefs; Christianity and Islam in the region is explained. Təgrä, is the name of the language and identity of the inhabitants of the region. It is believed to be evolved from the ancient gəʿəz language. Therefore, it is vital to review the assumed historical accounts on the origin and development of the language together with its sister languages. The Təgrä language and culture had absorbed a number of groups of people including the Bet-ʿAsgädä that originally speaking different languages, adhering different religions and distinct cultures. In order to have a better and clear picture of the subject matter of this research, it is relevant to have a detailed scrutiny of the socioeconomic, cultural and political past of the various communities inhabiting the Northern Highlands before the arrival of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. This part is the cornerstone of the chapter; it detailed the uneven genealogical origin of the Bet-ʿAsgädä and their organizational structure and the other secluded clans and small mobile nomadic groups, which were subjected by the Bet-ʿAsgädä.

This chapter tried to dwell on, though might seem to have gone beyond the scope of the main subject, however it is my conviction that, it is fundamental to glint the human experiences in the region centuries before the institutionalization of the aristocratic system. I believe, the incorporation of the various Təgrä groups in Sahel and their territories under the subordination of the Bet-ʿAsgädä was possible owing to their modest sociopolitical and organizational make ups

and the vulnerable nature of the topography of the territory. Therefore the overall objective of this chapter is by recreating the above mentioned elements and then to give a relative clear picture of the Northern Highlands prior to the coming of Bet-'Asgädä.

2.1 Geography and Climate of the 'Asgädä Territories



Map. 1 :The political map of Eritrea showing the six administrative divisions.

Source, <https://www.ezilon.com/maps/africa/eritrea-maps.html>

The habitat of the Bet-'Asgädä family and their subjects is characterized by diverse topographic features. The Northern Highland, which is the main home of the community, its terrain is an extension of the central plateau. From the south, the highland's east-west width is wider in

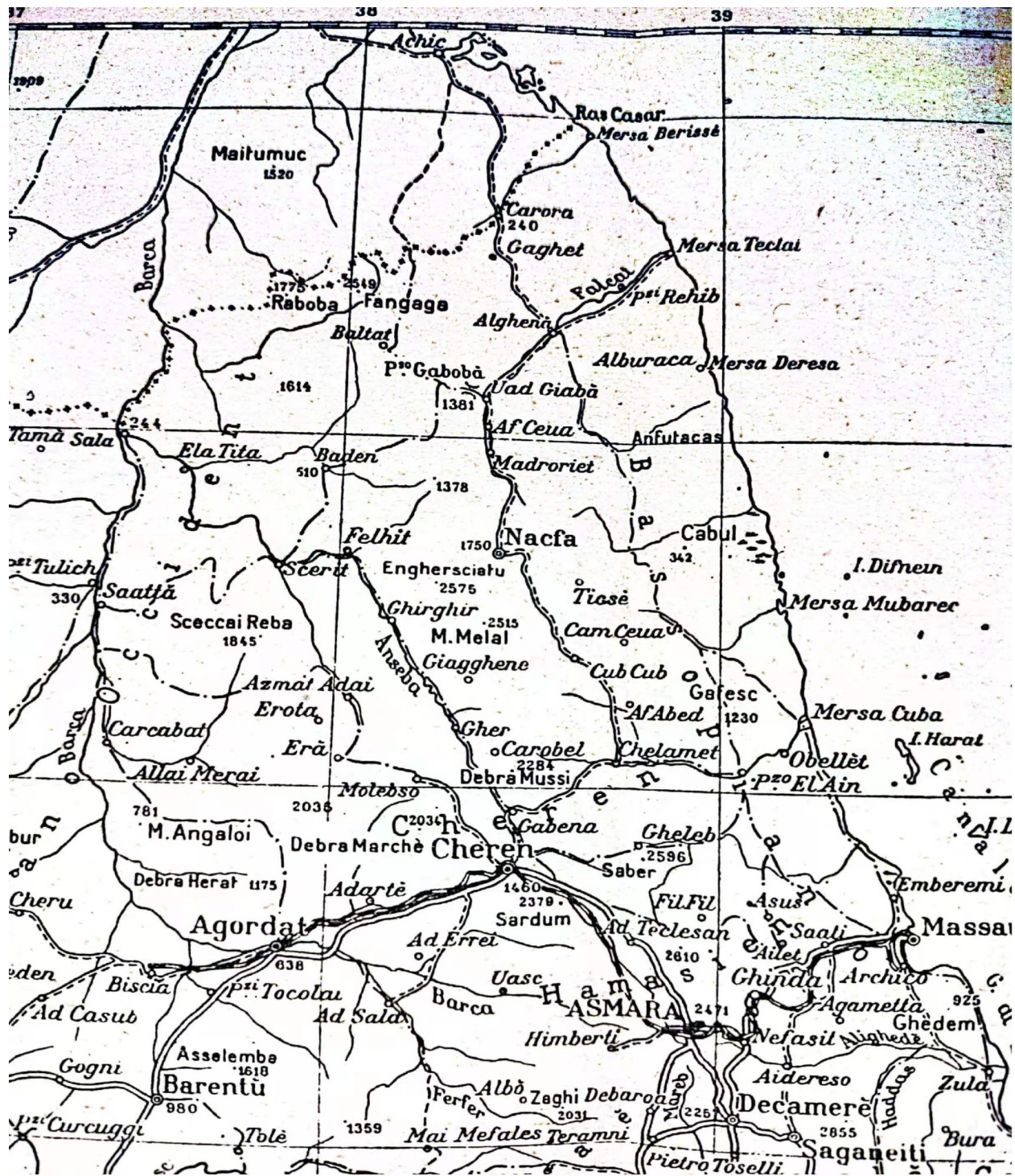
southern Eritrean highland and gradually narrows towards the north and it terminates in Saḥəl along the Sudanese frontier. During the British Military Administration, the area inhabited by the Bet-ʿAsgädä area was under the administration of Kärän Division, and was divided in to two administrative subdivisions or districts; the Naqfa (ናቕፋ) district in the north and Kärän district in the south. In this way, it better described the geographic distribution of the Bet-ʿAsgädä and the topographic characteristics and the resulting economic differences. The former district comprises the mountainous northern plateau and the Red Sea coastal plains. And the Kärän district is the southern part of the division. It comprises a low plateau where the mountainous terrain slopes down towards the west. The altitudinal differences in both districts affected the climate and mode of production of the inhabitants. While in the mountainous Naqfa district inhabitants perform nomadic way of life, the relatively plain Kärän district lead a mixed economy, largely sedentary economy supplemented by livestock production.

The three clans of the Bet-ʿAsgädä; the Ḥabab, ʿAd-Täkles and ʿAd-Tämaryam occupied three respectively recognized autonomous territories.¹⁴⁴ Therefore it is essential to describe the three respective geographic areas which have variations in climate and greatly affect the way of living of the inhabitants. The Ḥabab community occupies the Naqfa hills, Rora Ḥabab (ፎራ ሓባብ), Naro (ናሮ) plain and ʿAgrae (አግራዕ) up to Qarura (ቋሩሩ) in the north and the eastern coastal plains to the Red Sea.¹⁴⁵ Thus, they occupy areas that are the most coldest in the highland and hottest along the coastal plains. The territory, especially the plateau gain relatively good rainfall, therefore grows sufficient pasture which made it favorable for livestock production, thus for centuries the Ḥabab community and their subjects' economy was dependent on nomadic way of life.¹⁴⁶ The clan was moving to and from the highland to the coastal plain according to the raining seasons. The region has fertile land and is good for farming especially beginning from the Italian colonial period, agriculture become part of the economy of the society similar to their kinsfolk, the ʿAd-Täkles of the ʿAnsäba valley in the south.

¹⁴⁴ The Italian Colonial Government's decree of 29 June 1898, n. 444 administratively divided the colony in to provinces (*commissariati*) and districts (*residenze*). The decree of 30 April 1901, n. 22 that put the tribes of the Saḥəl dependent on the Regional Provincial Headquarters (*Commissariato Regionale*) of Massawa were assigned to the Administration of a special governative emissary (*special inviato governativo*). The *Residenza* of Saḥəl was made to comprised with jurisdiction over the area of the same name and the clans of ʿAd-Tämaryam, ʿAd Şawra (ዓድ ጻውራ), ʿAd-Mu'alim (ዓድ ሙዓሊም), ʿAd-Şākə, Ḥabab, ʿAd Ḥasri (ዓድ ሓስሪ) of the Tābḥ (ተብጽ) and Raşayda (ራሻይዳ). The decree was materialized since October 1902. Therefore, based on the new administrative structure, while the Ḥabab and ʿAd-Tämaryam were set up under the Saḥəl *Residenze*, but the ʿAd-Täkles due to their geographic proximity were entrusted to the Kärän.

¹⁴⁵ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 194-195.

¹⁴⁶ Nadel, *Races and Tribes*, cit. p.13.



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 CS Scanned with CamScanner

Map. 2: Detailed map of Eritrea. Source: Martini, Ferdinando. *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D’Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell’Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vol. IV, 1946.

The ‘Adə Tämaryam clan together with their Təgrä subjects occupied the Läbka (ለብካ) Valley, near ‘Afa‘abät (አፍኖበት). Their territory is bounded with the Ḥabab in the north, the ‘Ansäba including ‘Ad-Täkles, Bilen, and Bet Ğukə in the west. They also meet with the Bet ‘Abrahä (ቤት ኣብረሀ) in the south and in the east with Mäsəhalit (መስሐሊት) and the Red Sea.¹⁴⁷ Geographically it is low lying plateau with warmer climate suitable for animal rearing and farming in the river banks. The other advantage of the clan was control of the trade route from Massawa passing through the Läbka valley to the Barka (ባርካ) and then to Käsäla (ከሰላ), in the eastern Sudan.¹⁴⁸ However, the clan was leading a nomadic way of life traveling from their *Dəgä* in the Läbka valley to the coastal plains. The proximity of their habitat to the coastal plains gave the clan an advantage to enjoy the two raining seasons. Some Təgrä clans under their subjection used to practice farming, but their possession was not much productive for the fertile land was owned by ‘Ad-Tämaryam lords, therefore the Təgrä cultivate in the barren land. However, like other Bet-’Asgädä, the ‘Ad-Tämaryam begun to practice farming later, during the Italian colonial period.¹⁴⁹

The third groups are the ‘Ad-Täkles, living in the southern most of their ‘Asgädä brothers. In the district following the Marəya Şälam (ማርያ ጸላም), the ‘Ad-Täkles are the biggest community in the Kärän district. They are the only Bet-’Asgädä clan administratively and geographically in the district of Kärän and are relatively the most peaceful than the other Bet-’Asgädä except the sporadic dispute with the Marya (ማርያ) and Bet Tawqä Bilen (ቤት ታውቀ).¹⁵⁰ Their territories are relatively large on the right bank of the ‘Ansäba River bordering with Bet Tawqä in the southwest up to Kärän, the western slopes of the habab or Naqfa hills in the north and northeast and the Gärgär (ገርገር) valley.¹⁵¹ The ‘Ad-Täkles, reside in areas including; Ṭähra (ጥህራ), Şa‘əda (ጳዕዳ), Habäro Şälim (ሃበሮ ጸላም), Habäro Şa‘əda (ሃበሮ ጳዕዳ), the mountain chain of Sə‘ənaab (ስኢናብ) and Gäbgäb (ገብገብ) up to Fəntəg (ፍንትግ) on the ‘Ansäba River side, which made them the southernmost from their kin brothers. The ‘Ad-Täkles holds an area relatively plain and suitable both for animal rearing which used to be part of their main economy. Farming was largely introduced as a new way of living in support of their considerable livestock

¹⁴⁷ EPLF Public Administration Research Section, *Təgrä of wadi-labka* (ዋዲ-ለብካ ትግረ), Sahəl, Code 186, Call No. 93/0017, Shelf A, Column 03, File 34, 1983, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p.149.

¹⁵⁰ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*. Box 93, File no. 215/KE, Acc. No. 11134, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵¹ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, Nd, p 159.

raring to make them the most settled and permanently established clan than their kins.¹⁵² They begun extensive farming some time before the coming of Italians in Habäro Şälim and later expanded to Habäro Şa'ada during the colonial period.¹⁵³ But, as the production tools were backward the produce was less, thus the clan was dependent on livestock raring. Farming developed later after the fair distribution of land was secured especially along the river banks and relatively modern means of production were introduced. At this time, they are leading almost sedentary life.¹⁵⁴ In all the Three Mäfläs¹⁵⁵ (ሞፍለስ) territories, land was a clannish ownership under the Bet-'Asgädä, and the Təgrä under their respective control were obliged to pay dues and provide services in both nomadic as well as farming sectors for their use of the land.

With regard to the territorial boundaries and economies, during the Italian period the livelihood of the Kärän areas including the 'Ad-Täkles became agriculture and through the acquisition and long occupation of the lands, clan territories were well defined.¹⁵⁶ The Naqfa district is still leading a pastoral way of life as a result the clan boundaries was not fixed so it had a fluid character but there existed no land disputes thanks to the generally accepted inter-clan boundaries. Therefore, owing to the economic characteristics of the districts, the Italian administration declared the clan territories of Naqfa to be *demniale* in 1926. This declaration of government ownership of the land assumed no clan territories in the area.¹⁵⁷ Below is the presentation of clear clan territorial boundaries in a map prepared by the Italians.

¹⁵² British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*. pp. 28-29.

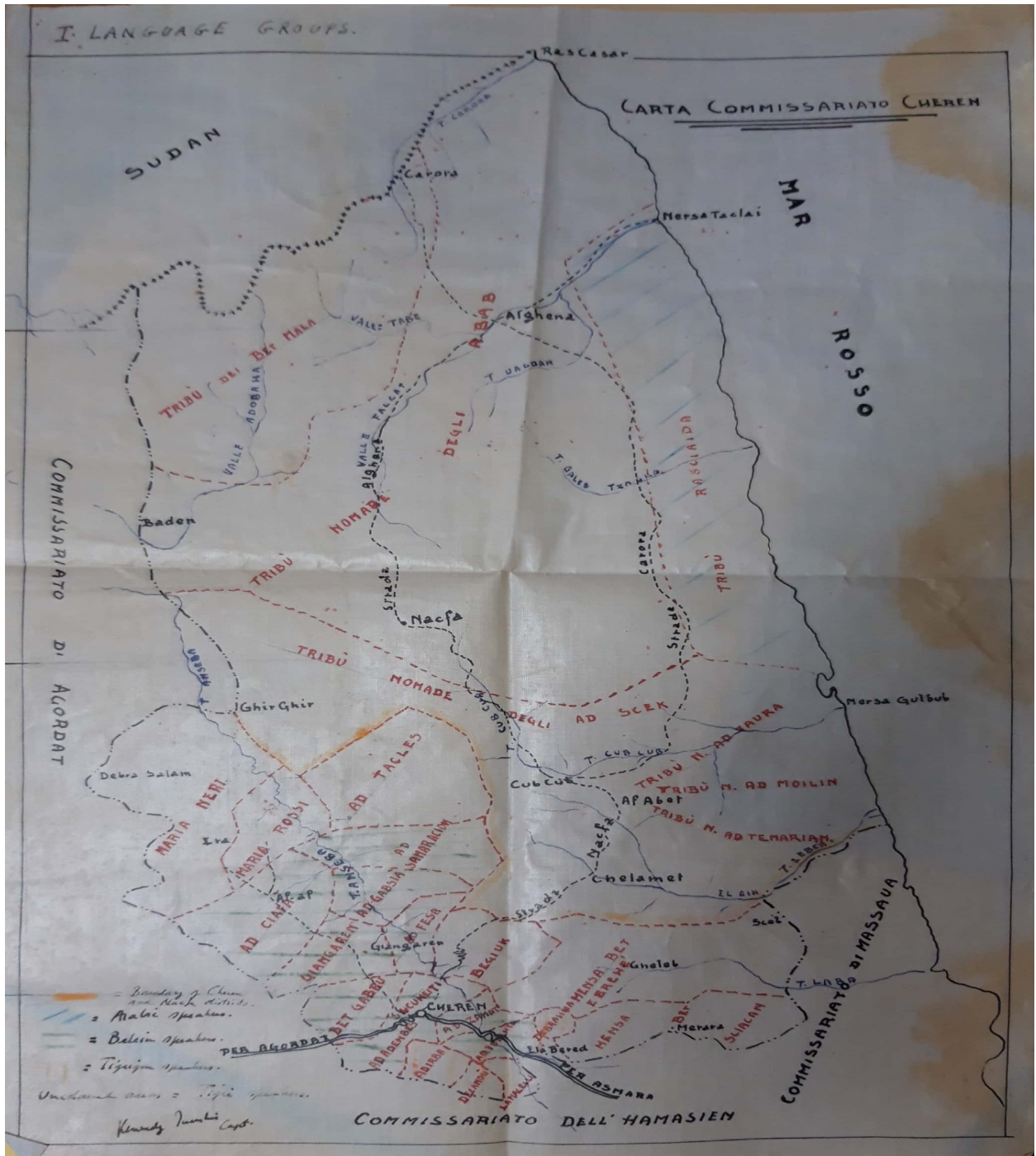
¹⁵³ EPLF Public Administration Research Section, *Economic Livelihood of the People of Sahel* (ቁጠባዊ ምክብብር ህዝቢ ሳሕል), Sahel, 1983, p. 4

¹⁵⁴ Nadel, *Races and Tribes*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁵ The three divisions of Bet-'Asgädä are also known as “Three mäfäläs”. Mäfäläs was the son of Abib and considered as the father of the three 'Asgädä clans. Actually, he was brother of Tämariam and father of Həbtes (habab) and Täkles.

¹⁵⁶ G.K.K Trevaskis, A Letter to Chief Secretary O.E.T.A. Asmara, 11 Sept. 1942, File no. 66/D.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.



Map 3: Detailed Geographic description of the Aristocratic areas. Source: Native Administration Political Organization Keren, Box/204, Fine No. 255/KE, Vol. I, RDC, Asmara.

Geographically, the central part of the mountainous plateau of the Northern Highland has an elevation ranging from 2000 to 2700 meters above sea level and holds fertile plains and table lands like the Rora Habab. There, the climate resembles that of the central plateau and is suitable

for cereal grains and livestock rearing. The plateau is also traversed by low valleys and massifs with dry and hot weather receiving relatively low amount of rainfall, and the vegetation is mainly of acacia varieties but the environment is suitable for goats, sheep and camel production. The western side of the Northern Highlands immediately descended some 1400 up to 1800 meters to the low lying arid and semi desert plains extending into the northeastern Sudan. These expanses are crossed by many seasonal tributary rivers of the Barka lowland and then join to 'Ansäba River which supported the life in the plains by carrying fertile silt to the extensive Tokar cotton plantation of the Sudan.¹⁵⁸

On the eastern side of the plateau, the mountain descends sharply to the narrow coastal plains of the western coast of the Red Sea. By far it is the most important region for the seasonal migration. There, the climate is extremely hot and humid dry in summer, wet, cold and foggy during winter. Like the western side of the highland, eastern escarpment leading to coastal plain is traversed by multiple of rivers including; Fälkät (ፈልካት), Läbka (ለብካ), Laba (ለባ), Moga'ə (ሞጋዕ), 'Azhara (አዝሃራ), 'Aflag (አፍላግ) and 'Amdäg (ዓምደግ) rivers flowing to the Red Sea. These rivers provide seasonal water for animals and in the later century, with the introduction of flood diversion irrigation, the rivers played a pivotal role in transforming the nomadic community to practice farming. For centuries, the rivers also served as routes for the east-west commercial activities.

On the eastern coastal plains, the rivers that are utilized by the people for irrigation are; Moga'ə River, departed from around Naqfa flow via Kubkub (ኩብኩብ) waters the Nägälə Dədəg (ነገል ድድግ), 'əmran (ዕምራን) and Gulbub (ጉልቡብ) agricultural areas then entered the Red Sea. 'Azhara River departs from 'Amäkäkät (አምካካት) Mountains, west of 'Afə'abät pass via 'Azhara flow to 'Awäga'ə (ዓዉጋዕ) agricultural plains joined with Läbka River at Wolät Səkur (ዎለት ስኩር) then enter the Red Sea. 'Aflag and 'Amdäg Rivers departed from Yämho (የምሆ) Mountain, then water the irrigational agriculture in the Gadəm Ḥalib (ጋድም ሓሊብ) then join Läbka River and enter the Red Sea. Läbka River, departed from Mänsa'ə (ሙንሳዕ), Gäbgäbə and 'Afə'abät joined by different minor tributary rivers flow and water the Qəfnäläh (ቅፍነላሕ), Gadəm Ğämaherə (ጋድም ጀማሀር) and 'Abarara (አባራራ) agricultural areas, it also waters the farming area known as Qəba'ə (ቅባዕ) before it enter the Red Sea. These rivers brought fertile and silt soil to the agricultural areas in the plain.¹⁵⁹ In this case the Ḥabab and their Təgrä and the

¹⁵⁸ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 1-3.

¹⁵⁹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ለብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 3.

'Ad-Tämaryam with their subjects were beneficiaries of the Highland and the coastal plains with their seasonal variations. These days, the majority of the agro-pastoralists continue their seasonal movements from and to the coastal lowlands and the highlands of Sahel, but there are some clans permanently resided in the coastal plains. Throughout the region, similar to the topographic variations, rainfall differs in time and intensity. Generally the region has two raining seasons. The raining season in the coastal plains is from October to March and the community called it 'Awlet (አውለት). It is characterized by fog and spray of rain. In the areas with medium altitude, the main rain season is the same as the coastal plain but it enjoys average amount of shower during the summer of the highland from mid May to mid September. During the rainy season of the coastal lowland and medium altitude areas, the hot weather get cooler and grain and pasture grows which turn out to be suitable for human and animals. Therefore, the coastal plains benefited from both raining seasons. The coastal summer in the form of rain and the highland rain in the form of flood in watering their irrigation, thus they produce twice a year.

Throughout the four seasons, a variety of winds blow in the region which resulted in diverse climatic conditions. These are; winter winds/*Lhata* (ለኤታ),¹⁶⁰ of the hot and dry season. During day time, hot wind or *Käbot* (ካቦት) blows from east or the sea side then to the west.¹⁶¹ This wind carries dust, and is simoom, desert storm. During night time the *šämal* (ሸማል) north wind blow from the Sea to the plains and slowly cooled down the temperature. Winds blowing during summer of the highland have different names in different parts of the plain. These are 'Ayrä'at (ዓይረአት) and *Kamsin* (ካምሲን). During the rainy season in the highland, and the winds known as 'Ayrä'at blow from west to east and brought cold from the plateau. Simultaneously *Kamsin* also blows in this season. It blows from north to the south with strong whirlwind and dust. The latter wind damages houses and causes harm on human and animal lives. This time is raining season of the highland and the rivers' flood from the plateau diverted to the irrigation and brought cold to the surrounding.

A wind blowing during autumn or *Qaym* (ቃይም) is locally known as *Mäntälos* (መንጣሎስ). It blows from the sea side to the escarpment or from east to west. The wind is wet and ventilates the plain with the moisture it brought from the sea. When the cold wind reach in the highland, it gets dry and indicates the harvest season. Later, another cold wind coming from the sea is known as *Mäqäyro* (መቕደሮ) which mostly cause flu. During the raining season of the

¹⁶⁰ The winter winds/*lähata* blows from mid March to mid June, a dry winter season.

¹⁶¹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 5.

coastal plains two winds blows mainly from the east and north. These are; 'Azeb (አዜብ), a wet wind blowing from the sea side to the plains, and *Hababay* (ሓበበይ) or *Bahray* (በሕራይ) is cold wind blowing from the north to south. The latter causes nausea and increases ailment in the residents of the coastal area. During this season, both the coastal plain and the highland become cloudy, foggy and cold with spray of rain.¹⁶²

The varieties of geographic terrains in the region resulted in diverse climate, as well as flora and fauna. The vegetation in the three altitudinal positions are including shrubs big trees which are important in the daily life of the community as fodder for their animals, in construction of hut or houses, making home utensils, making instruments of production used in diverting flood to irrigation, food making, traditional medicine, selling as a fire wood to towns that became as a source of cash and their fruits for human food etc. The diversity of climate also allowed the wild animals to prevail. Decades back the wild animals in the area were including; the fierce boar, the gazelles and buck, the wild horses, the guinea fowl and francolin, that once were in abundance.¹⁶³ However their survival was in competition with the human and domestic animals thus became victims of hunting as a result their existence greatly diminished. The above geographic and climatic variations are suitable for animal production and the inhabitants with a nomadic way of life wondering according to the rain seasons of the highland and the coastal lowlands. Consequently, the economy of the aristocratic system of Bet-'Asgädä became a nomadic pastoralism where the lords extract live animals and dairy products. However, according to Alberto Pollera, this pattern of life might not have been the sole way of life of the ancient inhabitants of the area. The still visible ruins of buildings and the terracing on the hills and slopes around Rora and Naqfa plateau are foot marks of the previous farming settlements.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand Longrigg suggested that the ancient terraces and wells are indications of abandoned agricultural economy due to climatic changes. According to his hypothesis centuries back rainfall must have been plenty and farming was possible, however in the later times, due to deforestation and other factors the amount of rainfall declined to support good harvest as a result the community give up farming.¹⁶⁵ In this case the climatic circumstances had fundamentally

¹⁶² Ibid, pp. 5-7.

¹⁶³ E. Treves, Editore, *Biblioteca di viaggi nel Mar Rosso e tra I Bogos*, (Milan, 1872). In Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea; The History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries*, Harrassowitz Verlag-Wiesbaden, 1996, p. 9. Anthony d'Avray witnessed the existence of much of these wild-lives in person in 1942-46.

¹⁶⁴ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 191-192.

¹⁶⁵ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. p. 27.

affected the mode of production of the inhabitants; from farming or probably mixed economy into nomadism.

2.2 People and History

It is difficult to precisely identify the first inhabitants of the Northern Highlands. As a matter of fact, throughout history, the region has accommodated different groups of people with different origin, background, economy and culture. In reconstructing the identity and history of these earliest inhabitants, it is essential to revisit the available local and colonial written materials and oral history of the inhabitants. The written sources are mainly colonial documents, or produced by foreigners and with some locally produced written materials. The former, especially those of written by the Italian colonial agents are the most available, however their methodology and aim is not purely historical research. For the purpose was administrative in nature, they are just scanning the overall ethnographic survey of the existing groups without profound depth of their past experiences. The materials are good attempts but more of linguistic based in classifying the communities, thus lack strength in critically looking in to the remote history and culture of these peoples prior to their current form. The colonial materials on the other hand are good contributions for they are relatively the earliest written sources. The local vernaculars were not in a position to record the local history as the literate people were religious and the Gə'əz script was solely for spiritual purposes and the secular world was not a much concern. Thus, for generations history and legend of these groups was in oral form. Therefore, the colonial materials are undeniably command a pivotal position, as a result in this part of thesis they hold the lion's share.

The remote past history of the region involved the migration of diverse communities held the most important but yet unstudied past. My endeavor to reconstruct the ancient part of the history below is from the available sources and obviously only basic, thus needs an archaeological and other scientific examination. The colonial materials are more of linguistic and ethnographic in content and presented in a holistic approach. They are shallow and inexpressive of details of individual group's history. The authors express their racial and judgmental attitudes and owing to their main informant sources more probably were from the aristocratic class, therefore biased in nature. Every group of communities has its own tradition and oral history of origin, and such sources failed to examine it in detail. Many of the local published and

unpublished materials are of good attempts, they are mainly produced by local writers from the oral history relayed from generation to generation, but not without shortcomings as the informants are self censored and prone to be subjective. Therefore, reading this part needs to keep the shortcomings in mind and look in proportional prism. However, this part of the thesis gives a relative depth of foundation for the subsequent body of the study.

The available materials and traditions are main pillars in solving the difficulties of identifying or hypothesizing the earliest inhabitants of the Northern Highlands. However, despite lack of certainty, there are some mentions and suggestions about the ancient dwellers, deciphered from the engravings and artifacts, interpreted from the documents of ancient writers and travelers in the region. Hence, in an attempt to discern those ancient inhabitants, it is essential to talk and hypothesize about unknown people who perished without a verifiable links to the current peoples of the region. Based on documents of Ptolemies of the Hellenic Egypt, Conti Rossini mentioned the Soboridi group probably contemporaries of 'Agə'azyān (አግአዝያን)¹⁶⁶ of the southern Arabia, who conquered the Šmāžana (ሸሙዳና) and southern 'Akälä Guzay (አከለ ጉዛይ) since third century BC were those who used to live in the central course of 'Anəsäba river as far as the adjacent coastal plains of Sahəl.¹⁶⁷ They might have been the ancestors of the Sabur (ሰቡር) whom tradition of the region considered them as one of ancient inhabitants of the Sahəl area. In the northern part, Pliny mentioned a people known as the Asachae or Hasac occupying areas extending from Rora up to Tokar, and they were a community with the same mobile patterns as the contemporary Bet-'Asgädä.¹⁶⁸

Oral tradition in the Sahəl also offers two obscured and fuzzy groups of people known as Tāwqe (ተውቄ) and 'Awqe (አውቄ) to be the ancient inhabitants of Sahəl.¹⁶⁹ However, there is no reliable evidence or information proving their existence. The Sahəl people believed that the unidentified burial grounds in different parts of Rora Ḥabab are believed to be of these communities.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, there is no any known genealogical, cultural or material legacy. The names resemble to the founding fathers of the Bilen, but they must have been not the same people because they are not related in time and there are no legends, acknowledged blood

¹⁶⁶ The term 'Agə'azyān implies to the people believed to have Gə'əz origin and spoke the language.

¹⁶⁷ Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etioṗia*, Milano, 1928, translated by Lynn A. Yuill, 2001, p. 140.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ EPLF Public Administration Research Section, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሙበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), Sahəl, 1983, p. 23.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

relation or claim from both sides. The Northern Highlands as any of the rest of the country has experienced a series waves of migration of peoples, where an existing clans subdued by a newly coming clans and another conquering clans did the same cycle of conquest and subjugation of the ruling ones.

To begin with, it is believed that the ancestors of present day Nara (ናራ) and Kunama (ኩናማ) people who departed from the bushes of the southeastern Sudan then push to the Gaš-Sätit lowlands and later occupied the Barka Lowlands and then to Northern Highlands.¹⁷¹ Through the place names and oral history in the Saḥəl community both groups are still actively remembered. The ancestral communities of Nara and Kunama are believed to be the earliest settlers in the Wadi-Labka area up to Mahya'ə (ማህያኢ), an ancient name for 'Af'abät, and extending up to around Naqfa.¹⁷² Although there is no credible explanation for when and why they abandoned the region, but farming terraces signifying their agricultural economy are still identified by the current inhabitants in Baqos (ባቕስ), Kärar (ካራር) and Yämho which are known as Därät Barya (ደረት ባረያ) farming fields of Barya or Nara people.¹⁷³ According to the oral history of the communities, all the current settlers admitted to have come after the Nara and Kunama left the area. The Bet-'Asgädä reiterated that the 'Ad Däbray (ዒድ ደብራይ), their cousins to have arrived while the Nara and Kunama still inhabiting in Saḥəl, especially in the Läbka area.¹⁷⁴ Thus, it seemed that, the two groups of people are by far the most probable and highly supported to be considered as the earliest inhabitants of the country.

Later on migrant groups, a nomadic people from their home in the northern Sudan and southeastern Egypt conquered the Barka Lowlands and the Northern Highlands.¹⁷⁵ These Hamitic people were better armed nomadic group that succeeded in subjecting the indigenous

¹⁷¹ The oral history of the Bet-'Asgädä claims that during the first arrival of the family, the Barya and Baza people, or the present day Nara and Kunama were still living in the Saḥəl as farming communities in areas including; Rora Ḥabab, Naqfa, 'Af'abät, Läbka etc.

¹⁷² In the EPLF, *Təgrä of wadi-labəka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), page 78. It is stated that, it is believed that Baria, Bazen and Fuj people to be the ancient settlers in Baqos, Mahyae, and in 'Ansäba River area. Still there are legacies in place called Kurba Baria meaning, Mount Baria in 'Ansäba. As additional proof for the Saḥəl particularly the 'Af'abät and Läbka area for being inhabited by the Barya, the oral tradition tells that a caravan from *labəka* carrying salt went to the Baria land to barter the salt with grain and became guests to an old Baria woman. She wondered for they brought salt asked them where they came from and if their land was not growing cereal, they told her that they came from 'Af'abät, and she told them Mahya'ə/ 'Af'abät was the most suitable and fertile for growing cereal, which signifies that the Baria used to live there as a result had good knowledge of the region.

¹⁷³ EPLF, *Təgrä of wadi-labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 26.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁷⁵ These groups of people are described in various sources as Hamitic peoples, but I prefer to call the migrant groups from the north.

communities wherever they settled, and adopted many languages and culture. Then thanks to their overwhelming conquest, the territories of present day Eritrea and Ethiopia became a Hamitic realm.¹⁷⁶ They subdued or ejected the Nara and Kunama dwellers to their original home in the southwest, Gaṣə area.¹⁷⁷ The new comers spread along the dry coastal desert lowlands down to the south following the Red Sea sandy coastal areas to form the Somali lands, Afar, and other groups of peoples in Ethiopia.¹⁷⁸ Thus the migrant people from the north conquered the western lowlands of Barka, central and northern highlands as far as northern and eastern Ethiopia. The third wave of migration was the coming of the Sabaeans. They left their country and crossed the Red Sea either for seeking better opportunities or fleeing from persecution at home. Their resettlement started in the middle of first millennium before our era. These Sabaeans spent not much time in the arid coastal areas, ascend and settled on the hospitable highlands of southern Eritrea and northern Ethiopia.¹⁷⁹ Conti Rossini argued that, although the Sabaeans during their early days in the highland met the ancestors of Nara and Kunama, but they built strong and lasting relationship with the Kushitic speaking peoples of 'Agāwə (አገው) and left deep and lasting cultural and political impacts them.¹⁸⁰ They found the plateau an ambient climate and relatively fertile soil which was similar to their homeland in present day Yemeni highlands. It seemed that the Sabaeans¹⁸¹ encountered and intermingle with the people of the Kushitic speakers who already occupied the plateau to produce the hybrid¹⁸² stock that are responsible for the formation of the Aksumite kingdom.

It is commonly believed that during the encounter, the Sabaeans had superior qualities on agricultural techniques, political organization and better commercial experiences, while the aboriginal communities were most likely in primordial stage of material culture, and inhabited in

¹⁷⁶ Longrigg, *A Short history of Eritrea*, cit. p. 10.

¹⁷⁷ The Nilotic stock mainly the Barya and Baza people, as explained in the previous paragraph and as we shall see in the following chapter, in the Bet-'Asgädä oral history and some physical traces including farming terraces witnessed the existence of these peoples in the Sahel area up until around the seventeenth century. Therefore, it seemed that they were most likely subjected but not ejected by the newly arriving Kushitic groups, but probably driven out with the coming of Bet-'Asgädä family.

¹⁷⁸ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, pp. 3-6.

¹⁷⁹ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁰ Conti Rossini, *La Langue des Kemant en Abyssinie* (1912), p. 39. Cohen, *Etudes*, P. 44. In, Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 8.

¹⁸¹ The Sabaeans were the general name of the different tribes coming from the Southern Arabia, present day Yemen and the different communities were including the tribes of 'Agə'azyān, Ḥabäša (ሐበሻ), Ḥadärmī (ሐደርሞ), Säḥarten (ሰሐርተን) etc.

¹⁸² The hybrid stock later took the name of Ḥabäša and adopts the spoken and written Gə'əz language which became the mark of the Aksumite kingdom. The Ḥabäša has evolved to Abyssinia, and currently it is used to represent the Semitic peoples in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

a small secluded clans with no polity. The Sabaeans also imported new animals; brought the camel, the horse, and the sheep. The other imports were; new plants and cultivating techniques, new fighting tools, and new style of house building, they also introduced governance not a simple like that of the indigenous herdsmen but an administrative order with a complex and organized political system.¹⁸³ Owing to the nomadic mode of life which allows living in small groups led the indigenous for a weaker organizational and defensive position, thus it seemed that the Sabaeans immigrants had the opportunity to easily impose their superior position on the inhabitants to make them subjects, and steady semitization in effect.¹⁸⁴ The new comers too most likely were organized in small communities but with their own political units, which gradually progressed into a collective unitary state system.¹⁸⁵ Given these enhanced traits borrowed from the Sabaeans, the new half-cast communities founded the Aksumite civilization around the first century AD, with characteristically overwhelmed by Semitic culture.

The successive arrival of various South Arabian clans further empowered the Semitic traits of the kingdom. Especially the international commercial experience of the South Arabians allowed the Aksumite kingdom to develop a commercial and cultural links with Egyptians, Persians, Romans and the Greeks via port 'Adulis. At some stages, as an expression of greater Hellenic influence, it is believed that the Greek language was used as the *lingua franca* in the kingdom. Therefore, it seems that with the coming of subsequent Semitic peoples of superior material culture from across the Sea overwhelmed the center and swept away the influence of the Kushitic culture to remain on the periphery. Consequently, while the Aksumite way of life tilted to the culturally and technically advanced Sabaeans', the Hamites under the influence of the strong state compelled to be semitized and adopt the simplified, the Gə'əz language.¹⁸⁶

Alberto Pollera also argued that the Gə'əz people, initially as transhumance and latter as settlers conquered the areas along the Barka and the 'Ansäba valleys and the northern highlands which led for the fusion of Beja and Gə'əz cultures, in which he hinted such synthesis to become the basis for the birth of the Təgrä culture.¹⁸⁷ Tadesse Tamrat in support of Pollera's statement argued that, the Sabeans inhabitants of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea territorially further expanded to the interior for various reasons including; hunting, commerce and deliberate

¹⁸³ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. p. 11.

¹⁸⁴ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 5-6.

¹⁸⁵ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 8.

¹⁸⁶ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 3-6.

¹⁸⁷ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp.11-12.

endeavors of territorial expansion, consequently produced political and socio-cultural extensions.¹⁸⁸ Hence, there is no doubt that the Kushitic culture with nomadic mode of life remained active in the peripheral areas, beyond the reaches of the Aksumites' Semitic influence. Based on this assumption, until the mid first millennium AD, it seemed to me that the Northern Highland was still a periphery, thus culturally Kushitic with considerable Semitic influence. Therefore, we can assume the identity of the mysterious; the Soboridi and Asachae or Hasac peoples, presented by Conti Rossini and Pliny respectively from ancient Hellenic documents could be defined as branches of the Kushitic clans. Suppose this as a given fact, undeniably the Kushitic stocks must have had ancestral input up on the ancient clans still living among the various communities of the Northern Highlands though now might be difficult to identify because of the continuous migration and intermingling of families with different cultural, racial and geographic backgrounds. The examination of Kushitic influence would test the new claims of Arabic identity by the clans in the region. Hence, in order to grasp a relative truth of the issue it invites further scientific studies.

The zenith of Aksumite civilization was during the middle of first millennium, extending from the fourth to the sixth century AD. During which, the kingdom extended far and wide; to the west it subdued and destroyed the kingdom of Meroe, to the east the Aksumite army crossed the Red Sea and subjugated the southern Arabia chiefly for religious interests.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, there is high probability that the Aksumite influence to have reached the Northern Highlands. As a matter of fact the survived remnants of urban mounds, columns of stones, baths and ruins of temples are mostly concentrated in the southern highlands of Eritrea and northern parts of Ethiopia, however as we shall see below some material remains that have physical similarities to that of Aksum are available in the Northern Highlands. Therefore, if the discovered material cultures of the civilization are concentrated but not limited in the southern highlands of Eritrea, it is possible to argue that the Northern Highlands were extension but peripheral to the kingdom. Taking the point in to consideration, still we can assume the Kushitic peoples of the region, despite the geographic distance and landscape of the plateau though to a lesser extent, probably were affected on cultural and political interference until the coming of the new waves of Beja invaders from the north. The new comers occupied the plateau and disconnect it from the state and had an input in the decline of the Aksumite kingdom.

¹⁸⁸ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 8.

¹⁸⁹ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. p. 5.

Based on Cosma' writings and his observation, Rossini had disclosed his findings of similarity on the material structures of the Aksumite urban areas and some areas in the northern highlands. These were the thrones, while in Aksum and Adulis (አዲሲስ), the thrones were fine and decorated, those of at Dəgdəg (ድግድግ) in Naqfa plateau of Northern Highlands were a “cruder, unsophisticated or provincial type of the thrones,” made of two unpolished stones. The horizontal is elevated so that one could comfortably sit in contemporary fashion and the vertical one supported the back.¹⁹⁰ Probably, they were used in assembly and the seat in the middle was undoubtedly for the chief. Other similar structures were found in 'Agrae, in the Lower Lābka and Gälāb (ገለብ) areas.

In the same way, another expression of the sculptural talent of the ancient inhabitants of the region is the two stele in Rora Laba, crowned by a crouching lion holding a cow between its paws.¹⁹¹ The rock figurines depicting animals and daily activities of shepherds and warriors are spreading from northeastern Ethiopia to the northern frontiers of Eritrea. Such representations are also found mainly in Hagär 'Abay (ሃገር ዓባይ), in the Northern Highlands.¹⁹² These physical legacies witnessed the level of cultural advancement of the communities inhabiting the region. However, despite the structural similarity we might not be certain that all represented Aksumite culture, and we have to give some space for independent polities and to prove this need further investigation. In support of the above assumption, Alberto Pollera supposed the remnants of the terracing and ruins of construction sites in the Rora plateau of Sahəl and south wards in Marya, 'Ansāba Valley and Bogos areas to be not only traces of agricultural communities but to have relics of physical structures share technical skills that seems to have similarities with that of civilizations equivalent to commercial centers of 'Adulis and other urban areas of Qohayto (ቆሐይቶ) and Tākonda'ə (ተኸንዳዕ) in the southern plateau. He further implied that, though not studied yet, the Rora of Sahəl might have been inlets used by the Ptolemies and Alexandrine Egypt in their attempt to enjoy the commercial sources and hunting grounds in the peripheral and interior zones of the empire including to the capital Aksum. He argued that the natural landscape of the Rora had advantages; the plateau was used by the Alexandrians as a thoroughfare for it provided a safe passage and healthy air for long travel as the cold weather and the height of the

¹⁹⁰ Rossini, *Storia d'Etioṗia*, cit. pp. 326-327.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 330.

terrain helped them to control the adjacent areas easily as far as the goldmines¹⁹³ in the lower valleys of Barka and ‘Ansäba Rivers.¹⁹⁴ Alberto Pollera further advanced his theory of the significance of the Rora region of Sahəl as the main commercial road. Referring to Al-Yaqubi’s document of 891- 892 A.D., Pollera argued that the Rora region that inhabited by the Zanafija¹⁹⁵ people of Beja stock was a vivid settlement.

In comparison with the climatically hot, unsafe and unhealthy routes along the western Barka Lowlands, the terrain of Rora was the most convenient path connecting Aksum.¹⁹⁶ Taddesse Tamrat additionally reinforced the notion for the Rora being the commercial route during the Zagwe Dynasty too. He stated that the route departed from Lalibäla (ለሊበላ), the capital of the dynasty; northwards it passes through Lasta (ለስታ), Tämben (ተምቤን) and Gärä‘alta (ገርዓልታ) then to the region of Aksum. From there across Märäb to Särayä, then to Ḥamasen, Bogos, Marya then it passes through the district of Baqla (ባቕላ) before it joined with the Suakin-Nile caravan line.¹⁹⁷ The Baqlin, as the capital of the Zanafija might have been the stopover of the long journey and the kingdom that said to have controlled the whole Sahəl and parts of Barka areas secured the safety of the travelers in exchange for the taxes collected.

Other residential ruins, wells and stone works similar to that of Egypt are found south of Baqla area on the way leading to Aksum including in Ḥabab, Marya, Mänsa‘ə and in various districts of the Eritrean plateau.¹⁹⁸ These artifacts bear witness either to the once residents of the area or any people who were passing through and familiar with stone and brick works. Pollera hypothesized the end of the Zanafija kingdom centered in Baqla to have been associated with the decline of the Greco-Roman cities. Once these civilizations ceased sending their commercial missions to the region, the dependent nature of the Baqla economy was not in a position to revive autonomously and add insult to injury; the decline of Aksum in the interior put the final stone ending its existence.¹⁹⁹ Considering the above historical assumption, no doubt during the Aksumite period, the Northern Highlands was a periphery, with no direct control from the state,

¹⁹³ Alberto Pollera supposed that gold was mined in the lower valleys of Barka and ‘Ansäba Rivers. The current gold mining activities in Biša, Zara and other traditional mining in the Gašə Barka region closer to both rivers supported his argument.

¹⁹⁴ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 30 - 35

¹⁹⁵ According to Alberto Pollera, the Zanafija people were believed to have been part of the Beja family, controlled all of Sahəl and northern parts of Barka, however there is no known remain of these people.

¹⁹⁶ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 30 – 35.

¹⁹⁷ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. pp. 81-82

¹⁹⁸ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. pp. 30 – 35.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

however the area had active commercial towns including coastal towns as ports and Baqla as a stopover in the middle of the trade route.

The subsequent southward massive migration of the pastoral Beja communities following the Islamic invasion of Egypt transformed the demographic, political, social and economic picture of the region. The pressure pushed the Beja groups who already settled in the Northern Highlands and Barka lowlands southward to the central plateau. The situation interrupted the kingdom from access to the coast; consequently the core of the state withdrew southward that led for power vacuum in the northern part of the kingdom or the central and southern plateaus of Eritrea, which later integrated as part to either of the newly organized five Beja chiefdoms. The Baqlin or the Zanafij was one of them that had played a significant role in the decline of Aksumite kingdom. The Bälāw (በለው) and Kälāw (ክለው) tribes who are believed to have been the remnants of these Beja communities had vital role in the history of Eritrea and still are vivid in the oral memory of both highland and lowland people of Eritrea. Members of the Bälāw are still identified in many highland villages and those of Naybs (ናይብ) around Massawa served as the ruling families representing the Ottoman Turks were among their remaining extensions. The Bälāw and Kälāw tribes as ruling classes in the highland lost their power with the coming of migrant tribes from Abyssinia that occupy the central plateau which later evolved to become Təgrña speakers.²⁰⁰

With regard to the Zanafij people and the Baqlin Kingdom, Timothy Power provided a different analysis. Just as Pollera, he referred the same sources of the Arab travelers' documents; however Timothy presented the geographic location, the social status and cultural composition of both the Zanafij and the Baqlin kingdom to be a different story. He stated that, Al-Yaqubi described Naqis's territory to have been extending from Aswan frontier in the north to the frontier of Barka in the south, and the Ḥdarb (ከዳርብ) and Zanafij to have been the subjects of the kingdom.²⁰¹ A century after Al-Yaqubi, another Arab writer; Abu Sulaym al-Aswani (975) mentioned nothing about Naqis, but he wrote about the same territory, where the tribe called Zanafij were living together with the Ḥdarb. He said the Zanafij were numerous but were subjected as serfs of the Ḥdarb, herding their cattle. Each clan chief of the Ḥdarb owned a number of Zanafij as inheritance: they had status similar to slaves and offered as gifts from one

²⁰⁰ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. pp. 32-35.

²⁰¹ Power Timothy, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500-1000*, American University of Cairo Press, Cairo, 2012, p. 171.

to another.²⁰² Around mid tenth century, the Arab clans intermingled in the northern territories of Naqis, and the modern techniques they introduced including; mining, trade and market had transformed the classless and pagan Bejas into a semi feudal Muslim society. In that new aristocratic order, the Arabs constituted the ruling class, the Ḥdarb as a warrior category, and the Zanafij a serf class supplemented by slaves brought from the neighboring communities.²⁰³

Timothy in his study with regard to the Zanafij people and Baqlin kingdom in the south stated that; “The homeland of the Ḥdarb seems to have been in the environs of Wadi al-‘Allaqi between Aswan and ‘Aydhāb, to which the territory of the Zanafij to the south was added by late tenth century. Al-Ya’qubi wrote that “from al-‘Allaqi one goes to the land of the branch of the Beja known as al-Zanafij, also called Baqlin,” and elsewhere states that “[it] has many towns and is very large..... the frontier of Barka (is) in the territory of the Baqlin.”²⁰⁴ Based on the above account, we come up with a number of complimenting, contradicting and supporting view points with that of Alberto Pollera’s explanation. First, on the location of the Baqlin Kingdom both share closer assumptions; south of Naqis Kingdom comprising of Sahəl and Barka lowlands centered in Rora Baqla, in the northern plateau, but the later failed to include the Sahəl area and the probable location of the capital of the kingdom. Second, the Zanafij are mentioned in Pollera’s account as a predominant population and ruling class of the Baqlin Kingdom in the Rora Baqla areas of Sahəl.

However, according to Timothy, the Zanafij were found to be serfs, cattle keepers of the Ḥdarb and the Arab ruling class, especially in the Naqis Kingdom in the north. However, in my opinion, the Zanafij given their big number had spread in vast areas and might have been the lowest class in the northern territories of the Beja lands, while living as ordinary citizens and ruling class in the south, in Baqlin. Third, while A. Pollera had no mention on the religious identity of the ruling class or the position of the Arabs in Baqlin Kingdom, Timothy based on the documents of Ibn Hawqa concluded that, the ruling class of the Baqlin were the Rabi’a tribe of Arabs, and the king was an Arab speaking Muslim. Even if this king was tribal chief of the Arabs, as the Arabs represented a ruling class, thus he was possibly indirectly a king.

Another mysterious group of people were the Romə, to whom Longrigg has assumed to have been part of the Bälāw group. The Romə (ሬፎ) as Beja groups deserve mention in relation

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 172.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

to the Sahəl area. There are many physical structural legacies and the still active folklore in the community representing the Romə people. These people with an extraordinary physique; very tall and robust muscle are still actively remembered in songs and tales by the communities in Sahəl, Barka and rarely in the highlands. The Romə were shepherds with no permanent settlement and wondering in search of pasture and water. They were known for being invincible warriors armed with giant spears and believed to have subjected the people and collected tribute from coastal towns to the Gašə River.²⁰⁵ The extra-large graves spread throughout Sämhar (ሰጾሃር), Ḥabab, Barka, Marya, Bogos and in lower ‘Ansäba river and the water wells in Ḥamasen, Märaguz (ሞራጉዝ) and May-ša‘əda (ማይ ጸዕዳ) are considered to belong to the Romə.²⁰⁶ The end of the Romə is mysterious and needs further study, but A. Pollera assumed them to be a mythological invention of the elderly people and put his hypothesis on the role of the elderly in inventing the legend; “it would be easy and honest to answer that no one knows, but the eldest member of the tribe does not wish to lose his aura of wisdom and so he invents a new legend.”²⁰⁷

Since middle of the first millennium of our era, the Beja people, migrants from the northwest were significant in the demographic, political and social history of the region. Following the demographic pressure from the north, the Beja pushed southward and part of them came to settle in Sahəl and left a legacy that shows their special role in the configuration of the early inhabitants of the Northern Highlands.²⁰⁸ Although not lasted for long, after their occupation of the highland including the central plateau, the Beja groups setup five kingdoms. The Baqlin, one of the Beja states was governing the Sahəl region. The Rora Baqla²⁰⁹ is another name for the Rora Ḥabab or later the Rora ‘Asgädä, thus it has historical connotation. The Beja states had significant effects in the racial and cultural makeup of the Eritrean society including to the inhabitants of the central plateau. As can be read below, the extent of the impact is visible and long-lasting in the pastoral communities of the Northern Highlands and the lowland

²⁰⁵ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 36.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 3-6.

²⁰⁹ Here is a point deserves further research, the name Baqlin and Baqla. In the above story, Baqlin was an ancient name of one of the five Beja kingdoms centered probably in the present day Rora Baqla adjacent to Naqfa, in the Sahəl highlands. However according to the oral tradition, the name Rora Baqla, as we shall see in the upcoming chapter, it was given in association to the lost and found of a mule belong to the founding father of the Bet- ‘Asgädä in the seventeenth century. Therefore, there is higher probability for the mismatch of the location of the center “Baqlin”, or the Bet- ‘Asgädä might have imitated and adopted the ancient name to serve their interests and in order to have better recognition and claim.

communities of the 'Ansäba and Barka river basins and the coastal areas. According to Longrigg, until the fourteenth century the pastoral peoples of Naqfa hills and the Barka valley were mainly Beja in race.²¹⁰ They occupied the districts of Naqfa, Kubkub and Qarura grazing to the coastal plains, and he categorized them as 'people without history.' These people were few and unorganized but still are points of contest for the domination by Christian and Muslim forces, however only with the migration of the Bet-'Asgädä family that they set to be ordered.²¹¹ Those Beja groups in the Northern Plateau probably creed mix of traditional beliefs and Islam and spoke Beja, but later adopted Təgrä language, and became ancestors to various contemporary clans in the region.²¹² Therefore, there is high probability that these Beja groups to be the ancestors of the various clans that preceded the Bet-'Asgädä and got subjected by them.

The Bäläw were another Beja stock who are believed to be part of the groups invaded the central plateau and left foot marks in the Northern Plateau. They were strong ruling class in the highland, the western lowland and later the coastal plains, but with the coming of new migrant groups from the south they lost their power in the highland, consequently they dislodged to the northern highlands or absorbed by the new powers and gradually diluted the purity of their Beja identity.²¹³ Furthermore, Conti Rossini suggested the Bäläw to be part of the ancient farming communities who employ terraces on the mountain slopes of the Sahəl.²¹⁴ These Bäläw groups were finally absorbed into the various surviving and dominating Təgrä and Təgrña speaking groups. There are a number of villages and families in the highlands of the central plateau that claimed Bäläw origin. Therefore for centuries the current territory known as the Sahəl which is the habitat of the Bet-'Asgädä has been accommodating many groups of people with different racial and cultural backgrounds prior to its occupation by the current communities. The most recent but long lasting ruling class of the clans in the region is the Bet-'Asgädä²¹⁵ family. They were Təgrña Christian families occupied the area since the seventeenth century and established

²¹⁰ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. pp. 16-17.

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 36.

²¹² A number of clans considered to be among the ancient settlers of the region including the 'Almäda, 'Asfäda and Ḥafära could be the descendants of these Beja groups, but these days they give up their Beja background and claimed Arab origin. Thus, as we can see below, it is difficult to reconstruct the genealogy of these groups

²¹³ The memories of Bäläw in the form of folklore like the Dina Fana and physical structures like cemeteries and residential remains is still identified and actively remembered in the oral tradition of the central and northern highlands.

²¹⁴ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. p. 6.

²¹⁵ The 'Asgädä family's migration can be considered as the continuation of the serious of people's migration from different directions to the Northern Highlands and finally to impose its superior positions as part of the usual classical aristocratic history of the inhabitants.

their superiority on the pastoral inhabitants peacefully and subjected them to remain their subordinates until the late 1940s.²¹⁶

As we shall see in the next chapter, there are numerous explanations for the migration of the Bet-ʾAsgädä to the region. Trevaskis consider the migration of the Bet-ʾAsgädä as an extremity of the wave of migration of the groups of people from Ethiopia as a result of the power struggle or demographic pressure. They settled in the Eritrean central and southern plateau by absorbing or dislodging the well established Beja chiefdoms and their peoples.²¹⁷ The influx of migration was organized in the form of kinship and families. One of the bigger groups was mainly the ʾAgäw speaking from Lasta and the second were Semitic families of Meroni from Dämbya, various families from Təgray and military colonies from ʾAmḥara. Around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries these stocks vied in control of the highland, absorbed or pushed the Bäläw groups and other ancient peoples off the plateau. Therefore, the ʾAsgädä being descended from the Meroni family, for several generations settled in the central plateau up to the seventeenth century. As per some traditions, the ʾAsgädä family left their home because of power struggle and migrated to the north. Hence, viewing from the broader migratory historical tradition of the region, we can consider the coming of the Bet-ʾAsgädä to the northern highlands as one of the historical phenomena and the last cycle of migration of peoples who destined to become the ruling class and imposed aristocratic order on the heterogeneous communities of the Sahəl, similar to the preexisting aristocratic systems practiced in Bilen, Marya and Mänsaʿə groups.

²¹⁶ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 67-68.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

2.3 Religion and society

2.3.1 Christianity

Before the introduction of Christianity, the practices of the Old Testament seem to have influenced the region of present day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. It seemed that Judaism²¹⁸ and traditional beliefs were practices of the community in the region prior to the official introduction of Christianity.²¹⁹ This Hebraic influence is observable in the daily life and spiritual practices of the Orthodox Christianity in the region too. The numerous Hebraic expressions and basic Jewish concepts in the Gə'əz and the presence of Judaic character in the Orthodox Christianity implied the closer influence of Judaism.²²⁰ The Baqlin kingdom, one of the five Beja kingdoms was governing the northern highlands, Al-Yakubi described it to have many urban areas and their god was called al-Zabahir which sounds similar to the 'Agə'azyān Christian God "'əgəzi'abḥer" (እግዚአብሔር).²²¹ Circumcision was part of the custom of the people, clearly shows the probable existence of Judaic influences. This could have been due to the geographic proximity to the Near East, the origin of the monotheistic religions and the existing cultural and commercial relations with Egypt and the Mediterranean world in general. Especially, owing to the Northern Highlands' proximity to the ancient maritime posts like Swakin (ስዋኪን), 'Agig (ዓጊግ), Marsa Tāklay (ማርሳ ተኸለይ) etc. it had higher probability to be affected by the Judaism and Christianity. There are various claims on the penetration of Christianity before its official introduction in the fourth century. On the issue of the introduction of Christianity to Eritrea, there is a claim that around 70 AD, during the apostolic times, apostle deacon Philip Christened a noble Ethiopian eunuch of Queen Candace, as a Jew while visiting Jerusalem for pilgrimage. On the other hand, though lacks local evidence, Origen argued that St. Mathew was the apostle to Ethiopians.²²²

In the later centuries, Christians from the Roman Empire used to come to the Aksumite

²¹⁸ As the northern highland was under the Baqlin kingdom of the Bejas, Al-Yaqubi described that the inhabitants to practice circumcision, which was probably the sole rite practiced by the adherents of Judaic belief. Therefore, this custom implies the area was influenced by the Judaism.

²¹⁹ Sergew Hable sellasie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa: United Printers Press, 1972, p. 27.

²²⁰ James Quirin, "Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900", Cambridge University Press, *The Journal of African History*, 1998, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1998), pp. 195-220, p. 98.

²²¹ Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia*, p. 171.

²²² Aymro Wondmagegnehu and M. Joakim, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam H.S.I Printing Press, 1970, p. 1.

Empire either to flee persecution or preaching the faith. One of the pious groups was the Ṣadqan (ዳድቃን). They were group of Christian preachers from the Near East. Initially, they settled and preached in the locality of Šəmāžana and known for their spreading of Christianity and introduction of monastic tradition. Their activities were not limited to teachings of the new faith but they translated the bible and other sacred books in to Gəʿəz, a written language which facilitated the expansion of Christianity throughout the kingdom.²²³ A monk by the name ʾAba Māṭa ʿə (አባ ሙጣዕ)²²⁴ was one of them, originally from Rome then departed as a devout from Egypt to the Aksumite land. Initially, it is believed that he settled for seven years in Baqla, where he preached Christianity and translated the Gospel of Mathew, then he went to the central highlands; in Guḥçəʿa (ጉሕ ጭዓ), where his house of worship still remains in service, then he continue his journey to Aksum, ʾAgamä (ዓጋሙ), Burə (ቡር)²²⁵, and May-Šaʿəda (ማይ ዳዕዳ) in Särayä (ሰራዩ)²²⁶ and later he established the renowned monastery of Däbrä Libanos (ደብረ ሊባኖስ), which was home to a powerful community in the fourteenth century.²²⁷

Despite the lack of precisely dated hagiographical records earlier than 13th century, it is clear that by the end of the sixth century, Christianity was spread widely. Cosmos described the kingdom as full of churches, monks, bishops, martyrs etc, which was including Təgray, Eritrean plateau, and the coastal areas.²²⁸ The still available ruin of an ancient monastery of Hagärä Nagəran (ሃገረ ናግራን)²²⁹ in the Hagär Mountain is another evidence for the spread of Christianity in the northern highlands. The monastery was most likely established during the end of the Aksumite era.²³⁰ Sapeto, an Italian missionary spent some years in the northern highlands as a result he could knew the territory well and comprehend the language, confirmed that he found a number of ruins of an “Abyssinian” city with remnant of churches and monasteries that destroyed by the Muslims.²³¹ Sapeto dared to describe the ruins of physical structures at ʾənzəläl

²²³ Cerulli, *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, (1956), pp. 23-33. The translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew is especially attributed to Abba Mata, Conti Rosini, *Storia d’Etiopia*, pp. 157-8.

²²⁴ He was the founder of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos in southern Eritrea closer to the town of Sän ʾafä (ሰንዓፈ). The monastery was the center of a powerful community in the fourteenth century.

²²⁵ Burə was the ancient name of the southern part of the Akele Guzay highland, and still the valley south of ʾAdi Qäyäh (ዓዲ ቀይሕ) is known by that name “*Ruba Burə* (ሩባ ቡር).”

²²⁶ Rossini, *Storia d’Etiopia*, p. 212.

²²⁷ Conti Rossini, op. cit., pp. 157-8; id., ‘L’evangel d’oro di dabra Libanos’, RRAL, SER. 5, VOL. X (1901), pp. 177-80; Doresse, J., op. cit., pp. 187-8. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, p. 24.

²²⁸ Rossini, *Storia d’Etiopia*, p.163.

²²⁹ It is believed to have been named in honor of the Nagran Christians massacred by the Jewish king of Himyar in Yemen. The victims were considered as martyrs by the Ḥabäša Christians.

²³⁰ Rossini, *Storia d’Etiopia*, pp. 304-305.

²³¹ O.G.S. Crawford, “*The Habab Tribe*”, Sudan Notes and Records, vol. 36, No. 2 (1955): 183-187.

(አንዝላል) to have been an ancient city similar to Yəḥa (ዩሓ) in Təgray and the script letters of the Himyarites.²³² According to him it is common to see ancient ruins in different parts of the region including in Šāršāra (ዳረዳራ). If the above account is to be considered authentic, therefore we can assume the region was experiencing a progress parallel to the civilizations of Aksum or was deeply influenced by the latter.

The Nagran (ናግራን) is mentioned in several of Ethiopian apocryphal documents. First, as the northern limit of the land be fated to the Eliab, from the tribe of David at the time of the division of the land by the Israelites²³³; second mention is related to Queen Makda (ንግስተ ማክዳ) whereby she pass through Nagran on her way to and from Jerusalem to meet king Solomon;²³⁴ the third mythical mention is in the Ethiopian church's claim, the visit of Joseph, Merry and Child Jesus to Nagran on their way to Aksum.²³⁵ These legendary texts cite Nagran as an *en route* to the Holy Land and as a northern limit to the land divided by the Israelite migrants accompanying king Menilik I. This shows that the area was prominent and despite the geographic distance, its location was vital and not strange to the center of authority in the south. Thus, it can be considered that, by the middle of first millennium AD Christianity as a religion was introduced to the people in the northern highlands, particularly the Rora Baqla and Naqfa plateau.

For Crawford, the story of Abu Mihgan, a prominent exiled Muslim during the prime Caliphate to the port of Badi,²³⁶ indicated that Badi might have been the defining northern frontier of the Christian Aksumite kingdom.²³⁷ For Conti Rossini too, based on a Gə'əz inscription of the seventh century, the hot western lowlands of Barka basin were habitat of Christians and the monastic documents studied by Munzinger from the ancient monastery of Hagärä Nagran probably a contemporary of the former indicated a time when the overwhelming number of inhabitants were Christians.²³⁸ Rossini presented the ruins of a rectangular, and rarely square shaped ancient church in Dəgdəg, closer proximity to Naqfa. The church had mid archaic features; while the internal division is squared, the exterior part is circular. He suggested the

²³² The document failed to provide the description of the letters discovered in the site.

²³³ Rossini, *Storia d'Etioṗia*, cit. p. 347.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 345

²³⁵ Ibid., pp. 348-349

²³⁶ According to Crawford, Badi was located in the environs of present day port of 'Agig (ዓገግ), north of Ras Qesar (ራስ ቄሳር).

²³⁷ Crawford, O.G.S., *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar* (1951), pp. 104-7. In Tamrat Tadesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, p. 33.

²³⁸ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 33.

church style could have had adopted from foreign influences including the celebrated Constantine rotundas of the Holy Places, churches in Syria and Armenia.²³⁹ Such church ruins were another confirmation for the Christianity in the northern highlands with possible influences from the Near East. But, in the later times, around seventh century with the closure of maritime access to the kingdom of Aksum, Christianity weakened and with the overrun of the region by the Beja invaders the faith further gradually declined.

Beginning from the late seventh century, the Aksumite kingdom withdrew not only from the maritime trade which left it to be poorer and weaker, but the Beja pressure from the north forced the kingdom to gradually abandoning the northern and central parts of Eritrea, consequently pushed its presence further south.²⁴⁰ The Bejas consolidated their presence in almost all parts of present day Eritrean territories, consequently the Northern Highlands being far from center of the church, the Christianity was weakened. However, it seems that until the fourteenth century Christianity was not totally swept from the region. To support this argument, here are cases in point; the plateau of the Hagär Mountain in the northern Sahel is around 2300 meters above sea level and was inhabited by a Christian farming communities who had the same origin as the Christians in the central plateau but the settlement shattered when Islam prevailed over Christianity, and the settled people became wandering emigrants.²⁴¹

During his journey to Armenia, in 1337 A.D. 'Ewosätatewos (ኤዎስታቲዎስ)²⁴² used the route through the northern plateau that leading to Marsa Täklay, a coastal port town, from which he took boat leading to Egypt.²⁴³ As has been mentioned above during the Zagwä (ዛግዌ) dynasty, the commercial route departing from Lalibäla, the capital of the dynasty was passing via Baqla then leading to Egypt and other commercial and religious pilgrimage destinations in the middle

²³⁹ Rossini, *Storia d'Ethiopia, cit.* pp. 314-315.

²⁴⁰ Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Ethiopia*, pp. 267-76; Newbold, D., 'The Beja Tribes of the Red Sea Hinterland', in *Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from within*, ed. And tr. Hamilton, J. A. de C., (1935), pp. 148-51; Crawford, op. cit., pp. 102, 104-8, 118-22. For the background of the Beja see Monneret de Villard, op. cit. pp. 24-60. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 44.

²⁴¹ Anthony d'Avray, (ed. and annotated in collaboration with Richard Pankhurst), *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*, Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 53. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag: 2000, p. 123

²⁴² 'Ewosätatewos was the leader of the northern Abyssinian and Eritrean Orthodox Church in support of the observance of Saturday during the debate known as the "Sabath Controversy" of the fourteenth century.

²⁴³ Gädli 'Ewostatewos, (Hagiography of 'Ewostatewos), PP. 62-63, 72-73, 78-79, 83; Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Ethiopia*, p. 255. In Tamrat Tadesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 81-82.

and near east. It seemed that 'Ewostatewos has followed the same direction, thus given to the Christian history in the area and the still visible monastic and church ruins and the assertion provided by the Eritrean Orthodox church, at least until the sixteenth century there is high probability of at least a weakened Christian community in the Sahel region.

2.3.2 Islam

Provoked by the Aksumite intervention in Southern Arabia, the Persians occupied the Red Sea region, consequently prevented the Aksumite kingdom from its access to the international trade networks. Probably, they had even physically controlled the coastal region. This thought is augmented by the oral tradition among the inhabitants of the coastal and island communities formerly under Aksumite administration. These communities kept a story about the Persian domination of the area through the oral history of the people known by the name *Furs*. According to the oral history, the *Fur* used to rule the area and many still surviving wells are attributed to them.²⁴⁴ Hence, the people referred as *fur* might mean to the Persians. The occupation had far reaching consequences to the Aksumite kingdom that forced to steadily withdrew from the maritime trade. Later, the kingdom lost its influence in the coastal areas further contracted to remain landlocked and finally declined for good. Taking the Beja conquest discussed above into consideration, the departure of the Christian kingdom from the coastal area was significant for laying fertile ground for the up-coming Islamic expansion in the region.

The friendly relation of Prophet Mohammed and the Aksumans was disrupted while the former was alive, and in the seventh century the bilateral relation was characterized by hostilities. The Dahlak Islands fall in the hands of the Muslim forces almost immediately with the advent of the new faith. Later, the archipelagos were used as a prison centers for the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates starting from the beginning of the eighth century.²⁴⁵ The withdrawal of the Aksumite Christian kingdom from the sea led for the weakening and later gradual decline of coastal Christian settlements and commercial activities. The remaining center of the empire ceased minting coins by the middle of the eighth century which indicated the state

²⁴⁴ D'Abbadie, A., *Geographie de l'Ethiopie* (1890), ii, pp. 24, 328; Basset, R., 'Les Inscriptions de l'île de Dahlak' in JA, ser. 9, vol. I (1893), pp. 85-6; Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etioopia*, pp. 196-201; Doresse, *L'Empire du Pretre Jean*, i, pp. 193-5; Trimmingham, J.S., *Islam in Ethiopia* (ed. 1965), p. 42. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 31.

²⁴⁵ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 32.

was becoming weaker and poorer.²⁴⁶ The situation encouraged the Muslim merchants to control the commercial activities of the Red Sea area. This time marked the beginning for the political condition that became suitable for the Muslims to conduct trade and spread the new faith to the Eritrean coastal settlements and the island communities associated with trade and nomadic way of life.²⁴⁷

The influence of Islam as a political factor to the hinterland was insignificant. But the Arab Muslim merchants were freely operating their commercial activities throughout the Christian kingdom. In action they replaced the Byzantine merchants who used to dominate the commerce and later left the region following the departure of the kingdom from the coastal areas.²⁴⁸ According to Al-Yaqubi's text on geography and commerce (c. A.D. 889), the main traders in the coastal areas were Arabs and the commercial relation was strong particularly with Iraq.²⁴⁹ Other foreign traders were mainly from Yemen²⁵⁰ and their local counterparts that actively engaged in trade were from Dahlak and the coastal inhabitants.²⁵¹

With strong organization and efficient religious agitation, in 969 A.D. the Fatimid Caliphate established a power base in Egypt. The situation made Egypt center of Islam and shifted the power base from the near-east to the Nile Delta, and the country attained absolute political independence from the international powers of the time. In previous centuries with the shift of the Islamic political center from Hijaz to Damascus and then to Baghdad, the commercial importance of the Red Sea was diminished for around two hundred years. However, with the rise of Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, the Red Sea region once again became imperative in a similar condition to that of pre-Islamic period. Thence, Egypt became the launching site of Islam, from which the faith propagated swiftly southward to the Sudan following the Nile River and coastal settlements and trading posts along the Red Sea.²⁵² Therefore in studying the influence and

²⁴⁶ Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia*, pp. 213-14, 217; Contenson, H.de, 'Les fouilles a Axoum en 1957' in AE, iii (1959), pp. 32-4; id., 'les principes etapes de l'Ethiopie antique', p. 22; id., 'Les fouilles a Axoum en 1958', AE, v (1963), pp. 13-14. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 43-44.

²⁴⁷ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 44.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ *Livre des pays*, tr, Weit, G. (1937), p. 4. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 45.

²⁵⁰ Ibn Haukal, op. cit., pp. 22-3, 54. Masudi, op. cit., p. 35. Umarah, Yaman, its Early Medieval History, ed. And tr. Kay, H. C. (1892), pp. 8, 143. In Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 45.

²⁵¹ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. p. 44.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 45.

introduction²⁵³ of Islam to the Northern Highlands, the role of the Dahlak Islands and Egyptian role needs cautious consideration.

From the Dahlak side, the Island had already succeeded 'Adulis as a trading transit between the interior and the Eritrean seaboard. As described above, starting from mid eighth century, Aksumite state has lost control of the maritime trade in the Red Sea, associated with the occupation of Dahlak and the coastal towns by the Muslim forces. Therefore, the proselytization towards the interior must have started in areas where the Christian power was felt weak. Initially, the concentration of the conversion was in the coastal settlements and the expanse of pastoral communities of Sämhar plains up to the edges of the plateau. From the very beginning, the conversion was mainly associated with commerce and nomadism.²⁵⁴ However, despite the early emergence of Muslim communities in the Dahlak Archipelago and important Muslim center in the region starting as early as the first century of the *Hejira*, its role as a base for the expansion of the faith to the interior was not speedy as was supposed to have been until the 16th century.²⁵⁵ However, sections of Saho communities already accepted Islam and the remaining society of the coastal areas and Sämhar plains were either Christians or in traditional beliefs until the late fourteenth century.²⁵⁶

From Egyptian side, the *Mamluks sultanate* of Egypt was in a series of conflicts with the Bejas of the desert over the commercial interests to the east. By the end of the thirteenth century the Swakin Island had strong ties with the *Mamluks* of Egypt and around 1316 the sultanate declared its allegiance to the *Mamluks* in an alliance to attack the Bejas. In comparison to the Dahlak Islands, Swakin and other ports on the northern Red Sea region had significantly played in importing Arabs came in pursuit of mining gold and emeralds. It happened probably as the geography of the region was desert plain like that of Arabia and no opposition from church or Christian power. The hinterlands across the Dahlak Islands leading to the central plateau on the other hand did not offer any fortune grabbing opportunities and the ragged topography hindered the accessibility to the upland, thus failed to attract and develop Arab Muslim communities.²⁵⁷

The strength of the church was still the barrier against the expansion of Islam in the

²⁵³ Dahlak as a base for the spread of Islam into the interior remained the least until the 16th century. For further reading see Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 45.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

interior of the central highland. The monastic tradition following the *Täsaetu Qudusan* (ተሰአቱ ቅዱሳን) was strong, and location of the leading grand monastery of Däbrä Bizän (ደብረ ቢዘን), on the edge of the escarpment as the main center of Orthodox Christianity of the plateau might have defensive role against the spread of Islam. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Beja invaders of the Bäläw princes were already assimilated to the local culture; adopted Christianity and speak Təgrä or Təgrña, therefore Christianity in the plateau proved strong against the possible expansion of Islam despite the weakening of the political center in the south. The absence of expansionist Islamic power in the Dahlak Islands and its dependence on the commercial products from the interior, the Island remained almost passive until the coming of the Ottoman Turks.²⁵⁸ However, segments of the western lowland communities and the coastal areas already adopted Islam in the thirteenth century through trade activities and the travel of religious men from Arabia.²⁵⁹

In the last three hundred years, the growing exposure and interrelation of this region with regional and international commercial and cultural actors had direct effects in broader expansion of Islam. Particularly the coming of the “Islamic revival” movement in the Təgrä speaking communities has further connected them to outside world. The movement was originated from Arabia with a core task in a missionary activities mainly on the revival of Islam among the already Muslims which alleged to be morally and spiritually slipshod from the daily Islamic practices, and the diffusion of the faith in to non believers including Christians living in the frontiers of Islamic zones.²⁶⁰ The *Khatmiyya tariqa* order was a prominent movement led under its Hijazi founder known as Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani (1793-1852). He made several missionary tours in the Sudan adjacent to the Təgrä territories and worked in Eritrea between 1810s and 1820s including to the western lowlands and the northern plateau where he designated *Khalifas* and *Khalifat alkhulafa*. Through which he reactivated Islam among the Təgrä of Sahəl and must have influenced greatly in the conversion of the Christian lords, and integrate the plateau with the cross-regional order extending to Sudan and as far as Egypt and across the Red Sea to the Arabia and Yemen.²⁶¹ However, with regard to the various Təgrä clans in the Sahəl, owing to their assertion of Arab origin, they claimed to have already been Muslims from the very

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁵⁹ Venosa, *Serfs*, p. 170.

²⁶⁰ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 38-39.

²⁶¹ Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. pp. 171-172.

beginning of their coming to the region.

In the Islamic awakening period, various holy families played significant roles in the expansion of Islamic belief, rules and custom in the territories between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.²⁶² The religious awakenings of Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani were vital in encouraging other religious movements, holy families and holy men like the ‘Ad-Šäḳə, ‘Ad-Därqi, and ‘Ad-Mu’alim. In the middle of the nineteenth century with active support from the Naybs and later Egyptians, these Islamic families actively engaged in spreading Islam in to the Orthodox Christian Təgrä communities of the eastern lowlands and the Northern Highlands. By the same time, the ‘Ad-Šäḳə won in proselytizing the Bet-’Asgädä lords.²⁶³ The role of holy men like the ‘Ad-Šäḳə’s Šäḳə Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. al-Amin of ’Embärämi, who was influential religious figure died in 1877 is a good example where by his tomb is attracting followers and visited annually as a pilgrimage to a shrine from the wider Təgrä region including Saho speaking areas.²⁶⁴ The expansion of commerce was another factor expanding the scale of Islamic faith. The trade activities of the Massawa- Kärän- Käsäla caravan rout connected the coastal towns, especially the Red Sea port of Massawa to the western lowlands up to eastern Sudan and the Northern Highlands. The faith was growing parallel with the trade activities. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Təgrä speaking communities predominantly adopted the faith except some sections of Mänsa’ə, where Catholic and Protestant missionary was successfully gained followers.²⁶⁵ But Islam was further strengthened through its regional and worldwide Islamic connections in the form of Quranic schools, pilgrimage, Arabic literacy etc. The conversion of Bet-’Asgädä in to Islam and the role of the ‘Ad-Šäḳə in the process will be part of the up coming chapter.

2.3.3. Language

The Təgrä language is spoken in areas north, east and western sides of the Təgrña speaking peoples of the central highland. Geographically, the Təgrä language occupied the largest linguistic territory in the country. It is extending from the Sämhar plains, including the Dahlak Archipelagos, all the way to the northwestern part of the country bordering the Sudan. The entire Northern Highland districts of Marya, Mänsa’ə, Bet-Ĝuk, all the Barka and ‘Ansäba River

²⁶² Miran, Jonathan, “A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea,” *Die welt des Islams*, 45, 2005: 177-215.

²⁶³ Ibid, pp. 169-170.

²⁶⁴ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. pp. 35-50.

²⁶⁵ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. p. 36

banks. The Kunama, Nara, Ḥdarb and Bäni-‘Amär territories bordering the Sudan.²⁶⁶ The Təgrä speakers are socially organized in clans and sub clans like; Marya, Bet-Ġuk, Mänsa‘ə in the Kärän area; ‘Ad-Šäḳə, ‘Ad-Mu’alim, Bet-’Asgädä as the umbrella of clans in Northern Highlands; and the Bäni-‘Amär confederation in the western lowlands.²⁶⁷ The origin of the language is associated with the migration and intermingling of peoples. It is believed that Təgrä is produced from the fusion of two linguistic groups; the Gə’əz²⁶⁸ speaking and Beja speaking groups. However, Təgrä language is associated with Gə’əz than with the other parent language, and linguistically Təgrä is closer to the mother language Gə’əz than the two sisterly languages of Təgrña and ‘Amharic (አምሓርኛ).²⁶⁹

It is fair to see on the general history of the Gə’əz language for it has intrinsic relation with the Təgrä language. On the general linguistic classification, Gə’əz is considered as one of the southern Semitic tongues.²⁷⁰ It is also the oldest Semitic language in the northeast Africa.²⁷¹ The Gə’əz language was serving as the written and spoken medium of communication in the Aksumite kingdom until the 10th century A.D.²⁷² Following the decline and disintegration of the kingdom, the speakers dispersed and new vernaculars evolved with distinctive cultures of respective groups. Hence, Gə’əz ceased to be language of communication and restricted for church services in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is believed that the Gə’əz language have been brought to present day Eritrea and Ethiopia by the South Arabian immigrants, people known by the same name Gə’əz or ‘Agə’azyān.²⁷³ At that time, Gə’əz seemed to have enjoyed the highest

²⁶⁶ Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. p. 168.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ According to the unpublished teaching manual prepared by the department of Eritrean Languages and Literature, former College of Business and Social Sciences, Eritrea. Gə’əz is the language used as a medium of communication of the Aksumite people and state and was in service for literary works until the nineteenth century. It was referred as “the language of Literature,” because of the literary works written in Gə’əz language Fidäl or script were; historical narratives, religious writings, hagiographies, religious poetry, as well as medical, mathematical, astronomical and legal documents. The three vernacular languages evolved from Gə’əz language use Fidäl as their writing scripts. However, currently Gə’əz is limited solely for religious services.

²⁶⁹ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, pp. 17-18

²⁷⁰ Goldenberg, Gideon, “The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia and Their Classification.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London vol.40, no. 3 (1977): 461–507.

²⁷¹ Sabby Osman Saleh, *The History of Eritrea*, translated by Muhammad Fawaz Al-Azem. Beirut: Dar Al-Masirah, 1974, p. 38.

²⁷² Department of Eritrean languages and Literature, *Introduction to Eritrean Languages and Literature*: (unpublished) Teaching Manual, Eritrea: College of Business and Social Sciences, 2012, p. 66.

²⁷³ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. p 16.

acceptance, and become the language of the Aksumite subjects mainly to the newly evolved hybrid people known as Ḥabäša²⁷⁴ groups.

Historians including Trevaskis hypothesized that, that Gə'əz was formed as a result of the merger of two linguistic groups; the indigenous, probably the Hamitic speakers from the north and Semitic Sabaean speakers from Southern Arabia.²⁷⁵ The blend occurred either following the swept off or the subordination of the Nilotic groups by the Hamites. Then the latter groups dominated the plateau. According to this hypothesis, the South Arabians with their superior culture mingled with the Hamitic people and gave rise to the half caste stock known as Ḥabäša spoke Gə'əz language.²⁷⁶ With subsequent South Arabian migrants especially the Himyarites, the new blend or the Ḥabäša people incorporated overwhelmingly a Semitic language and culture. Thence, gradually the classic Gə'əz language developed in the plateau communities. The people with Hamitic background under the Aksumite administered areas were also compelled to abandon their intricate Hamitic language and adopted the soft Semitic Gə'əz that used to be language of the state and its subjects.²⁷⁷

Based on my readings, the 'Agə'azyān must have been a Gə'əz speaking people and one of the various tribes crossing the Red Sea and settled along the coastal areas and ascended to the highland areas of southern Eritrea and northeastern plateaus of Təgray. Owing to their advanced commercial experience they introduced scripts formed with only consonants but later become complete with the introduction of the vowels by the Christian preachers in the fourth century A.D. Therefore, it is more probable that the 'Agə'azyān and Ḥabäša to be contemporaries together with other South Arabian tribes. But as a matter of fact Gə'əz language became the linguafranca, and Ḥabäša turn out to be the name of the people evolved as a result of the fusion of the indigenous groups and the immigrants from Arabia, and gradually advanced in to Abyssinia, the medieval name of present day Ethiopia.

²⁷⁴ Alberto Pollera described the Ḥabäša as contemporary of 'Agə'azyān groups of people from South Arabia. While the former was from Sahartan in present day Yemen believed to have played a dominant role on their occupied territories of mainly the highland of Ḥamasen, and the later controlled the region between the southern highlands of Eritrea and parts of northern Təgray down to the escarpment and the coastal areas. They monopolized the maritime transportation, and thanks to their commercial activities they could introduce writing system. However, Trevaskis assumed Ḥabäša people to have evolved as a result of the mixture of the Sabaen and Hamitic stocks, but not an independent groups coming from South Arabia. Therefore, from Ḥabäša, the name Abyssinia derived.

²⁷⁵ G.K.K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea; A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 4-5.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

According to Tamrat Taddesse, during the influx of the South Arabian migrants, the land between the coast in the east and the Nile River in the west as far as the southern Egypt in the north including the entire present day Ethiopia was occupied by the Kushitic people speaking different dialect.²⁷⁸ Thus, at least since the end of first millennium BC to the middle of first millennium of our era, the Barka and 'Ansäba River basins and the Northern Highlands with its coastal plains were home to the Beja nomads, representing one of the various Kushitic speaking communities. Then, the hybrid Ḥabäša groups speaking Gə'əz for various reasons overrun the interior deeply as far as the Barka and 'Ansäba River areas and the Northern Highlands, therefore possibly it was then the fusion of the two linguistic groups took place to deliver the primordial stage of new Təgrä language.

After the Arab conquest of Egypt, the southward pressure of the Arabs increased²⁷⁹ and it was felt in the Northern Highland, Barka lowland and central plateau by the demographic pressure of the Beja communities. Thus, the Beja occupation of the highlands and other international blows led the Aksumite kingdom into crumble. The gradual disintegration of the kingdom was accompanied by the displacement of the Gə'əz speaking elements to the north and south directions of the center of the civilization. Such movement of the Gə'əz speakers was the main rationale behind the evolution of three distinctive hybrid languages; Təgrña, 'Amḥaric and Təgrä. Daniel McCall's expression on the gradual evolution of sister languages best suits on the evolution of the vernacular languages emerged out of Gə'əz. According to his assumption, a language at the beginning started to have changes in different geographic speech zones. Initially, these differing routes lead into the evolution of different dialects, then, after some centuries, these emerged dialects evolved in to separate languages, to the level where their speakers no more understand each other.²⁸⁰ Thus, the development of the three daughter languages from Gə'əz seemed to pass through such route of evolution.

The detailed process of evolution of these languages is as follows. In the post-Aksumite decline, the movement of the Gə'əz speakers was mostly into two different directions; northeast and the south. Added by the coming of the 'Agäw (አገው) stocks to the center led for the development of the three sister languages. The Gə'əz speakers encounter with various distinctive

²⁷⁸ Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, cit. pp. 16-17.

²⁷⁹ This coming of the Beja was the second wave of migration of a Hamitic group of people from southern Egypt and northeastern Sudan with the advent of Arab Muslims in Egypt, probably around seventh century A.D.

²⁸⁰ McCall Daniel, "Introduction", in *Writing African History*, ed. John Edward Philips (University of Rochester Press, 2005), pp. 1-8.

linguistic groups in their destination, and the incoming of the 'Agäw in to the center lead for the development of these vernacular languages, consequently the mother Gə'əz ceased to be a medium of communication, and limited only for church services. In the 10th century's 'Agäw migration to the Eritrean plateau had a transforming effect on the local languages. It is believed that Təgrña language to evolve as a blend of the Gə'əz language with the 'Agäw²⁸¹ language of the Kushitic people from the present day Lasta, in wälo.²⁸² Currently the speakers of Təgrña language inhabit the central and southern highlands of Eritrea and Təgray, a northern province of Ethiopia. It is the mother tongue to the Christian people of the plateau which represent the largest linguistic group in the country and is serving as a *de facto* official language of the country.

With regard to 'Amharic, while the core of the Aksumite state withdrew southward, it mingled with the Šäwa (ሸዋ) and Sidama (ሲዳሞ) dialects to produce the 'Amharic language.²⁸³ Since 1270 the 'Amhara ruling class led by Ykuno-'Amlak (ይኩኖ አምላክ) emerged as an extension of the Aksumite kingdom, consequently the 'Amharic language remained in service as the official language of the Abyssinian kingdom ever since.²⁸⁴ At present time, Təgrña and Təgrä languages are representing the most spoken languages in Eritrea. 'Amharic is the official language in Ethiopia and is the mother tongue of the 'Amhara ethnic group, representing significant proportion of Ethiopian population.

The Gə'əz speaking peoples inhabiting the Sämhar plains and coastal commercial centers of 'Adulis and Zula areas, the Sahäl coast and the plateau, the 'Ansäba and Barka valleys had been immune from the penetration of 'Agäw elements, but profoundly influenced by the Beja speaking communities.²⁸⁵ According to Alberto Pollera's hypothesis, especially, following the Islamic occupation of the Red Sea and the conquest of the Beja people from the north has led for the withdrawal of the Aksumite political influence along the coast and the decline of 'Adulis, the port and commercial center. The power vacuum created along the coast probably had encouraged the Saho from the south to push the Gə'əz speakers of the coastal area further north and met with the Beja speaking people in their new home along the coastal areas up to the Northern Highlands. Similarly, in the western lowlands, the Beja encountered with the Gə'əz speakers of

²⁸¹ Following the defeat of the Zagwe dynasty, the 'Agäwə people were forced to migrate and conquer the southern and central highlands of Eritrea and Təgray. It seems during which their language mingled with Gə'əz speakers inhabiting the Eritrean highlands and Təgray which produced the Təgrña language.

²⁸² Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. pp. 16-17.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Amharic language is probably the farthest dialect from the mother language Gə'əz than the other two languages.

²⁸⁵ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 28.

the 'Ansäba and Barka valleys. Hence, the intermingling of the two racial and linguistic cultures led for the emergence of the Təgrä language. During the fusion of both cultures, the Gə'əz seemed to have commanded the dominance over the Beja elements. This could be proved by the Təgrä language's closeness to Gə'əz than to Beja. This reflects the relatively material and cultural advanced background of the Gə'əz speaking groups over the pastoral Bejas. While the former had the highly advanced commercial and political centers along the coastal settlements and the Aksumite state in the plateau, but the Bejas had only nomadic experience.

Phonologically the Təgrä language is the closest to Gə'əz than the two sisterly languages, thus, it shows that the Təgrä language is more appropriate to be the inheritor of the Gə'əz scripts than other scripts in its literary domains.²⁸⁶ Therefore, as mentioned above, during the middle of first millennium A.D., the northern highlands and its coastal plains, the Barka Lowlands and the 'Ansäba River basin were already penetrated by sedentary Gə'əz speaking people, thus inevitably the intermingling of these Gə'əz communities with the invading Bejas was felt equally with that of the coastal plains. Linguistically viewing, the Təgrä language was dynamic and absorbent to the various groups coming to its territorial domain. For that reason, Fouad Makki argued that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, demographic, ecological, and political developments in the region led to the movement of people of different languages to the Təgrä speaking territories which led for the formation of new groups that gave up their tongue to adopt the Təgrä language and culture.²⁸⁷ Therefore, the Təgrä language with the mobile nature of the speakers became a unifying agent to the migrants from different directions that fused all together to be part of its speaking communities.²⁸⁸

Currently, the Təgrä language can be divided into three dialectical zones; first, the North and West dialect of Təgrä including; Barka, Sahəl and Marya Şälam (መግርያ ጸላም) areas. Second dialect is the Təgrä dialect of Sänhit (ሰንሲት) that representing the sub-dialects of Mänsa'ə, Marya Qäyəh (መግርያ ቀይሕ) and Bet-Ġuk. The third dialect is the eastern part, the Sämhar dialect which is philologically different from the first two dialects.²⁸⁹ Dialectically speaking, the

²⁸⁶ Department of Eritrean languages and Literature, *Introduction to Eritrean Languages and Literature*, p. 31.

²⁸⁷ The regional developments were; the 'Aḥmed grañə's (አሕመድ ግራኝ) invasion of Christian Abyssinia, the violent conflicts in the eastern Sudan which led for the formation of the Funj Sultanate and the Ottoman occupation of the western Red Sea coast. These three upheavals led for the movement of people to the Təgrä speaking zones. The new comers abandoned their language, religion and other cultural values to adopt the Təgrä language, religion and culture but mostly retain their tribal names and in most cases like the Bet-'Asgädä, Marya, Mänsa'ə, Bet-Ġuk, 'Ad-Şäḳə etc remain to be lords on the preexisting Təgrä groups.

²⁸⁸ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. p. 31.

²⁸⁹ Department of Eritrean languages and Literature, *Introduction to Eritrean Languages and Literature*, p. 54.

parlance variation in the different Təgrä speaking zones is found to be very low in comparison to the dialectical gaps in other linguistic groups in Eritrea. Such an almost homogeneity of the three Təgrä dialects is due to the traditional nomadic way of living of the Təgrä speakers that helped them to keep contact with each other.²⁹⁰ Therefore, the intelligibility level of the Təgrä speakers inhabiting these different geographical areas is generally high.²⁹¹ Both Alberto Pollera and Michael Hasama Raka acknowledged that Təgrä language was one of the widely spoken and broadly expanded in Eritrea before the advent of the Italian colonial rule. Formerly Təgrä language was spoken by the people of Dəmbäzan (ደምበዛን) equivalent to Təgrña, but later it was limited to north of Wara (ዋራ). Michael recounted that, Təgrä is rich in vocabulary and more suitable to express once emotional feelings. The elders of Dəmbäzan, Bilen and other Təgrña speakers used to say their joy and grief in poetic expression using Təgrä.²⁹² Generally, the Təgrä speakers are considered as more communicative and the language is romantic and easy flow in character.

2.4. The Pre-Bet-'Asgädä Clans in Sahel

As we have seen above, for centuries the Sahel region was home to different migratory and invading groups of people belonging to various social and cultural backgrounds. Some left legacies while others perished or absorbed by the other dominant cultures or lost in obscure. It is not certain if some of the current residents who are believed to be among the first settlers in the region are the offshoots of the ancient Beja groups. In this case, the biggest research challenge I felt is tracing the genealogical origin of the Təgrä speaking communities in the region. The source of the problem is their self-identification with 'Islamic identity' or the claim of Arab origin. The main reason of this assertion is; in order to honor once lineage by associating with the *Ashraf* of Mecca or Arabia in general and from the Prophet himself in particular. The Arab ancestry is claimed including by the most recent converts of various origins.²⁹³ They established such assertions also in order to claim land and exclude the opponent part, thus they construct tradition proving distinction, superiority and exclusion of a rival claimant. This is also true in the Təgrña highlanders who claim ancestry from the biblical twelve Houses of Israel so as to show

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ), cit. p. 77.

²⁹³ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. pp. 28- 29.

once pride and honorable origin.²⁹⁴

Not only the claim of Arab pedigree that complicated the tracking down of the origin of the Təgrä, but as Alberto Pollera put it clearly that, in patriarchal African population, a tribe takes its name after the name of the founding father, but later after some generations it splits into branches, then the name of the newly created subdivisions is called by its founder.²⁹⁵ After some generations, the descendants forget their common origins because there will be no more common interest and their migration would be far from their original homeland. Then another people conquered the abandoned home, but from few remnants of the old tribe the new comers learn and retain the custom of the previous inhabitant's name.²⁹⁶ In this case both groups are vulnerable for changing clan name, language, religion, and way of life based on geography they resettled and through time forgot once origin and adopt to the dominant ones' or vice versa. Or if they are strong, they can subject the weaker group then give and take either group's cultural values and identity. Therefore, loss of once origin due to distance in time span and geography, or deliberate betrayal and instead chose honorable ancestry has complicated the issue. Therefore, being in such situation, it is difficult to recreate the blood line for the majority of Təgrä clans settled in Sahəl before the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä.

Identifying which clans were the first comers among the currently inhabiting groups is becoming open for argument, both in oral tradition and the scholars circles. The research conducted in 1983 by EPLF's public administration section described the Targelä (ታርጌላ), Dägdägä (ደግደግ), Dob'at (ዶብኣት) and Fägə 'Afruğə (ፉጅ ኣፍሩጅ) clans as the first and still living settlers of Sahəl.²⁹⁷ Another document from the same research added the 'Almäda (ኣልሙዳ) clan to the above list.²⁹⁸ Alberto Pollera on the other hand argued that; the 'Asfäda (ኣስፈዳ), 'Almäda and Ḥafära (ኣፈራ) to be the earliest settlers of Sahəl in which they mingled with the aboriginal inhabitants, and they still can be identified well.²⁹⁹ Nadel also generalized the Sahəl clans other than the Bet-'Bsgädä, to be of heterogeneous stock, composed of both remnants of aboriginal groups and the offspring of slaves, and descendants of the smaller and weaker clans.³⁰⁰ The research done by EPLF's public administration section substantiate its argument that; the

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 36.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism*, (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ ሙግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. p. 1.

²⁹⁸ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሙበቆል ህዝቢ ሰሕል), cit. p. 23.

²⁹⁹ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 191-192.

³⁰⁰ S.F. Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 15.

first moment the Bet-’Asgädä came to Ḥabab, they first made marital relations with the Dägdägä women, and the contemporary chief of the region, Ḥameda was from Sabur / ’Almäda clan.³⁰¹ This shows us that certainly the Targelä, Dägdägä, Dob’at, Fäğə ’Afruğə, ’Almäda, ’Asfäda, Ḥafära, Sabur (ሳቡር) etc. were the inhabitants of the area prior to the coming of the Bet-’Asgädä. However, as we shall see in the next chapters, the Bet-’Asgädä claimed to the contrary. They consider themselves as the first settlers, thus owners of the land and the other clans mentioned above to have come later and that seniority and proprietorship led to the subjection of Təgrä under the Bet-’Asgädä aristocratic relationships.

Another proof provided is that Moḥamäd Šärif (ሙሐመድ ሸሪፍ), the ancestor of the Bet Ma’äla (ቤት ማዕላ) came from Arabian Peninsula through ’əgig (ዓጊግ) and married wälätə ’əzhndəb (ወለት እዝህንድብ) from Targelä / ’Almäda clan. In this case if we assume the ’Almäda to be one of the first settlers, the clan itself too claims to come from Arabia, and their forefather got married to a woman from Dob’at and the descendants are still known as the Seven House of ’Almäda / Bet Dob’at.³⁰² As we can see from the list of clans claiming Arab origin, the Dob’at itself is among the list. Therefore, it is quite difficult to find a clan admitting native and non Arab descent. According to the information from the research conducted by the EPLF public administration section, its informants were belonging to almost all the different clans in Sahəl, and based on their information, the following are believed and claim to have come from Arabia; ’Almäda, ’Asfäda, Rugəbat (ሩግባት), ’Aglumba (አግሉምባ), Ḥarabəso (ሓራብሶ), Dob’at, ’Aflānda (አፍላንዳ), ’Abḥəšen (አብሕሽን), ’Ad-Mu’alim, Dägdägä, ’Abulqasm, ’Ad-Šäḳə, Rašayda and Šawra.³⁰³ Therefore, all of the above clans claimed to have come from Arabia,³⁰⁴ and to have an Arab origin. However, some clans including Bet Ma’äla, ’Ad-Šäḳə, ’Ad-Mu’alim etc alleged their origin from the first four *Khalifa Al-Rashidin*.³⁰⁵ Hence they consider themselves to be *Ashraf*, or holy clans but there is no credible evidence to verify their chain of lineage.

Generally, for most clans claiming Arabian origin seems to be proved fallacy. The research result clearly demonstrated that, the clans claimed to have come from Arabia via ’əgig,

³⁰¹ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሙስቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 23.

³⁰² *Dob’ait* (ድብዓይት) signifies to the descendants of a woman from Dob’at clan.

³⁰³ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሙስቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 23.

³⁰⁴ In previous part we have seen that Alberto Pollera to consider the ’Almäda, ’Asfäda and Ḥafära to be descendants of the Beja groups who conquered the Northern Highlands, and to be among the first settlers of the region.

³⁰⁵ *Khalifa Al-Rashidin* is a term used in Sunni Islam to refer to the thirty years reign (632-661) of the first four caliphs (successors). Therefore, these clans claimed to have blood from the four Caliphs, thus holy families.

north eastern Red Sea coast of the Sudan, and their source is unfounded but a legend that passing from generation to generation. In support of their assertion, there are some traces; including names of places and water wells around 'əgig, in the Sudan. But these names cannot be convincingly taken as departure points of their ancestors, because at that time there was no international borders and the then nomads were free wanderers and they might have departed rather from the Eritrean part. To put case in point, some informants from the later group of clans claimed to have blood from the *Ashraf* in just twenty generations back and others beyond twentieth generations, and asserted their sources for such information to be informed Šākəs who were practicing Quran.³⁰⁶

Taking as a representative sample, let us try to prove if their assertion has probability of truth, here is an example from one of the informants during the research by EPLF. The informant was from the Bet Ma'əla. He claims after 32 generations to 'Imam 'Ali 'Ibən 'Aləktub. i.e; Moḥamād 'ədris, 'Osman, Karof, Afḥad, Kerof, Maḥmud, 'Aḥmād, Ḥumād, Kaml, Sulṭan, Kaml, Maḥmud, 'Umār, Ḥasābā Nābi, 'əndikāna, Bākri, Ma'əla, Šārif/ Moḥamād, Šārif/ 'Ali, Šārif/ 'Abdālqadr, Šārif 'Ali, Šārif/Ḥasān, Šārif/saləḥ, Šārif/ 'Abdulrāzaqə, Šārif/ Moḥamād, Šārif/ Suleman, Šārif / Saləḥ, Šārif /Yazid, Šārif Kābəlun, Šārif/ Ša'əban, Šārif / Ḥasānə' albusti, 'Imam 'Ali 'Ibən 'Alkətub.³⁰⁷ Assuming 25 years per generation, the probable time the first ancestor mentioned 32 generations back is around 800 years ago i.e around 1183 AD, but the claimed ancestor, 'Imam 'Ali 'Ibən 'Alkətub was living in the seventh century AD, contemporary of Prophet Mohamed. The time the research conduct was in 1983 or 1405 AH³⁰⁸, tracing back and reconstructing for 30-40 ancestral generations from the contemporary age band was not possible to be congruent with the reality. Possibly, generations up to 17 ancestral fathers can be recollected as it can pass from elders and clan chiefs to the younger cohorts. But ancestral names mentioned beyond this are unsubstantiated, but it was only a tale that propagated by elders and Šākəs intended to boast once origin. Therefore, in my opinion, the Ma'əla's claim as the son of Moḥamād šārif is a mere legend told from generation to generation without compelling facts.

The research results of; The Origin of Sahəl People, (ሞበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), an historical and genealogical study deeply explains the pastoral nature of the community. According to the study; normally pastoral societies are interested in their blood relations and clan lines. In the Sahəl

³⁰⁶ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሞበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 24.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ *Anno Hegira.*

communities starting from childhood there is a habit of curiously inquiring and memorizing once genealogical order. Learning by heart from 10 to 15 ancestral generations is accustomed phenomenon, nevertheless counting beyond is mostly becoming unfounded legendary tale.³⁰⁹ At present, most clans found to be derailed from their authentic origin, hence it is not easy to reconstruct their past in association with the Beja and Gə'əz origins explained above. In the absence of genuinely written material, the consideration of oral history claimed by the people with all its shortcomings is an inevitable but as a least alternative. Therefore, the general origin and derivation of the Sahəl communities can be classified in two ways or from two directions and places; 1, the majority of the clans claim from Arabia across the Red Sea and then to present day northeast Sudan and later settled Sahəl i.e from the west and northwest of Eritrea. In this case Rašayda are the last migrants from Arabia. 2, the other groups are mainly the Bet-'Asgädä, 'Asawrta, Zagr, Ḥamasen, etc. from the central highland of the country with Təgrña and Saho ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

According to the material, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ጸበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), not only the remoteness in time and unfounded claims of Arab origin that made difficult for the rediscovery of the genealogical order and autonomous history of the clans in Sahəl, but it stated the following factors as some of the main impediments for the linear reconstruction of descent; First, almost all clans in the Sahəl were Təgrä of Bet-'Asgädä. Consequently they couldn't develop an organized and autonomous socio-cultural and historical identity. Second, the nomadic economy compelled members of the same clan to travel far and spread wide throughout Barka, Sahəl, Sämhar and parts of Sudan with no common settlement. Thus, with time contacts weakened and common memory vanished. Third, the nomadic way of life separated sections of a clan to mix and share living with other clans, consequently faded distinctive identity. Fourth, the customary plunder and invasion has played a vital role in dispersing various families and groups from their mother clan. In this situation, the weaker compelled to seek refuge and protection in a subservient position under stronger groups but in distant location from and no contact with their original home.

Therefore, the above four factors blurred the common memory and increased the fusion of various races and bloods against the purity of an original clan identity. For me it seems that in such obscured condition and under the subordination of the Bet-'Asgädä and other ruling classes,

³⁰⁹ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ጸበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 25.

for the Təgrä clans it was a necessity to assert pedigree from an *Ashraf* of Arabia. For it has religious basis and they hoped it would keep them in an elevated psychological and moral position. However, their claim of Arab descent associated with Islam has discontinued the historical memories. Clinging in such myth of origin became a barrier in reconstructing their genuine blood line linking them to their ancient African ancestors with authentic clan identity. Therefore, such mythical claim has blurred their ancestral backgrounds and blood relations with those of ancient Gə'əz and Beja pastoralists who used to inhabit the region for centuries before the evolution of the present day Təgrä groups or clans.

Generally only the 'Ad-Šäḳə, 'Ad-Mu'alim and Rašayda are believed to have come from Arabia, but almost all the remaining clans in Sahəl that claim ancestral origin from Arabia, their assertion is unfounded with no credible evidence. It was only with the adoption of Islam that the Təgrä clans Islamized and Arabized their genealogical origin and tradition; therefore in order to unravel the entangled vestige of the ancient ancestors in relation to the current communities, the subject needs further research.³¹⁰ Such self asserted origins by the clans is becoming subjective and intentionally biased, but archaeological study, linguistic evidence³¹¹ or other scientific investigations needed to be conducted, hence we would establish relevant evidence helping in the reconstruction of the relative truth of their origin.

Based on the above facts, the basic social organization of the society in the Sahəl before the migration of the Bet-'Asgädä were small kinship and clans. The livelihood was mainly nomadic, breeding camel, cattle, goat and sheep wondering after pasture and water, particularly swinging to and from the highland and the coastal plains including to the western lowlands of 'Ansäba and Barka Rivers and further north towards Qarura. Considering the possibilities for the development of social class variations, based on the different cycles of migration of groups of people to the region, I can imagine that, due to the volatile security issues the weaker groups were seeking protection by the stronger; as a result a stratified society was inevitably created. Thus since ancient times the northern plateau must have been a showground of the domineer and dominated social order. Naturally in pastoral societies, access to land and water was free to the groups residing in the territory, but in due course the evolving warrior lords controlled the resources and limited the access to the previously commonly owned possessions.

³¹⁰ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ጸብቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), cit. pp. 25-26.

³¹¹ Christopher Ehret in his article *Writing African History from Linguistic Evidence* stated that in reconstructing African history, historians of Africa have used linguistic evidence more than those of historians of any other part of the world. Every language has potential information on the history of the people spoken it.

The fixed nature of the residence of the lords became easily exposed by any stronger warrior raiding groups' attack and enforced their rule, as a result the earlier lords relinquish their status to integrate to the new authority or downgraded to vassalage.³¹² The strong and powerful new comers in most cases impose their name, language, belief system and sociopolitical values as manifestation of superiority up on the previously inhabiting communities.³¹³ In some cases it happened to the contrary, like the Bet-'Asgädä where they adopted the values of their subjects. Therefore, for centuries a class based division involving economic exploitation of the one group against the other was historical reality in the northern highlands, for example, the earliest inhabitants, the Nilotics subjected or pushed to leave the space by the newly arriving Hamites, the later also overwhelmed by the Beja groups who came as a new wave of migrants. The Beja in their turn, at least subordinated by the Gə'əz speaking groups, and finally the various Təgrä groups with different backgrounds evolved from the combination of the centuries of social developments fall under the control of the Bet-'Asgädä domination up until mid twentieth century. Therefore, for centuries the Northern Highlands accommodated different migratory and invading groups prior to the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä. The detailed discussion on the origin and development of the aristocratic system with particular emphasis on the domain of Bet-'Asgädä will be presented in the next chapter.

³¹² Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. p. 34.

³¹³ Conti Rossini expresses the condition that the existing dominant groups are not ancient, and obviously there are yesterday's dominant elements in their subjects. Rossini, 2016, p. 297.

CHAPTER THREE

GENEALOGICAL ORIGIN, MIGRATION AND ARISTOCRACY OF THE BET-’ASGÄDÄ

Introduction

In the previous chapter we have seen the general historical settings of the Saḥəl area. It discloses that, the Təgrä speaking area in general and the habitat of the Bet-’Asgädä in particular was the product of centuries of migration of multiple cultures. Jonathan Miran’s explanation seems best to explain the Təgrä phenomenon;

“the formation of Təgrä 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.”³¹⁴

In order to have a better understanding of this essential element of the Saḥəl communities, this chapter is mainly an attempt to discuss on the available theories on the ethnogenesis of the Bet-’Asgädä in the central plateau and the elemental causes of their migration to the Saḥəl. The description of the various claims on the “who first settled?” in the area is part of the discussion. In this case, the Bet-’Asgädä consider themselves as the first comers, through which they justify for why they owned the land and became the lords of the late comer clans. Similar counter claims are also provided by subjected Təgrä clans. Therefore the early days of the family and the subsequent subjection of the people and possession of the land, the continuous fratricidal conflict of the ruling clan and the *fait accompli* lasting division of the family etc. will be discussed in this chapter. Hence, this chapter is aimed to reimagine the early days of the Bet-’Asgädä family and their encounter with their indigenous Təgrä subjects.

3.1 Origin of the Bet-’Asgädä

The major sources³¹⁵ and oral history³¹⁶ of the family claimed that, originally the Bet-’Asgädä

³¹⁴ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit..p. 33.

³¹⁵ The published sources of by; Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), Kokob Tsebah Press, 1961., Michael Hasama Raka, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዳጎታ ኤርትራ), 1986., Berhanemeskel Tesfamariam, *The History of the Descent of Eritrean People* (ታሪኽ ወለዶ ህዝቢ ኤርትራ), China, 2009 are books on the general history of Eritrean people and its ethnographic origin. Their sources are mainly from oral history relayed from generation to generation and in this research the author has utilized them as references according to their importance to cover the gaps of the remote past particularly in the migratory and the ethnographic part of the history.

were from Ṣən‘adäglä,³¹⁷ and later due to family power struggle moved to ‘Adi-Nəfas in Ḥamasen and finally went to Saḥəl.³¹⁸ However, various accounts including oral tradition provide a different but in some part similar stories on the origin of the Bet-’Asgädä community. The local historians including; Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ)³¹⁹, Berhanemeskel Tesfamariam, *The History of the Descent of Eritrean People* (ታሪኽ ወለዶ ህዝቢ ኤርትራ)³²⁰, Michael Hasama Raka, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ)³²¹, EPLF documents³²² and other written sources and oral tradition maintained that the Bet-’Asgädä group to be kinsfolk to the various families in districts of Ḥamasen, with branches in ‘Akälä Guzay and some groups in Särayä through their common ancestor, Meroni (ሜሮኒ). The sources generally agreed that Meroni came from Dämbya (ደምብያ), north-west of present day Ethiopia in the province of Gonder and arrived in the central highland via the western

³¹⁶ In this case, the term “oral tradition of the family” is to denote the narrative that kept for centuries and told by the family members as their historical past.

³¹⁷ Ṣən‘adäglä is one of the six districts of Wäd ‘Akälä (ወድ ኣከለ), in ‘Akälä Guzay province, in the present day Southern Region.

³¹⁸ Authors including, Alberto Pollera, Stephen Longrigg, Antony d’Avrey, O.G.S. Crawford argued that the original place of the Bet-’Asgädä was from Ṣən‘adäglä, a supporting point for their assertion is that the Bet-’Asgädä described that Ṣən‘adäglä to be their first memorable ancestor, but they lack uniformity in claiming their original place as some mention ‘Adi-Nəfas in Ḥamasen and others from ‘Adəkämä-Məlgä’ə (ኣድከመ ምልጋእ).

³¹⁹ The book, Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ) is about the genealogical history of different communities and clans in Eritrea. The book has no information about the author; however it seems that he had average academic level with the title of *Geometra*, an Italian academic title equivalent to surveyor, thus he was not historian by training but through interest. The sources he used in writing this book seemed more of oral tradition.

³²⁰ The author, Berhanemeskel Tesfamariam frequented to various Orthodox monasteries in Eritrea and Ethiopia and graduated with the title of Mergieta, thus he was professional teacher of Ge‘ez language and secular subjects’ in different churches and schools in Asmara, Eritrea. Owing to such religious background, he had the opportunity to investigate the ancient parchments and documents in the monasteries that helped him to acquire a wealth of information that he realized in this book. Therefore, the book is entirely devoted on the genealogical history of almost all inhabitants of Eritrea. The book was published posthumous of the author by his children, hence the sources he used are not mentioned, but it seemed that oral history and ancient monastic and church documents were his main sources.

³²¹ Michael Hasama Raka was born in May 1920 in Məḥlab (ምሕላብ) center of the Mänsa‘ə. As a child, he studied in various catholic schools in Mḥlab, Mändäfera (መንደረራ) and Kärän. He worked as an interpreter under Italian colonial administration for some years. Thanks to his educational and work experiences and fluency of multiple languages served as junior clerk during Italian period, and with the coming of British Military Administration he was conscripted in the police force and later worked with the UN Commission of Inquiry in the late 1940s. During Federal and Ethiopian periods, he worked as governor in different districts and Deputy Minister until his migration to Norway in 1977. In this book he attempted to cover the genealogy and general history of the different clans and groups of people spreading throughout the country. The sources were oral tradition and the documents of early Italian writers.

³²² The sources I used in this research described as “EPLF Documents” are prepared by the EPLF, Public Administration section during the Armed Struggle in 1983. They provided, the detailed description of the history, genealogy, economy, politics, culture etc of the various communities inhabiting the Northern Highlands and other parts of the country.

lowlands and finally settled in Gäšnašm (ገሽናሽም).³²³ There, he established a living and begot three sons; Maluq (ማሉቕ), Faluqə (ፋሉቕ) and Čaluqə (ጮሉቕ). Later, Maluq went to south to bear the 'Akälä Guzay people. Faluq settled at 'Amäš (ዓመሷ), around 15 km north-west of 'Asəmära, and the third one remained with his father at Gäšnašm.

According to Abay Gebreyesus, Faluq had six sons,³²⁴ one of them was Dmbäzanoy (ድምበዛኖይ), and he destined to be the common ancestor for the people of the districts; Däqätäšm (ደቀተሽም), Bet-'Asgädä, Dmbäzan (ድምበዛን) and some villages in Karnäšm in Ḥamasen (ሓማሴን).³²⁵ Berhanemeskel Tesfamariam provided a detailed genealogical description of the Eritrean people that agreed with Abay on the origin of 'Asgädä (አስገደ), although with dissimilar genealogical order on the upper and lower ancestry of the 'Asgädä family tree. Alberto Pollera in his part agreed on the origin of the family down to the different sections of Bet-'Asgädä in Saḥəl, but the difference with the local authors is on the specific relations of 'Asgädä. He assumed 'Asgädä to belong to the Maluq of 'Akälä Guzay, and later flee from family grudges in his home in Šən'adäglä and settled in 'Adi-Nəfas. However, the local sources provided only the presence of some late comers of 'Asgädä descendants in 'Akälä Guzay, particularly in Šən'adäglä villages, but have not the same opinion for locality to be the origin of the family.³²⁶ According to these documents, the kins of 'Asgädä that inhabit in the villages around Sägänäyiti (ሰገነይት) seemed to migrate from Ḥamasen than vice versa.

The early history of the legendary 'Asgädä that attained eminence through his flourished and powerful progeny crammed with subjection of the Saḥəl people and conquest of their woods begun in the Ḥamasen plateau.³²⁷ According to Abay Gebreyesus, while in Ḥamasen, 'Asgädä had

³²³ In this case almost all sources agreed.

³²⁴ The six sons of Faluqə were; Dəmbäzanoy (ድምበዛኖይ), Mhrät (ምሕረት), Täkästä (ተኸስተ), Šmräšm (ሽምረጽም), Šmrätəb (ሽምረጥብ), and the sixth is unknown.

³²⁵ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), Kokob Tsebah Press, 1961, p. 112

³²⁶ Abay mentioned various villages in Šən'adäglä that are home to the descendants of 'Asgädä that later moved to these villages including in; Sägänäyoti, 'Akrur (አኸሩር), Ḥebo (ሔቦ) etc.

³²⁷ Ğa'əfar Saləh 'Osman (from Bet-'Asgädä of 'Ad-Täkles) to whom I interviewed in Kärän provided a different version that could be considered as a common story in his clan. According to his information, there were two 'Asgädä; the first was the son of Zanoj from Ḥamasen. Ḥadgämbäs had four children and one of them was B'əmnät and he had four children from two wives; the first wife was from the Nara that begot two sons namely Bḥaylay and G'ədad (ግዕዳድ) and his second wife was from Təgrña that begot two sons namely 'Asgädä and 'Atkämä (አትከመ). Four of the children of B'əmnät went to Saḥəl and divided the land. Bḥaylay and G'ədad conquered the northern part of Saḥəl up to Tokär, present day northeastern Sudan and the remaining two brothers occupied the Naqfa and Rora Ḥabab area, but because 'Atkämä died so early without progeny 'Asgädä alone possessed the area. Because the descendants of 'Asgädä grew in number and wealth, they got the fame and authority. Therefore, when the descendants of Bet Bḥaylay and Bet G'ədad claimed to be of Bet-'Asgädä, they mean to the first 'Asgädä, the son of Zanoj but not to the junior 'Asgädä the son of B'əmnät. The same is true to the seven 'Asgädä at 'Adi-Nəfas and

Seven children namely; Mä‘atäy (መዓተይ), Səmur (ስሙር), Täsfuw (ተስፋው), ‘Adkämä (አድከመ), Bḥaylay (ብሓይላይ), Habtäçän (ሃብተጨን), and Gänsäl (ገንሽል), and all are known as the Seven Children of ‘Asgädä (ሸውዓተ ደቂ አስገደ).³²⁸ The book stated that most of ‘Asgädä descendants were in Saḥəl, but few remained at ‘Adi-Nəfas. Michael Hasama Raka on the other hand, despite disparities on some parts of the genealogical order, his statements fundamentally agreed on the origin of ‘Asgädä. He argued that, Zanoy (ዛኖይ), the son of Dmbäzanoy to be the common ancestor of ‘Asgädä and ‘Atošim (አቶሺም), but in the lower descent, he put ‘Asgädä (አስገደ), the son of Bə‘əmənat (ብእምነት) as the father of Mäfläs (መፍለስ) and the residents of ‘Adi-Nəfas.³²⁹ In comparison with Abay and the EPLF document, Michael didn’t describe the lineage in detail thus bypassed at least three Generations especially on the Mäfläs genealogy. While in the EPLF document Mäfläs was referred as the son of ‘Abib (አቢብ) and brother of Tämaryam, similarly Michael put Hbtyäs (ህብትየስ) and Täklyäs (ተኸልየስ) as direct children of Mäfläs; however the difference comes when Michael indicated Tämaryam as the great-grandson of Mäfläs. The EPLF document referred Tämaryam as the son of ‘Abib and brother of Mäfläs.³³⁰ Michael Hasama Raka’s description of the genealogical order of the Bet- ‘Asgädä is a follows:

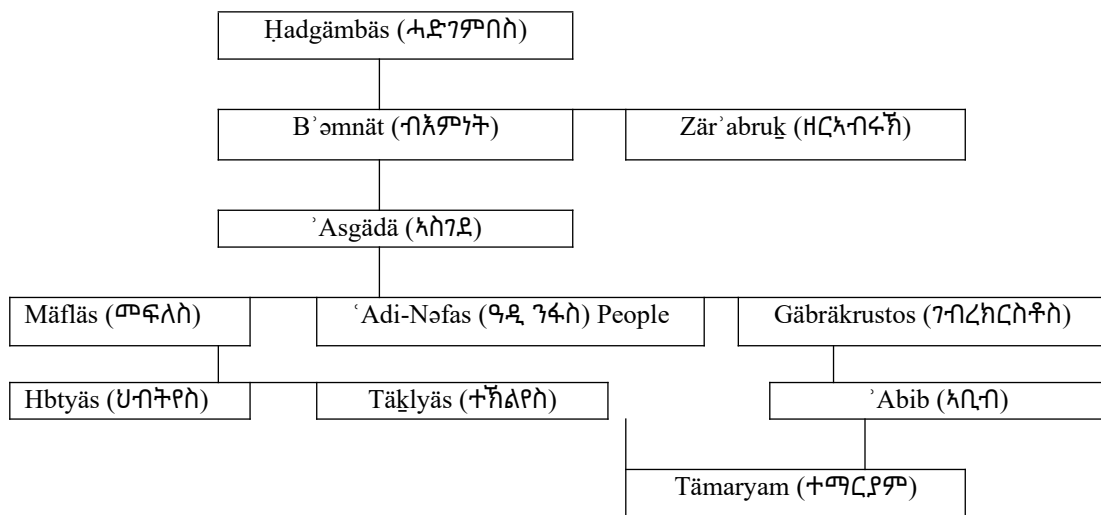


Table 1: Genealogical order of Bet- ‘Asgädä. Source: Michael Hasama. *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ): 1986, pp 77-78

With some disparity on the lineage down from ‘Asgädä, it is important to compare

other areas.

³²⁸ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), cit. p. 116

³²⁹ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ), cit. pp. 77-78

³³⁰ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism*, (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. p. 4.

Alberto Pollera's alignment of the lineage with that of Abay, Michael and the EPLF document. Pollera, similar to the EPLF document assumed 'Abib as the father of Mäfläs and Tämāryam, but three of them agreed on that Mäfläs was the father of Hbtyäs and Tāklyäs. Thus, Tämāryam was the brother of Mäfläs, thus an uncle to both Hbtyäs and Tāklyäs, but Michael put Tämāryam as nephew to both brothers. Michael failed to mention the names of the 'Asgädä children that still known as the seven 'Asgädä, inhabiting the people at 'Adi-Nəfas and he bypassed in listing at least three generations of Dafla (ዳፍላ), Gäbräkrstos (ገብረክርስቶስ), and Gärgis (ገርጊስ), the father of 'Abib. Abay Gebreyesus, on the other hand mentioned the seven children of 'Asgädä, and he mentioned Səmur twice; as a brother and son of 'Asgädä, but the EPLF document put Səmur only as direct son of 'Asgädä. According to Abay, the seven children of 'Asgädä are the residents that constitute the seven *Geza* (ገዛ) or *Enda* (እንዳ)³³¹ inhabiting 'Adi-Nəfas.

Other than the above history of origin; Abay, Berhanemeskel and Crawford presented a different version on the origin of 'Asgädä. Based on an apocryphal legend they all described the existence of a community in north-western Təgray (ትግራይ), claiming to be descended from an ancestral father known as 'Asgädä. Abay stated that there are people known as 'Asgädä that inhabited in Ethiopia starting from a period before the birth of Christ. These people were living in Šərä (ሸረ) and the surrounding, in Təgray, and they had a dignitary known as Sämäräl'ul (ሰሙረልዑል), who later named 'Asgädä after his horse's name.³³² According to this account 'Asgädä was the son of Ḥadgämbäs and had seven children from three wives. From his first wife he had four sons; G'ədad, Ḥaran (ሐራን), Səmur, and Guçät (ጉጩት). The descendants of the latter two are still living in Šərä.³³³ Ḥaran and G'ədad perished with no descent. Descendants of Səmur are still living in 'əmbadärho (እምበደርሆ) known as *Geza* Šəmagälä (ገዛ ሸማግላ). 'Asgädä's second wife was the daughter of Nayb 'Omär Şa'əda (ናይብ ዑመር ዳዕዳ) and became the mother of four sons; 'Atkämä, Täsfuw, Gärgis, and Grenät (ግሬነት). The third wife was from Mladzanoy (ምላድዛኖይ) that gave three sons; 'Abrham (አብርሃም), Səmur and Ğänkär (ጀንከር), and all collectively known as the seven 'Asgädä (አስገደ).³³⁴

³³¹ Both *Geza* (ገዛ) and *Enda* (እንዳ) represents the same social group that claimed to descend from the same father and share common land and custom. Most villages in Eritrean highlands constitute more than one *Geza* or *Enda*, at the same time two or more *Enda* may have descended from the same ancestor, like the seven children of 'Asgädä but separate and develop an independent group at least after seventh generation or due to some historical factors; migration, conflict or new religious beliefs.

³³² Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (ሙሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ ሙረብ ምላሽ), *cit.* pp. 117-118

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

In my opinion, this account clearly reads a bewildering narration that by mentioning the same people's name, tries to recreate the genealogical descent happened in the Ḥamasen plateau as if similarly took place in the Təgray region. The time incongruity is exhibited;³³⁵ hence this must be only a mythical account. The confusing story furthered its puzzlement not only by mentioning two Səmur from two different wives but it stated; Ḥadgämbäs, the father of 'Asgädä before coming to Karnäšəm was living in Šərä, his mother's village. In Šərä he begot to Bə'əməñät, and these days B'əməñät's descendants are still there.³³⁶ Gärəgis's descendants are now in 'Embadärho and 'Adi-Nəfas. 'Asgädä's descendants are also in various localities of 'Akälä Guzayə particularly in villages around Sägänäyətī and in Särayä (ሰራየ).³³⁷ The various families of 'Asgädä inhabiting 'Embadärho are; *Geza* 'Agodo (ገዛ አጎዶ), *Geza* 'Adi-Ḥiläl (ገዛ ሐሰሌ), *Geza* 'Adi Grmay (ገዛ ዓዲ ግርማይ) and *Geza* 'Adi-əzar (ገዛ ዓዲ ዕዛር).³³⁸ Crawford again stated that 'Asgädä was the grandson of *Ras* Dägäna (ራእሲ ደገና) a Christian dignitary of 'Agamä living in the sixteenth century. His son Zär'abruk had seven children, a district is still named after 'Asgädä and currently the leading inhabitants of Šərä (ሸረ) trace their descent across fourteen generations from the seven 'Asgädä (አስገደ).³³⁹

This version of the story that assumed an ancient legendary man named 'Asgädä of Šərä (ሸረ) as the founding ancestor of the 'Asgädä community living in different parts of the Eritrea seems far from truth. The sources described the names of the 'Asgädä's ancestors and his seven children as part of the narrative in a way that fits with that of sixteenth century 'Asgädä family in Ḥamasen. However, particularly considering Abay's Argument; the remoteness in time and geography, absence of oral tradition among the Bet-'Asgädä of Sahəl that supporting the story and the lack of other facts bridging the time in between makes it confusing and erroneous account. However, as Abay and Crawford claimed above, Berhanemeskel Tesfamariam also proved the existence of the kinsfolks of Bet-'Asgädä in Təgray. He stated that they are the descendants of Səmur (Sämäräyäsus) (ስሙር or ሰሙረየሱስ) and Gučät. They are numerous and still living in 'Adyabo (አድዖ), Šərä and the neighbouring villages including; May Dmu, 'Algen

³³⁵ The time incongruity is exhibited that, the document supposed 'Asgädä as a man living before the birth of Christ, and one of his wives was the daughter of the Nayb of Massawa. Such time gap and mismatches proved the account fallacious with no reliable facts.

³³⁶ 'Asgädä's descendants around Šərä are living in many villages and their center is May Dmu (ማይ ድሙ), and their chief's title was Fitäwrari (ፊተውራሪ).

³³⁷ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (ሙሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ ሙረብ ምላሽ), *cit.* p. 18.

³³⁸ Berhanemeskel, *The History of the Descent of Eritrean People* (ታሪኽ ወለዶ ህዝቢ ኤርትራ), *cit.* p. 158.

³³⁹ Crawford, *The Habab Tribe*, *cit.* p. 3.

(ዓልገን), Bzät (ብዘት), Hohoyä (ሐሆዮ), Ksad Gaba (ክሳድ ጋባ), Şa'əda 'əmba (ጸዕዳ እምባ), 'Adi-Dägol (ዓዲ ደጎል), 'ənda Gärgš (እንዳ ገርግሽ), May 'Anbäsa (ማይ ኣንበሳ), Bäraqo (በራቕ), Zänaqodo (ዘናቕዶ), 'Adi-Boylu (ዓዲ ቦይሉ), 'Adi-Qädya (ዓዲ ቕድያ), 'Adi-Zəladen (ዓዲ ዝላዲን), 'Adi-Qäst 'Agamä (ዓዲ ቀስት ዓጋመ) etc.³⁴⁰

Therefore, in my opinion it seemed that the above described myth presented by Crawford on ancient origin of 'Asgädä departing from 'Agamä to Šərä and then to Ḥamasen must be a mix up account. Although all authors agreed on the presence of 'Asgädä's kin around Šərä, Təgray, but approving the area as the main origin of 'Asgädä appeared to be improbable for it looked much flawed account. Three of them and oral tradition confirmed the existence of 'Asgädä's descendants around Šərä living in many villages and therefore, they must be the extension of the family some centuries back moving there from Ḥamasen for various reasons. As a matter of fact we have a proof that ascertains my argument. An *Enda* among the inhabitants of 'Adi-Nəfas, known as 'Adi-FəḨän (ዓዲ ፍጨን) is a case in point. The forefather of this *Enda* migrated to Təgray and his descendants returned to 'Adi-Nəfas to join their cousins. Probably, remnants of that *Enda* might still live there retaining their ancestral name that made confusion behind the story above, but still not a convincing hypothesis. Hence, the above theory claiming the origin of 'Asgädä from Šərä area is inappropriate information, and the description of the exact names and the presence of seven 'Asgädä is a misleading that mystifies the issue.

Hence, in my opinion similar to the previous family tree, the most probable and legitimate genealogy of 'Asgädä family descends in the following order; Meroni begot to Faluq, then the later to Dmbäzanoy.³⁴¹ The later, from his father's home in 'Amäş went to lower 'Ansäba district, and there he begot Zanoy, then after the village is called Mladzanoy.³⁴² After some time, Zanoy in his part went back to K^wandäba (ኣንደባ), where he begot five children; two of them were; Ḥzbay (ሕዝባይ) and Ḥadgämbäs (ሓድገምበስ).³⁴³ Ḥzbay became the forbearer of the people of the Däqätäşəm district. Ḥadgämbäs remained in his father's village at 'Amäş and begot to B'əmnät. The latter bestowed with four children; 'Asgädä, Främäka'ə (ፍረመኻኦ), Smur and Zär'abruḩ. As we have seen above, other sources also provide different angles of narration but

³⁴⁰ Until the 1960s, according to the author, the center of the 'Asgädä descendants was at May Dəmu.

³⁴¹ Dmbäzanoy seems to denote the Zanoy's camp.

³⁴² In Təgrña language, Mladzanoy (ምላድ ዛኖይ) means the birth place of Zanoy.

³⁴³ Berhanemeskel, *The History of the Descent of Eritrean People* (ታሪኽ ወለደ ህዝቢ ኤርትራ), *cit.* p, 157.

agreed in common that, initially 'Asgädä was living in Šumğubluq (ሹምጁብሉቕ). Later moved to 'əmbadärho then to 'Adi-Nəfas and finally went to the woods.³⁴⁴

Based on the above accounts, the early habitat and departure of the 'Asgädä community was in the Ḥamasen plateau, particularly from 'Adi-Nəfas, north of 'Asmära. The oral tradition in the 'Ad-Tämaryam as part of their claim of long standing relations with Sahəl area, they claim that their forefathers including Ḥadgämbäs, the son of Zanoḡ used to come to collect the king's revenue throughout Sahəl as far as the present day Sudan.³⁴⁵ Although the dependability of the sovereign right could be contesting, but mentioning Ḥadgämbäs the son of Zanoḡ as their great ancestor proves that they originated from the Ḥamasen plateau which harmonized with the above argument. Therefore, the claims provided by various authors including; Alberto Pollera, Stephen Longrigg, Antony d'Avrey etc. indicating the 'Asgädä group to have come from Šən'adäglä, in 'Akälä Guzay seems less probable and in my view it was not their right departure area, but the Ḥamasen plateau.

³⁴⁴ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), *cit.* pp. 116-117.

³⁴⁵ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 31.

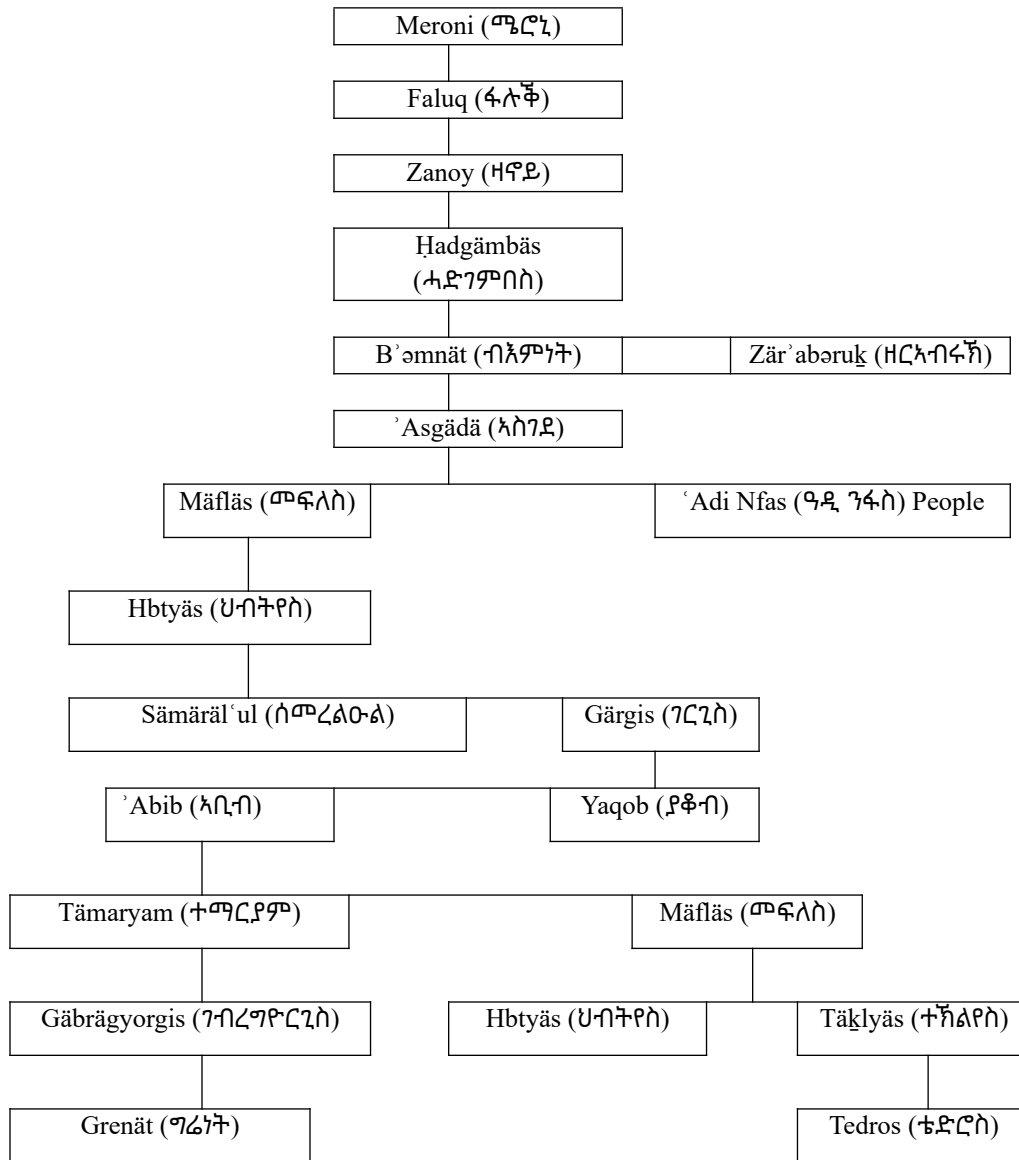


Table 2: Genealogy of Bet-'Asgädä. Source: EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism*, (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ ምዝገባ ጣልያን), p 4.

3.2. The Trek to the Sahel

There is no clear explanation on when, how and why 'Asgädä together with his brothers and followers migrated to the Northern Highlands. However there are a variety of stories told as part of the attempts to unveil and reconstruct the circumstances on the migration from the original home in the northern Ḥamasen plateau. For the convenience of explanation, here I present the categorized sources providing different angles of narration of the trek. They are mostly based on

oral history told by the Bet-’Asgädä themselves, published materials and the legend told by the people of Ḥamasen, their distant cousins. The first legend to be presented is of the Bet-’Asgädä community. They believed that the first migrants to Sahəl were the four children of B’əmnät, whom he endowed from his two wives; G’ədad and Bḥaylay from his first wife while ’Asgädä and ’Adkämä from the second wife.³⁴⁶ B’əmnät was also believed to depart together with his children, but soon died before they reached their destination.³⁴⁷

However, there are a number of stories explaining their pattern of migration to their current location. The first one is that before their concerted trek, Bḥaylay toured around Sahəl and after his return told his brothers that he discovered a land which was abundant and unoccupied.³⁴⁸ This narrative is claimed within a similar way that Bḥaylay, an elder brother of ’Asgädä was the first trekker with his herds to Sahəl and never returned back, and later ’Asgädä left his home in Karnäsm in search of his brother.³⁴⁹ Unexpectedly ’Asgädä found the place so attractive and suitable for living with its abundance of nature, and then he decided to settle in the region. This version of story substantiated by providing detailed history of first days of ’Asgädä in Sahəl. According to the narrative in the beginning ’Asgädä together with his followers settled around Laba (ለባ) and ’Endlal (እንድላል), around the Naqfa highlands for many years. To prove this story was authentic, the place where ’Asgädä initially settled is still known as *Rora kstan* (ፎራ ክስታን) which mean mountain of the Christians.³⁵⁰ This designation signified that ’Asgädä and his group were Christians and probably the preceding inhabitants might have been non Christians.

During the trek to Sahəl, B’əmnät died in the middle of their journey. Then owing to his grace of age, G’ədad was providing the leadership and guidance to his brothers.³⁵¹ The journey was not only involved the prominent family of B’əmnät together with their livestock, but a group of people from different lineages and of multiple vocations accompanied them. According to the document, musicians biting Nägarit³⁵², playing Waṭa (ዋጣ), flute and trumpet were among the

³⁴⁶ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People* (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 107.

³⁴⁷ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 31.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), *cit.* pp. 1-2.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 31.

³⁵² During the trek, people responsible for the Nägarit were ‘Adi-Kflu (ዓዲ ክፍሉ) from Zagr (ዛግር), and there were of three kinds of the Nägarit ; the first was Ḥalibät (ሓሊበት) bitten during wedding ceremonies, the second one was Mänsura (መንሱራ) bitten during war campaign, and the third Ḥananit (ሓናኒት) was bitten during funeral ceremonies. According to the document, currently they are in the Sudan taken by Kāntibay Maḥəṃud Ḥamd in the 19th century.

people of various professions. People of different origins including; from Zagr (ዛግር), ‘Adi ‘Amdoy (ዓዲ ዓምዶይ), Mäkälāhab (መከለሃብ), Waṭot (ዋጦት), Gurita (ጉሪታ), Bet Zär’u (ቤት ዘርኡ), and a priest family named (ቀሺ ኣሮገ) *Qäši* Aaron accompanied them.³⁵³ Zär’abruk³⁵⁴, brother of ‘Asgädä remained in the middle of their way at ‘Ansäba River, northwest of Kärän for his wife gave birth there. He was unable to follow his brothers and settled there. Currently his descendants are known by the clan name of Bet Ğuk. Following the course of ‘Ansäba River, the trakers pass via Habäro (ሃበሮ) to Laba and encountered with a people known as the Fuj (ፉጅ).³⁵⁵ It is not known who this people were or their current descendants. But the oral story tells that an ox belonging to Bet-’Asgädä fought with and killed to an ox of the Fuj. When a committee of four people from Bet-’Asgädä approached the Fuj to discuss on compensation, the later responded with absolution, for they considered the Bet-’Asgädä were their guests.³⁵⁶

The four brothers ascended the Sahel plateau and scattered by occupying their respective territories. G‘ädad initially occupy Baqla (በቆላ) but later for unknown reasons he left the area and at present time his descendants are living in ‘Ansäba and Qar‘obäl (ቃርዖበል).³⁵⁷ Bḥaylay in his part occupied the most northern part of his brothers up to Hagär (ሃገር), ‘Ararb (ዓራርብ) and parts of present day Sudan. In different localities there are footprints which testify settlements of Bḥaylay like; Mäqabr Bḥaylay (መቐብር ብሓይላይ) or Bḥaylay’s grave at Gädäfära ‘Aydb (ገደፈራ ኣይድብ) near Fätret (ፈጥረት), deep ditch known Šrum Bḥaylay (ሸርም ብሓይላይ) at Ḥamalay (ሓማላይ) around Ffto (ፍትፍት), the high plains at Hagär and ‘Ararb are also known as *Dəgä* (ድገ)/ Rora Bḥaylay (ሮራ ብሓይላይ), and a pasture reserve known in his name Qarat Bet-Bḥaylay (ቃትራ ቤት ብሓይላይ) at Hagär and ‘Aygät (ዓይገት) etc. However, the descendants of Bḥaylay soon disappeared and it is not known how they vanished from the region. In explaining on how they gone, there is an oral history known by ‘Adg Märeta (ኣድግ መሬታ) which signify that they left the area following once own donkey’s route and disappeared not to have any idea of mutual whereabouts with their cousins. However, there are families known as ‘Enda Bḥaylay (እንዳ ብሓይላይ) at Rora Ḥabab that are believed to have stayed there from the very beginning of

³⁵³ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahel People*, (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳኦል), *cit.* p. 107.

³⁵⁴ The Document: EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), p 31 described B’əmnät as had migrated together with his four children and his brother Zär’abruk remained in ‘Ansäba. Therefore, this document assumed Zär’abruk as uncle of ‘Asgädä but not as his brother.

³⁵⁵ The Fuj seemed to have been nomadic community, but the document failed to provide any additional information on who the Fuj people were.

³⁵⁶ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahel People*, (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳኦል), *cit.* pp. 107-108.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

their arrival from Ḥamasen.³⁵⁸ Adkämä returned back from Laba and occupied the land from ‘Awäläräym (ዓወለረይም), Gzgz (ግዝግዝ) up to Gäläb (ገለብ).³⁵⁹ Asgädä occupied the land around ‘Endlal (እንድላል) and later moved to Naqfa (ናቕፋ) to encounter with the ‘Almäda (አልሙዳ) clan.³⁶⁰

The ‘Ad-Tämaryam of Wadi-Labka (ዋዲ ላብካ) also have an oral history affirming that their ancestors were not new to Sahel. They claimed that, from ancient time their ancestors used to tour the region up to the territories of present day Sudan for the purpose of collecting tax as representatives of the chiefs in the central plateau. The story put Ḥadgämbäs the son of Zanoḡ as the first one to make the expedition. At that first moment he came to Mahya’ə (ማህያእ)/ ‘Afə’abät³⁶¹ (አፍዓበት) and met Ḥmeda (ሕሙዳ)³⁶², the chief of the Barya (ባርያ)³⁶³ or the Nara people³⁶⁴ there, and he took him to Naqfa and empowered him to collect tax from all clans including; Bet-B’äšo (ቤት ብዓሽ), Bet-‘Awäd (ቤት ዓወድ), Gənfro (ግንፍሮ), ‘Artega (ኣርቴጋ) and Kābā (ከበ) of Mahmimät (ማህሚመት) that were inhabiting in northern Sahel up to Qarura (ቃሮራ) and parts of present day Sudan. The oral tradition substantiated the claim by presenting a poetry composed by a complaining tone of a Təgrä woman;³⁶⁵

ረቢ ኢያስሙዳኒ እሊ ወድ ዛኖይ ሰብካ = God let me not hear the son of Zanoḡ is coming

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ ‘Afə’abät (አፍዓበት) according to F. Martini in his *Il Diario Eritreo* volume IV this stands for *Af Abed* or the mouth of a slave in Təgrä language.

³⁶² The identity of Ḥmeda is a contesting one. Some of the Bet-‘Asgädä claimed him to be the chief of the Barya people, and this seemed to disown the ‘Almäda from their claim of the first settler’s position. Because the ‘Almäda also claimed him to be their chief, but according to Moḡamädsə’id ‘Osman, the ‘Almäda claimed him to have been their chief but they do not provide any details about him or his genealogical background from which of the 11 branches of the clan, at the same time as a reaction to the claims of the Bet-‘Asgädä, the ‘Almäda have their own story on who first arrived in the area and how the Bet-‘Asgädä attained the power. Contrary to the claims of the ‘Almäda, Näsrädin of ‘Ad-Täkles whom I interviewed in Kärän said that Ḥmeda was the chief of the Barya preceded ‘Asgädä in Naqfa and he belong to the Harš wed krut (ሃርሽ ወድ ክርቱት) clan of the Nara still living around Mogoryb (ሞጎራይብ) in Barka. It is believed the Harš wed krut were living in Sahel and later moved to Barka for they found the area was not convenient for their lives. Ferdinando Martini in his *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D’Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell’Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vo. IV p 110. Described Ḥmeda as chief of Ḥafara.

³⁶³ The Barya or the Nara people are believed to be the indigenous people of Sahel, particularly in Baqos (ባቕስ), Kerar (ክራር), Yämho, Labka (ላብካ), Naqfa, ‘Af’ abät etc in particular and the ‘Ad-Tämaryam claimed that the Barya were still in ‘Afə’abät area during the arrival of their ancestors in the region. In this oral story, the ‘Ad-Tämaryam considered Ḥmeda as the chief of the Barya people not of the ‘Almäda, but in other sources Ḥmeda was considered as the chief of the ‘Almäda.

³⁶⁴ The Barya/Nara people are believed to be the ancient native residents of the Eritrean plateau, up to the Sahel areas, but later pushed by the late comers to remain in their present day areas of Barka.

³⁶⁵ EPLF, *Təgrä of wadi-labəka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 31

ገጽ ኢያድብሕ እባ በቕል ጸሊም ገጽ = with bad countenance sitting on the white faced mule

እምበል ሃብኒ ኢይአምራ እንካ= He only knows taking but not giving!

As Jan Vansina has explained in his work; *Oral Tradition as History*; verbal arts including poetry are expressions of contemporary practices and reflections of the emotions of the situations.³⁶⁶ Thus, the above poetry or probably song by a Təgrä woman is good idiom witnessing the situation of the time, and reinforced the claims of the 'Ad-Tämaryam to have real presence of their ancestors in the area since early days. The poetry further supported the Bet-'Asgädä's claim of early presence of Ḥadgämbäs, father of B'əmnät in Sahəl. Therefore, according to the poetry, the coming of the four children of B'əmnät to Sahəl was the continuity of their ancestral tradition. In the oral history of 'Ad-Tämaryam community of Wadi-Labka, there is a belief that they arrived there while the indigenous Nara and Bazän or Kunama people inhabited the area. Both the aborigines and 'Ad-Däbray (ዓድ ደብራይ) of Bet-'Asgädä used to live in harmony, which suggests that the 'Ad-Tämaryam to be the first comers.³⁶⁷

The 'Ad-Täkles also have similar claims of ancient conquest of the Sahəl through their ancestors. 'Asgädä ሻ'əda (አስገድ ጸዕዳ), the son of Zano and the great grandfather of 'Asgädä was living in Ḥamasen and was the first to come to Sahəl and used to have control as far as the Hagär mountain. He used to have payed an annual visit to kiss and offer tithe to the church in the mountain, and collected dues from the residents of the area. At that time the people in the area were suffering from the frequent raids, so they welcomed the Bet-'Asgädä's guardianship and were happy to pay back in dues and services for the utility of the land and protection they enjoyed.³⁶⁸ 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans of Mänsa'ə and Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd of 'Almäda, aged 78 and 80 years respectively are living in Keren. Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän is from the ex-Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles and 'Abä Gäbrämädhn was from the Šumaglä of Mensae. Both claimed that the 'Almäda, Rugbat (ሩግባት), 'Aflända (አፍለንዳ), Käbä, 'Ašnabra (ዓሽናብራ), 'Abulqasm (አቡልቃስም), Dob'at, Dägdägä, 'Aglumba (አግሉምባ) and other clans were living in Sahəl prior to the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä.³⁶⁹ Particularly Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd claimed that his

³⁶⁶ Vansina, M. Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*, (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), *cit.* p. 11.

³⁶⁷ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላባካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 8.

³⁶⁸ Interview, Gä'əfär Saləh 'Omär, 14/10/2021, Kärän.

³⁶⁹ Interview, 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans and Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

clan was in Sahel five generations before the arrival of the Bet-ʿAsgädä.³⁷⁰ This assertion is contrary to the first comer’s theory of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. In this case, people with the Šumaglā and the Təgrä background are scrambling on the narration to hold the first comer position.

Here, both the stories of claims provided by ʿAd-Tämaryam and ʿAd-Täkles do not disclose details of when and why they came to the area, and it seems more of self-serving explanation that put themselves as the first comers and undermined the ought to be Təgrä cohabitants in the region. As the source is based on the oral tradition and probably originated from rumors passing from generation to generation. However, for such subjective and more of unconfirmed reports based story, Jan Vansina gave interesting explanation;

“Rumor is the process by which a collective historical consciousness is built. The collective interpretations resulting from massive rumors lead to commonly accepted interpretations of events, nonevents, or sets of events. Hence a tradition based on rumor tells us more about the mentality at the time of the happening than about the events themselves.”³⁷¹

This statement by Vansina seems to properly enlighten the claims of ʿAd-Tämaryam. Therefore, in my opinion it is difficult to uphold the claim put by ʿAd-Tämaryam as it seems to be purposely created to elevate their position. Thus, putting some levels of doubt is relevant. As the common saying stated that out of two conflicting cultures or groups, the losers are eradicated or subjected and the victors wrote or tell the history through which they glorify themselves and belittle the defeated or the conquered part. This general truth properly explains the oral story of ʿAd-Tämaryam. As they were the lords for centuries, they had the position of saying and embellishing their history by placing themselves as the first settlers next to the indigenous Nara and preceded the other remaining Təgrä subject groups. The other explanation on the migration of the Bet-ʿAsgädä is the available documentary materials composed by local and foreign writers mainly of the colonial historians. Oral history and legends are the main sources of both groups of writers; therefore the difference is the level of explanation and interpretation of the history in relation to the historical developments they knew. Based on the legend Alberto Pollera argued that, originally the Bet-ʿAsgädä were from the Šənəʿa Däglä district of ʿAkälä Guzay, but in due time the family had internal disagreement and initially moved to Karnäšm district and then to

³⁷⁰ Interview, Šäkä ʿEdris Hüsän Moḥamäd, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

³⁷¹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, cit. p 6.

Sahəl. The exact year of the family's relocation is not known. In their settlement in Karnäšm, they managed to be district chiefs for several generations.³⁷² However, around 1600 following the death of B'əmənät, 'Asgädä and his three brothers entered into quarrel on the succession of their father's chieftainship consequently they lost the hereditary power. 'Asgädä, as a figure left his brothers and found a village, 'Adi-Nəfas and grew in number. The watershed of 'Asgädä's migration came when his mule rambled away from 'Adi-Nəfas and thanks to his servants finally found it in Rora, Sahəl; a high plain similar to the central highland's natural abundance and beauty. Then, the place was named Rora Baqla (ሬራ ባቕላ), signifying a plateau where the mule was located. The servants came back to 'Adi-Nəfas and told the story of their journey and the exaggerated beauty of the new found land. The already uncomfortable with his brothers, 'Asgädä decided to move to that place and he liked to live there and the plateau was named after him as Rora 'Asgädä.³⁷³

On the other hand the Abay in his book; *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ) stated that Täsfaşyon (ተስፋጽዮን), the son of 'Atošm (አቶሽም) and 'Asgädä were contemporary cousins. Both were genealogically on the third generation from their common grandfather Zanoy, thus were supposed to be contemporaries. At that time, probably during the reign of king Ləbnä Dəngəl (ለብነ ድንግል), Täsfaşyon was settled at Hazäga (ዛዛጋ), his father's village and initiated building a church of Saint Marry; however the stones he built during day time were wrecked by somebody at night. Täsfaşyon told the incident to his brothers. Annoyed by the shocking news, the brothers decided to eavesdrop the demolisher at night. One night they discovered that the destroyer was 'Asgädä and his family. 'Asgädä did that disruption because he was not happy of Täsfaşyon's successfully and blissfully settlement at Hazäga³⁷⁴ and seems that he envied on Täsfaşyon's construction of the church. Then Täsfaşyon and his brothers chased them up to Šumğubluq, his village.³⁷⁵ 'Asgädä annoyed of his cousins decided to avenge and fight back the 'Atošm brothers. One day, 'Asgädä and his family faced the 'Atošm family

³⁷² Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 193-194.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), stated that the Ḥamasen plateau, especially the villages of Deqi Täsfaşyon specifically Šä'azäga (ጸዓዛጋ) was inhabited by shepherd Muslim communities before the coming of 'Agäba the son of Täsfaşyon. The communities were known as Zäga, may be it has relation with the name of the village and if they were Təgrä speakers, the origin of the neighboring village, 'Adi 'Asfäda also might have any historical relations with the 'Asfäda, the Təgrä speaking clan. Thus, it needs historical investigation.

³⁷⁵ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), cit. pp. 124-125

and their followers under the commandership of Gäbräkrustos (ገብረክርስቶስ). The fight was disastrous to the 'Atošm family. 'Asgädä won the fight and both Gäbräkrustos and his nephew, 'Agäba (ዓገባ) got killed. Infuriated by the deaths and defeat, the remaining 'Atošm brothers led by 'Abrham³⁷⁶ defeated 'Asgädä in the fight that took place in the fields between Wäki Duba (ወኪ ዱባ) and 'Adi-Habtäsəlus (ዓዲ ሃብተስሉስ). The clash was concluded by the victory of the 'Atošm brothers and that incident compelled 'Asgädä to withdraw to 'Embadärho and then to the woods.³⁷⁷ Then Täsfäsyon built the church tranquilly. Therefore, according to Abay Gebreyesus this historical incident was the main reason for the migration of 'Asgädä e to Sahəl.

Michael Hasama Raka in his part narrates similar version of the story. According to him; both 'Atošm and 'Asgädä were living together in Ḥamasen, but their peaceful days ended with quarrel and conducted two fights; in the first clash 'Asgädä defeated 'Atošm, but in the second fight 'Atošm prevailed and expelled 'Asgädä and the later settled at Kurba 'Asgädä (ኩርባ አስገደ), a hill near 'Embadärho and later resettled at 'Adi-Nəfas but part of his group remained at 'Embadärho.³⁷⁸ With regard to the migration of the family to the Northern Highlands, Michael shared similar thought of the historic mule with that of Alberto Pollera. In search of his mule, 'Asgädä traveled to Rora, where he found the mule in the lush meadow. Attracted by the beauty and abundance of the area, he aspired and soon decided to live there. 'Asgädä went back to Karnäšm and told his brothers about the new land exaggeratedly. Four of them convinced by his attractive story and agreed to accompany him. In this account, while 'Asgädä fought with 'Atošm (አቶሽም), it seems that he was not alone, and was playing a leadership role aided by his kins and probably more followers. Thus, with such warrior capacity and experience it would be easy to subject the democratic and peaceful indigenous Təgrä communities awaiting them in Sahəl. From broader horizon, looking into the regional developments, Fouad Makki on the other hand explained the migration of the Bet-'Asgädä as part of the greater regional political developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth century.³⁷⁹ The large-scale jihad invasion of

³⁷⁶ 'Abrham was the third son of 'Atošm, initially he was living in Ḥmberti (አምብርቲ), around 30 km southwest of Asmara, but after the defeat of his brothers by 'Asgädä, he fought in vengeance and defeated 'Asgädä and thence he established and settled Wäki Duba (ወኪ ዱባ), a village around five kilometers northwest of 'Asmära. He was also known as Rawəya (ራውያ), after his horse's name.

³⁷⁷ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), *cit.* pp. 126-127.

³⁷⁸ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛጎታ ኤርትራ), *cit.* pp. 77-78

³⁷⁹ According to Fouad Makki, the three regional developments were the invasion of Ahmed ibn 'Ibrahim (Gərañə/ግራኝ) of Ḥärär (አረር) to the Abyssinian state, the violent wars in the eastern Sudan that ultimately formed the Funj Sultanate and the 1557 Ottoman Empire's occupation of Massawa which was characteristically had international dimension as the Ottomans were contesting on the control of the strategic maritime area against

Abyssinian state and the Eritrean highlands under the leadership of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim (gərañə/ግራኝ) of Hārār (ሓረር) was one of the then regional disorders that exerted pressure, and is considered as a pushing factor for the migration of the Bet-ʾAsgädä from their home in the central plateau to the Northern Highlands.³⁸⁰

Considering Abay Gebreyesus's important material that mentioning ʾAsgädä as having participated in the war against the invading forces of Ahmed gərañə, Fouad Makki's assertion gives sense. According to Abay, ʾAsgädä was contemporary of King Ləbnä Dəngəl (ልብነድንግል) of Abyssinina. During the war, ʾAsgädä accompanied by his followers fought in union with Baḥrā Nāgaš Täsəfaləʿul of Dəbarwa (ባሕረ ነጋሽ ተስፋልዑል ናይ ድባርዋ), as a result they could save the monastery of Däbrä-Bizän (ደብረ ቢዘን) from the destruction on the hands of the invader.³⁸¹ Thus, the contemporaneous nature of the event is convincing to consider the historical assumption provided by Makki to have veracity. A different version of oral story is told in the Ḥamasen area. According to this story, ʾAtošm and ʾAsgädä were brothers. Following the death of their father, they set to divide the land and take their share equally. In the process, ʾAsgädä tricked ʾAtošm. On the eve of the survey and lot of the land, ʾAsgädä met and convinced a man from the surrounding village. The deal was to come on the specific time and place as if he was going by unintentionally. Then he would call him to be the middle man to put the brothers' respective stick to the east and west direction of the territory. According to their agreement, ʾAsgädä's stick was to be put to the east while ʾAtošm's stick to the west. The man did the lot according to his agreement, and then the Karnäšm including Baḥri (ባሕረ), eastern escarpment became ʾAsgädä's allotment. ʾAtošm was not happy of the lot, and was hesitant of the act, then according to the tradition he compelled ʾAsgädä for an oath, and gave his word that; "if the procedure was of no tricks involved may you be happy with the land and may you prosper and multiply with the grace of God, but if it was not in honesty, may your district be conquered by alien people (መሬትካ ጉግማጉግ ይምልእዎ)." ³⁸² Therefore, the oral story concluded that, the curse had knocked the doors of heaven and ʾAsgädä got his divine punishment.

As a realization of the curse on ʾAsgädä, the story reaffirmed and provided justifications. The district of Karnäšm which was allotted to ʾAsgädä became the habitat of peoples with

Portuguese. Makki assumed these three events as the main factors for the migration of different peoples of various origins including Bet-ʾAsgädä to the Təgrä (ትግረ) speaking areas to be fused together and adopted Təgrä culture.

³⁸⁰ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, pp. 31-32.

³⁸¹ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), *cit.* p. 118.

³⁸² Interview: Redie Gebremeskel, 08 September 2019, ʾAsmära, Eritrea.

different origin. While descendants of 'Asgädä limited only in 'Adi-Nəfas and 'Embadärho, 'Atošm's numerous children and grandchildren founded more than ten villages known as district of Däqätäšm³⁸³, after his name and they grew in power like the Hazäga and Šä'azäga. While 'Asgädä himself migrated into a far place and his descendants converted in to Islam, 'Atošm's remained in his land and his descendants retained their faith etc. Therefore, for the Christian highlanders in Ḥamasen, the Bet-'Asgädä's abandonment of the Karnäšm district and the subsequent abandonment of Orthodox Christian faith to embrace Islam was considered as an expression for the realization of the 'Atošm's curse.³⁸⁴

A similar deceptive story during the allotment of the father's land was narrated in the house of Šä'azäga. The three sons of Ḥnäšm (ሕንሽም) namely; Samson (ሳምሶን), Käntiba Kəflä (ከንቲባ ክፍለ) and Ḥəzbay (ሕዝባይ) decided to divide and allot their father's land. During the allotment, Ḥəzbay deceived his brothers by conspiring with a man from a neighbouring village. According to his objective of taking the fertile land, he convinced a man to put his stick on the desired land. However, the dissatisfied and conscious of the scheme, his brothers in union told Ḥəzbay; "if it was genuine may you benefit and prosper well, but if you conspired on us, may your children be tillers and our children be the beneficiaries." (እንተድኣ ብኡነት ከነት ተብቆሙላ፣ እንተድኣ ብጉርሒ ከነት ተጎድኣላ፣ ደቅኸን ሓረስቲ ደቀይኒ በላዕቲ ይግበሮም የልዎ።)³⁸⁵ In my opinion this story was imitated and adopted as 'Asgädä's story. 'Asgädä was the most pronounced figure than his three brothers and we found them shadowed by his fame and wealth in almost all of the history and oral stories. The whole story narrates almost only about 'Asgädä and failed to recount on the other children of B'əmnät (ብእምነት). Therefore, this oral story with some sort of credibility, hints the migration of 'Asgädä was the result of conflict-ridden relationships he had with the neighbouring people.

As it is explained above, in reconstructing the reasons why the Bet-'Asgädä migrated to the Northern Highlands, the absence of written document compelled me to use the oral tradition from different angles. As John Edward Philips described the limitation of oral tradition, it can

³⁸³ The term Däqätäšm (ደቀተሽም) signifies children of 'Atošm. Therefore, the villages in the district were an exclusively inhabited by his descendants.

³⁸⁴ According to d'Avray, the Bet-'Asgädä kept their contacts with their cousins in 'Adi-Nəfas until the Bet-'Asgädä converted to their new faith in the 19th century. However, in my knowledge, the relation continued until recent years. Michael Hassama Raka in his part said their relation was cutoff when the 'Adi-Nəfas refused the call of the Bet-'Asgädä in their war against the Sähäri (ሰሓርቲ) in Ginda'ə (ጊንዳዕ).

³⁸⁵ Abay Gebreyesus, *The Roots of the Mereb Melash People* (መሰረት ዓሌት ህዝቢ መረብ ምላሽ), cit. pp. 134-135.

never lead into perfection but opens the doors of research into broader study.³⁸⁶ Therefore, using such oral sources in reconstruction of history needs cautious treatment and interpretation as it reflected the subjectivity and conflicting narration from the two countering groups. In this case, the different groups of Bet-’Asgädä substantiated their claim of first settler’s position with oral poetry of the time and place names in the area. Hence, considering the different views of oral history mentioned above, in my opinion the most probable reason for the migration of the family was the security issues. ’Asgädä had no good relations with his cousins in neighbouring villages, and that time was when the region, Abyssinian and present day Eritrean highlands were destabilized by the invading regional powers like the Ahmed ibn ’Ibrahim (gərañə/ግራኝ). Therefore, ’Asgädä’s migration looks more of flee from the already disordered region into the relatively peaceful area. It seemed that the calm and sparsely populated with abundance of nature suitable for grazing was for the utmost satisfaction of ’Asgädä and his groups. Thanks to his warrior tradition and organizational superiority, he in no time attained the aristocratic position by declaring ownership of land and subordination of people in a form of undeclared contract. Therefore, based on the analysis of the different theories and narrations above, I come up to assume the migration of the Bet-’Asgädä as part of the migration of different groups of people from different regions for different reasons during the last several centuries that was discussed in the previous chapter.

3.3. Socio-economic Organization of the People

Before assessing the process of subjection of the Təgrä by the Bet-’Asgädä, it is important to view the socio-economic and organizational structures of the people of Sahəl. Across the various clans in the northern highlands, the people were socially divided between the ruling and the subject classes. As the aristocracy was a normal social order in almost the entire Northern Highland, the Western Lowlands and ’Ansäba River areas of present day Eritrea. The names given to the two classes might differ from clan to clan, but in most cases Šumaglä (ሹማገለ) was for the ruling class and the Təgrä for the subjects. With these names were both classes known in the Bet-’Asgädä of the Northern Highlands. The ruling class came late and overtook the

³⁸⁶ Achi, Bala, “Local History in Post-Independent Africa.” In *Writing African History*, ed. John Edward Philips (University of Rochester Press, 2005), pp. 374-380.

ownership of the land and the political position, at the same time however adopted the language and culture of the subjects, the Təgrä.³⁸⁷

From the economic point of view, nomadic pastoralism was the main economy of the resident communities of Sahəl and the dominant activity until the beginning of the last century.³⁸⁸ The Bet-ʿAsgädä might have brought craftsmanship of metal works including cooper, silver and gold but soon lost and they got imported items of such products through barter.³⁸⁹ Thus, the economy of the society steadily changed from the sole livestock rearing into the combined transhumance and seasonal cultivation. As explained in the previous chapters, the livelihood differs according to the geographic condition; while those living in the mountainous areas depend on pastoral way of life, and those of the low-lying plains and river side practiced the animal herding and cultivation since last 19th century together. Generally, the communities of the northern highlands under this study; the Ḥabab and ʿAd-Tämaryam move mostly to the eastern coastal plains but also to the western lowlands including to the northern tip of the border with the Sudan. The ʿAd-Täkles communities on the other hand to the vicinity of ʿAnsäba River areas and unlike their cousins in the Naqfa highlands they practice sedentary economy³⁹⁰, but still their livelihood is mainly depended on their animals.³⁹¹

As the Bet-ʿAsgädä were originally from the central plateau, a country with permanent farming settlements, they had a cultivation experience and they retained it for some time later to give it up and adopt the pastoral economy of their subjects. In their home, they were powerful dignitaries and during their migration the only thing they brought with them was aristocratic system.³⁹² Hence, during their early days in Sahəl, the Bet-ʿAsgädä used to practice farming. In latter days because they became lords, that absolutely dependent on the products of their subjects, they no more needed farming thus abandoned agriculture.³⁹³ Their older custom refurbished and renewed accordingly, and imposed aristocratic order up on the nomadic communities, thus instead of levying agricultural produces like their older custom in Ḥamasen, they substituted it with animal products available in the hands of the subjects. Therefore, cattle

³⁸⁷ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 14.

³⁸⁸ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ጥምረት ስርዓት፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), cit. p. 1.

³⁸⁹ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 34-35.

³⁹⁰ The ʿAd-Täkles farmers in comparison to the neighboring BiIen were inexperienced and practiced primitive methods and cultivated only limited areas.

³⁹¹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 170.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Alberto Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 196.

raring became the sole economy of the two classes, and for their grain demands they fulfilled through barter trade. Thence, the nomadic aristocratic order governed the economic system of the society. As land was the main source of production and living, it was clannish in ownership in the hands of the lords. It had definite territories where those of strange groups entered these areas were immediately accepted the terms of servile position under the Bet-ʿAsgädä, thus became economic suppliers of their respective chief.

The animal wealth and their strategic location had allowed the Bet-ʿAsgädä to generate an alternative economy. The dairy products they had including the butter, wool and blankets were good commodities of exchange for their necessities and the luxury they enjoyed. They had sheep, goats, camels and cattle in tens of thousands out of which the Bet-ʿAsgädä derived their purchasing power.³⁹⁴ They bartered their milk to the mariners and the caravan traders that passing along their territories, hiring pack camels was also another source of income. In the later era in addition to the partial introduction of seasonal farming, they also had the opportunity to sell their animals and animal products particularly wool from their sheep and the blankets woven from it to the markets in the modern town like Massawa, Kärän and Qarora including to the travellers to and from the coastal towns to the western lowland localities.³⁹⁵ Salt was another source of income to the community. Ḥasmet (ሓስመት) was their main source of salt extraction that sold to the highly demanded areas of the central plateau to be resold with good interest. Wild honey harvest was another supplementary source of income and addition to their dishes. With the money they got from the sell of their products, they bartered durra, a variety of maize arrived into their coastal beaches from across the Red Sea. The luxury products of the Šumaglā like the swords, white clothes, firearms, lances and saddler, horses etc. were imported from Dongola and Arabia.³⁹⁶ Such commercial activities with distant countries suggested that they had trade relations widely.

The community were socially organized in to groups known as the Qäbila (ቀቢላ), an umbrella group which constitute multiple of small social groupings an equivalent to clan. Such social organizations were integrated into stratified and ordered systems.³⁹⁷ Owing to the upheavals of the last three centuries the makeup of the communities was the result of migration and for the sake of common interest, mainly defensive purposes they mostly forged common

³⁹⁴ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 31-32.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 31-32.

descent through consent, and out of such formation authoritative lineages evolved. Thus, despite the lack of homogeneity in origin, the Təgrä language and culture was the ground for unity and the persistent insecurity brought the social order into closer relationship. Theoretically, in reaction to such threats strongly ordered warrior families rose into power as protectors of the community, consequently the egalitarian system gave way to the hierarchical one. In the subsequent time, many of the various Təgrä clans that fall into submission got united under the political domination of the lord clans and accepted the codes and they realized to belong together under the umbrella of their lord's clan or Qäbila. In this way the subjects associated themselves to the clans and sub-clans of the ruling class, but there presented many Təgrä groups that retain their ancient clan name or the family names.³⁹⁸ Therefore, the residence of the two classes was in the same settlement but with mutual contractual duties and responsibilities that disclosed the social class difference which will be discussed in the next chapter. However, organizationally family holds the basic element of social organization.

The following social organizations were the principal orders of the Sahəl communities. In such social group, the ruling elites could give their chiefs and hereditary leaders.³⁹⁹ The document; Təgrä of wadi-labka (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ) described the various social organizations in ascending order as follows;⁴⁰⁰ The basic organ was 'Aylät (ዓይለት)/ family organization; was made up of the husband, wife and their children. In this group the father is the head and source of living with the help of the grown up children. The second social organization was formed by the extended members of the family called Fära'ə (ፈራዕ)/'Ad (ዓድ); in Təgrä language the word Fära'ə means to be separated and become self sufficient. Therefore, Fära'ə is when the children of the same father multiply through marriage and established their own families. Therefore, all collectively known as Fära'ə/'Ad and named after their founding father's name. A Fära'ə/'Ad is formed by aggregation of more than five and less than forty families. Each family owns its own properties including; animals and land, but they cooperate in communal works, defence, mourning, compensation cost, herding, ploughing tools and oxen, seeds for farming, milking cows, pack animals etc. During marriage or other ceremonies, the families with in the Fära'ə/'Ad contribute grain, butter, cash and other material things to help mitigate the expenses of the concerned family.

³⁹⁸ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 15.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴⁰⁰ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. pp. 144-145.

'Azan Ḥaṣṣer (አዛን ሓጭር); this group is constituted of few Fära'ə/Ad, thus in comparison to 'Azan (አዛን), 'Azan Ḥaṣṣer is made up of few people. 'Azan is the combination of many Fära'ə/Ad descended from the same father. In forming 'Azan, the Fära'ə could be more or less in number but all the Fära'ə that form the 'Azan have blood relations. For example, 'Almäda Qäbila or clan have 12 'Azan that descended from common ancestral father. Similar to the social and economic cooperation in Fära'ə, it is also practiced in Azan level. When a family face difficult issues, the head of that family approach the chief of the 'Azan and share his problem or if the problem is noticeable enough, the members of his 'Azan took the initiative themselves. Then the chief dispatch and make sure if it was known by every member of the 'Azan, and request for help. The problems to be solved are including; when fire damaged a house with its property, if the family lacks a pack animal and wanted to buy a camel, if a member of the 'Azan hit or kill a person then the 'Azan provide support and liquidate the issue. A good example is if the concerned member has no pack animal and wanted to buy a camel, the chief make sure that the 'Azan offered either the price of the camel in cash or 30-40 goats, which are assumed equal to the price of a camel.⁴⁰¹

Qäbila (ቀቢላ); it is originally an Arab word for a clan. It is formed from the union of big number of families descended from the same father. In other words Qäbila is the combination of many Azans. For example, Qäbila 'Almäda (ቀቢላ አልሙዳ) is composed of 12 'Azan representing the 12 children of the common father, Maḥmud Almäday (ማሐሙድ አልሙዳይ) and all together are called Qäbila 'Almäda. However, Qäbila is not always formed by the people of the same ancestor, but Fära'əs and 'Azans of different blood could be merged as dependent elements under the umbrella of the bigger and stronger Qäbila. For example, different Fära'əs and 'Azans mainly of Rugbat, Zagər, Zawəl (ዛውል), 'Almäda etc. merged together under the Qäbila of 'Ad-Tämaryam. Therefore, the 'Ad-Tämaryam was known as Qäbila and the dependent groups as 'Azans and Fära'əs but administered as members of Qäbila 'Ad-Tämaryam (ቀቢላ ዓድ ተማረያም) and only identified their 'Azan next to the Qäbila. Such special character of Qäbila was realized during the tribal reorganization of the late 1940s. For example, an independent 'Azans under Bet-'Asgädä assembled together to form the Qäbila Šumaglä (ቀቢላ ሹማግላ), and the various 'Azans of different blood that scattered in different localities united to form a new Qäbilas. The Qäbila level cooperation occurred when the problems that arised are relatively serious and

⁴⁰¹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 147.

involving elements outside of once Qäbila. These are including; plunder of herds or homicide. For example, if the member of the Qäbila kills or be killed to or by member of another Qäbila, the handling of the issue is pass on to the whole Qäbila and it is no more a private matter of the concerned family.

Another sort of organization is when descendants of the same ancestral father known in two clan names. This happens as a result of historical developments, livelihood and grouping patters. For example, 'Ad-Tämaryam were part of the Qäbila 'Asgädä (ቀቢላ ኣስገደ), however later moved to Labka and organized numerous Fära'ə of different blood under their administration and became an independent Qäbila. But at the beginning of their arrival in Sahəl together with their cousins were under the Qäbila 'Asgädä. Additional and late coming organization of clans was developed during British period. It was created with the emancipation of the Təgrä subjects and the reorganization of clans. It involved the amalgamation of different 'Azans with no blood relations united together to form new and independent clan and the reorganization of different families claiming common ancestor but throughout the past centuries been dispersed under different lord clans in different regions. The reorganization was conducted based on common concern of the different groupings. For example the Qäbila Šumaglā was formed by different 'Azans that lack any common ancestor but mutual interest of forming the clan during the British period.

3.4. The Subjugation of the People and Land

Generally up until the coming of the Italians, due to the absence of strong centralized polity in present day Eritrea, mutual plundering and killings of various groups of people was a common phenomenon. As part of that insecure past, prior to and during the Bet-'Asgädä era, the Sahəl region was not safe from such troubles.⁴⁰² In aristocratic societies, the incapability of self-defence was the main reason for the subjection of families and groups of people. For instance except the 'Ad-Şawra (ዓድ ዳውራ) clan and the Raşayda (ራሻይዳ) community, the social structure of the various clans inhabiting the Kärän Division including the Sahəl, Sänhit (ሰንሲት) and parts of Sämhar areas was divided into two rigid classes of the Təgrä and Šumaglā.⁴⁰³ The egalitarian nature with small groups of social organization and the mobile nature of the economy made the ancient inhabitants of Sahəl vulnerable to any organized attacks. The nomadic way of living led

⁴⁰² EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism*, (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. p. 1

⁴⁰³ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, cit. pp. 11-12.

for the scattering of the people to extended territories which weakened their strength for self-defence and increased the possibility of intermingling with other migratory groups.⁴⁰⁴ Hence, the circumstances of the ancient Sahel communities seemed to have been characterized in such vulnerable condition.

Oral history and poems of the Sahel people stated that in earlier times, well armed groups from Hadändäwa (ሃደንደዋ), Bilen and various clans of Bäni 'Amär used to plunder the region, in response of such act, the Sahel clans also avenged in the same manner. The oral story conveyed that for the convenience of self defence, the settlements of nomadic societies of Sahel compartmented according to the kind of animals they own. Thus; camel, livestock, and goats and sheep herders respectively lived separately and fought together against possible enemies and attacks from wild animals.⁴⁰⁵ Thus, the situation where there was no mutual trust and stability, the strong subjecting the weak seemed to be the rule of the time. Therefore, protection from external threat was important consideration that defined and shaped the features of political relationship evolved between the two classes, and that threat compelled to the mutual obligation regime.⁴⁰⁶

Prior to the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä, it seemed that the period was such a *longue dure*, shaky and unsteady. Then, there was no defined power relationship, where a certain established group or clan elevated to prominence as victorious and powerful ruling class.⁴⁰⁷ The *stats-quo* seemed to have been such a primitive stage where the clan chiefs neither possessed real power nor command organized regiments allowing them to direct the daily affairs of their subjects and defend possible foreign conquerors effectively. The society also seemed more of egalitarian and organized in families and narrow kinsfolks with mobile character that made them vulnerable when surprise attacks occurred at any given time.⁴⁰⁸ In support of this hypothesis, Šäḵə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd of 'Almäda with a Təgrä background said that, the Təgrä clans before the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä were sparsely scattered nomads and with less interest for power and title, but the Bet-'Asgädä were well organized warrior and had full support from the Abyssinian kings.⁴⁰⁹ Therefore, the political experience and the general world view of the Bet-'Asgädä was

⁴⁰⁴ Pollera Alberto, *Le Popolazioni Indigene*, cit. pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 31-32.

⁴⁰⁷ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), cit. p. 1.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Interview, Šäḵə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

better than those of the nomadic clans in Sahəl.

Näsrädin Saleh of 'Ad-Täkles on the other hand stated on the migration of the Bet-'Asgädä in relation to circumstances of the Təgrä clans in Sahəl that, the strong Bet-'Asgädä with a warrior tradition came to Sahəl while the region was experiencing such security problems beyond the protective capability of the various smaller and disorganized nomadic clans. The clans thought the Bet-'Asgädä were powerful enough and asked for protection and in return admitted subjection.⁴¹⁰ With the submission, the relationship allowed the Bet-'Asgädä to command the economy, administer justice and resources, particularly land and securing protection of the clans and in return, the clans fulfilled their demands.⁴¹¹ Therefore, it was with this background that in the sixteenth century, the Bet-'Asgädä with relatively superior organization, leadership and experience of war subjected the seemingly classless and unorganized communities of Sahəl.

Although we lack certainty on how and when the aristocratic order was established, but the subjugation of the people, the land and the institutionalization of the aristocracy was not an overnight work. There are a number of explanations mainly oral histories and oral history based written documents narrating on how, when and why the Təgrä (ጥገረ) communities together with their land fall into subjection. Alberto Pollera viewed the origin of the Təgrä-Šumaglā aristocratic relationship of the Northern Highlands as an extension of the cycles of the continuous migratory history of the region. For centuries, due to different reasons various groups of people from different directions settled in the region with varied degree of strength and influence. These groups of people were including the Kushites, Bäläw and Käläw, Romə (ጮጫ), the Gə'əz (ግእዝ), and different people from the Sudan, the central plateau etc. that left footmarks either in a dominant or subjected positions. Therefore, for Alberto Pollera the subjection of the Təgrä under the lordship of Bet-'Asgädä was as a customary phenomenon of the region, where the new comer with superior strengths subjected the existing groups and either accepted or imposed its cultural traits to the subordinated peoples. The same was for Bet-'Asgädä, a small group of Christians from the central highland left their home due to family grudges and settled in the Rora of Sahəl and imposed their superior position up on the existing Təgrä groups peacefully. Owing to the existing insecurity, the sparse and more weakened Təgrä subjects needed the

⁴¹⁰ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

protection from the stronger Bet-’Asgädä, and through which the aristocratic relationship was created.

Both Antony d’Avray and Michael Hasama Raka had similar views on the innately militant and power-monger behaviour of the Bet-’Asgädä family. Michael described them; as descendants of the ancient Meroni, thus they had a power thirst in their blood, at the same time they were brave fighters, but despite their ferocity they were incisive leaders in character.⁴¹² Michael portrayed the Bet-’Asgädä people as ambitious to hold power and make history wherever they go. He overstatedly described the Bet-’Asgädä; even if a member of the family was hosted as a stranger, he considered the treatment as if it was his right and expects to have the same entertainment every year just like a tribute.⁴¹³ It has also metaphorical expression for the Bet-’Asgädä’s lust for treatment that; ፈተውቲ እንግዳት ስለዝኾኑ ባሬቶ እኪ “ኩ ኩ ክ ቤት ኣስገደ ጋሻይ ደሓን ልእቴ” እናበለት ደረፈትሎም ይበሃል, meaning; “even the turtle dove croon, kuk kuk saying my Bet-’Asgädä guest you are welcome to my home.”⁴¹⁴ Given their unlimited desire for power, after some years of peaceful coexistence with the host clans, their inherent aspiration arise, manipulated the serene condition and non-belligerent character of the ’Almäda chief and his people, as discussed below, ’Asgädä could easily overtook the power.

Antony d’Avray on similar terms gave more emphasis on the natural traits of the Bet-’Asgädä in which they experienced better organizational and superior warrior qualities.⁴¹⁵ Thus, the organizational and defensive capacities and feudal backgrounds at home helped the Bet-’Asgädä to easily and peacefully subjugate the land and the Təgrä communities of Sahəl. They owned the land and divided it in to the various houses of the family, and at the same time the people inhabiting the respective territories became sole subjects of the land owning Bet-’Asgädä families. The relationship was a lord versus servant, tied with a contractual form of duties and obligations. While the lord’s duty was to offer protection, in return the Təgrä were obliged to provide human and animal labour services and animal products as dues in place of the classical feudal dues the masters accustomed in their original home which they collected in the form of farm product.⁴¹⁶

The interview based unpublished document, Administration before the Italian

⁴¹² Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ), *cit.* pp. 78-79.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹⁵ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, *cit.* p.10.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን) is an account made from the oral stories collected in 1983 by the EPLF Public Administration Research Section in Sahel. This source provided an explanation on how 'Asgädä came to the position of chieftainship in the following two arguments. The first explanation stated that; 'Asgädä together with his followers came to Sahel in search of Bəḥaylay, his elder brother that resettled in Sahel. He enamoured the place and decided to settle in Laba and 'Endlal. After many years the turning point comes when in search of his lost mule he went from 'Endlal down to Fäläg (ፈለግ), a place near Naqfa. There, he met the chief of Sabur, a sub clan of 'Almäda. During the encounter, the chief stand from his rock chair in honour of 'Asgädä and the chief invited him to sit on his chair.⁴¹⁷ In oral tradition it is said that, 'Asgädä went to Naqfa (ናቕፋ) with the blessing, vision and encouragement of his priest known as Qäsi Aron (ቀሺ አሮን).⁴¹⁸ This oral story which vindicated the good fortune and courage of 'Asgädä affirmed that from that day on he took control of power and became the dignitary in place of the existing chief of 'Almäda. In this case if we are going to consider this peaceful transfer of power as a convincing confirmation, it is more likely that 'Asgädä must have shown off some kind of higher qualities that rationalized his position. For example, 'Abä Gäbrämädhn said that 'Asgädä was well aware of the rules of the central highland, therefore he was promoted to that position owing to his knowledge and interpretation of the law.⁴¹⁹

The second theory explains how 'Asgädä employed his cunning character and mastery of hand crafts ability in to his interest. As 'Asgädä was from a relatively materially advanced country, he was good in hand crafts especially in wood works. He used to provide the people with his wood works that simplify their daily life. As a result he became popular and respected in the community. To connect the role of his talent in growing his influence and acceptance among the people and the chief, there is a saying; 'Asgädä 'əb ṣfru dārära (አስገደ እብ ጭፍሩ ደረራ) meaning 'Asgädä got his dinner with his talent.⁴²⁰ Which means 'Asgädä could live thanks to the talent he had. Michael Hasama Raka also supported that 'Asgädä's crafts talent was a pivotal means in promoting him to a higher office. In his explanation, Michael as it is described in chapter one, that 'Asgädä pleased the chief of 'Almäda with his offer of wood works that transformed his equipments from primitive stone tools to a relatively better wood works

⁴¹⁷ EPLF, Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), *cit.* pp. 1-2.

⁴¹⁸ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahel People* (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 109.

⁴¹⁹ Interview, 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans, 18/10/2021.

⁴²⁰ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahel People*, (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), *cit.* p. 109.

including, a house, chair, bed, and other basic utilities.⁴²¹

The document also presented 'Asgädä's shrewd approach that helped won the hearts of the people. The ruthlessness of the chief opened an opportunity for the reputation of 'Asgädä. The chief's oppressive administration was beyond the tolerance of the community. His inimical control goes even to the restriction of their seasonal nomadic migration, thus he became out of favour. Observed the situation, 'Asgädä manipulated the antipathy and poured fuel on the existing grudges. He advised the chief to firmly maintain the oppression on his people, and in contrary he also agitated the community to uprising for their rights and to unseat their oppressive leader for his unsympathetic and dire treatment. 'Asgädä's scheme came true when the people deposed their chief and put him in his position.⁴²² In this case, 'Asgädä's coming to power was not in peaceful manner, but in a creative and insightful tactics. In the 'Ad-Tämaryam of Wadi-Labka area, the clan preserved an oral history that claiming their ancestors used to rule the region up to northern parts of Sahel including parts of present day Sudan. Those peoples, perhaps of different clans inhabiting in these areas were under their sovereign authority and used to conduct periodic tours for the purpose of collecting revenues. The oral story presented Ḥadgämbäs the son of Zanoy as the first chief from their forefathers that frequented the region to collect taxes. Then, according to the narration, B'ömnät and his four children were the second comers following their grandfather Ḥadgämbäs' foot steps. The oral story affirmed the ancient sovereign right and subjection of the region by stating that, the moment 'Asgädä and his brothers met Ḥmeda, the chief in Naqfa he asked them to take the tax from him because the power he had was given by their forefathers. In this case the 'Ad-Tämaryam assumed their coming to Wadi-Labka ahead of other clans except the aboriginal Barya people. Thus, in the Ad Temariam legend, Ḥmeda is considered as the chief of Barya, but in 'Almäda clan's legend and other oral histories he is considered as chief of Sabur clan of 'Almäda.⁴²³ Therefore, 'Almäda believed the existence of themselves and other various clans in the area prior to the arrival of 'Ad-Tämaryam which counters to the claims by 'Ad-Tämaryam.

As is common in other communities in Africa, it seemed that the owing to the authority they command, the 'Ad-Tämaryam developed a narration that aimed to suppress the history of their Təgrä subjects and made them as "people that had no history". This narration looks as if

⁴²¹ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛገታ ኤርትራ), *cit.* pp. 77-79.

⁴²² EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), *cit.* pp. 1-2.

⁴²³ EPLF, *Təgrä of Ladi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), *cit.* pp. 31-32.

purposely invented to down the role of the subjects in the history of the region; as late comers and dependents. The 'Ad-Tämaryam's assertion also applied for the justification of their chieftainship that, they own the land and subjected to the various late comer clans because they were the first settlers. Therefore, the 'Almäda in general and the Sabur clan in particular are put in the box of the late comer subjects. However, the claim by 'Ad-Tämaryam is contrary to the generally accepted belief that assumed many clans to have been there before the coming of the Bet-'Asgädä. But, thanks to their overall superior authority, they dominated the narration and placed themselves as the ancient settlers as a result owners of the land and the authority of their forefathers.

Normally reconstructing history of a community based on oral tradition encounters limitation. Bala Achi, in his article on the "Local History in Post-Independent Africa", emphasized the problems on the writing history of the neighbouring clans in Nigeria.⁴²⁴ According to Bala's finding, the conflicting claims by different clans on who the first settler was in a particular area in order to establish legal ownership of the land and political power poses problems. The competitive claims presented by the Kataf and Hausa clans on the ownership of Zangon Kataf region resembled to the claims of the first settlers' position of 'Ad-Tämaryam in Wadi-Labka.⁴²⁵ As part of their assertion of first settlers status, they named their habitat Labka wäd Gäresus (ላብካ ወድ ገሬሱስ), after the name Gäresus (ገሬሱስ), the son of Kántibay Grenät (ከንቲባይ ግሬነት). As it is mentioned in the previous chapter, it was named so because during the chieftainship of Gäresus, the valley was the passage of the commercial activities between the coastal port of Massawa and the western plains of Barka as far as eastern Sudan. In the process, he was patrolling the caravan while passing his district and accompanying for some distances off in both directions. For the protection he provided and the passage through the territory, he used to collect substantial amount of revenue. However, this naming gradually faded and was replaced by its current name Wadi-Labka that included the valley and the surrounding localities.⁴²⁶

We have seen all the above subjective assumptions and claims based on oral history which are full of prejudices. The 'Ad-Tämaryam's claim of being the first settlers and for that

⁴²⁴ Bala, Achi, *Local History in Post-Independent Africa*, cit. pp. 374-380.

⁴²⁵ In Təgrä language "Wadi" means narrow and "Labka" denotes to valley, therefore Wadi Labka stands for Narrow Valley and *Wadi Gäresus* (ዋዲ ገሬሱስ) for Valley of Gäresus (ገሬሱስ), one of the chiefs of 'Ad-Tämaryam that had evolved in power and used to control and patrol the valley and the commercial activities passing through the valley.

⁴²⁶ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labəka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 25.

reason owned the land and dictated the late comers is disproved by the accounts of various documents. Alberto Pollera argued that the already Moslem nomadic tribes of 'Almäda, 'Asfäda and Ḥafära were among the first settlers next to the aboriginal Barya and Nara communities.⁴²⁷ The narration of peaceful transition of power from Ḥmeda to 'Asgädä, which was concentrated on the personal histories of the individual chiefs, seemed too narrow that is created and consumed by the sayers particularly the Bet-'Asgädä as a convincing factor. Undeniably, the continuous migration of communities since ancient times and the resulting blend has been neglected by the clans for the benefit of gaining cultural identity, particularly Islamic. Therefore, the new claims of Arab origin have complicated the historical images on the origin of the aristocratic order and the sequence of arrival of the different clans not to be clear. The Təgrä social group is heterogeneous in makeup, and this was the result of the constant migration of peoples from multiple origins and places. At the same time the inconvenient terrain and nomadic way of living made the society to be disjointed and scattered thinly in a vast territory. Such social appearance made the society to be weak and unable to form a strong central polity, thus too disunited and vulnerable for attack.⁴²⁸ The nomadic life parcelled out the communities widely consequently weakened the communal relationship and increased the possibilities for intermingling with other groups of people. Therefore, it complicated the continuity of keeping once homogenous blood and the way of life made the herders helpless against any attacks and compelled them in need of superior protectors and eventual subjection. Hence, the cumulative weaknesses made the subordination of the Təgrä possible by the numerically few, but well organized and culturally different groups.

In my opinion, it is comparable to the realities of the rise of Eastern European serfdom. In Eastern Europe, the absence or the weakness of strong polity had encouraged the lesser nobility to accumulate power⁴²⁹ and command more control on the peasants, consequently worsened their

⁴²⁷ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 196.

⁴²⁸ S.F. Nadel, in his book; *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, page15, describe the heterogeneity of the Təgrä groups to be including; the remnants of an aboriginal communities and descendants of slaves or of weak and smaller groups which fall under the control of the newly arriving Šumaglā land lords. In the Ḥabab and 'Ad-Tämaryam sections, while the common subjects were known as Təgrä, the descendants of the ex-slaves and weakened aboriginal groups were known as Makät (ጠከት).

⁴²⁹ For various reasons including; inability to control their realms, the need for support from the nobles, princes conceded land to lords, the need for support during civil war etc. the princes had allowed the lords to have significant powers over the peasants who live in their villages and gradually those privileges become traditional rights of the landlords. Resident peasants become subjects and the peasants left with no right to appeal to the prince's court and in the latter centuries including the free peasants included under the local lords and monasteries. On the other hand, the unstable and warring environment has made the peasants feel insecure and seek protection from the local lords.

conditions.⁴³⁰ Similarly, the absence of local strong polity and any influence from the regional powers had let the nomadic clans to be vulnerable for any attack, thus predictably needed protection. In such coincidence, the strong families like the Bet-'Asgädä who had better organizational qualities and warrior experience took the opportunity in filling the gap of dominant politico-military position. The nomad Təgrä clans on the other hand had no organizational apparatus for self defence purposes thus easily accepted subordination in exchange for the protection to be provided by the Bet-'Asgädä clan. In such way was possible for the Bet-'Asgädä to attain a free hand on the subjects, and the absence of strong regional state has encouraged them to exercise unchecked degree of exploitation and arbitrary power on the subjects. Therefore, such weaker configuration of the Təgrä clans compelled them to be willing to seek protection and accepted the servile position under the administration of the stronger Bet-'Asgädä.

Fouad Makki in his general studies of aristocratic systems including that of Bet-'Asgädä stipulated it in clear terms. The discontinuous historical reminiscences and contradictory legends of origin entangled the cultural origin of the aristocratic relationship to be difficult to reconstruct.⁴³¹ But in an attempt to explain why the Təgrä were subjugated under their respective masters, the above reading leads us to the following two concluding reasons which are mainly persuasive in character. First, Given the weakness of the indigenous groups, the Bet-'Asgädä due to their strength and political experience they could fill the power gap and declared the ownership and lordship of the people and land. The absence of centralized polity increased the importance of the Bet-'Asgädä as providers of protection services to the existing and new arriving vulnerable and weak Təgrä communities. Secondly, because the masters already declared the ownership of the land, the subjects had to have the good will of the strong lords to utilize the grazing grounds for their animals, in return to provide material provisions mainly dairy products and the labour services to the masters. Therefore, it seems this way that the circumstances led for the formation of semi-contractual and reciprocal nature of relations between the two classes.

⁴³⁰ Blum, *The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe*, cit. pp. 807-836.

⁴³¹ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. p. 34.

3.5. The Power Struggle and Division in the House of Bet-’Asgädä

The ’Asgädä family succeeded in subjecting the people and land of Sahäl area, but failed to establish a stable and continuous power base in a fixed family line. Power struggle among various families and individuals was commonplace; such precarious environment was characterized by fratricidal fights and mutual looting and plundering of livestock. ⁴³² In the clan the ‘might is right’ rule works from the very beginning, the strong survives and the weak diminishes and either lowered in dignity or migrate and seek refuge in the neighbouring clans. ⁴³³ For example, Gärgis deprived the ‘Ad-Sämäräl’ul wed Gäbräkrustos (ገብረክሩስቶስ) from their ownership of the land and Təgrä for their father buried the Nägarit. Tämāryam antagonized the Bet-Yaqob wed Gärgis as a result they forced to leave their land and dispersed in the Bilen and Mänsa’ə areas and thanks to their noble blood they intermarried with the Šumaglā of these hosting clans. ⁴³⁴ The ‘Ad Däbray (ዓድ ደብረይ) pushed by the stronger cousins, and dispersed in their weaker form with no land, Təgrä and any social significance. ⁴³⁵ Səmur was blamed for blinding Sbhatu (ስብሃቱ), the son of G’ədad and was expelled from the area; as a result his progeny dispersed in the neighbouring Marya and Bilen, but only joined the ‘Ad-Täkles in the 1940s tribal reorganization. ⁴³⁶ In such security dilemma, only the Three Mefles emerged as core, prominent and strong clans that owned the land and the Təgrä. At the end of the power struggle, the weaker were forfeited of their possessions and the whole ’Asgädä clan territory and the Təgrä were made to be owned by the three clans which will be discussed below. Therefore, power was rotating from one family to the other depending on the relative strength accumulated by the respective individual family, but not established in a definite family in a hereditary form until the coming of the Egyptians. In such condition, the Bet-’Asgädä throughout their domain were not able to introduce a written customary law like the other Təgrä speaking neighbouring

⁴³² Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛጎታ ኤርትራ), *cit.* pp. 78-79.

⁴³³ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁴³⁴ There was a tradition that if people with a noble blood left their clan and migrated to other clans, they were treated relative to their status and intermarry with the Šumaglā of the host clan. But if they were Təgrä, they were made to continue in their subjected position.

⁴³⁵ According to Ğa’əfär Saləh, a Šumaglā could be lowered from his noble status within his clan if he failed to participate in warfare. He was not degraded to a Təgrä, but he was deprived of the Təgrä under his subordination. So he had to plough or milk by himself which was a bitter punishment in front of his kins. Deciding such deprivation was the responsibility of the Kāntibay.

⁴³⁶ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

communities and the central plateau.⁴³⁷

The absence of chronicle or any original written documents of the Sahəl communities restricted the attempts for the reconstruction of the past to depend on the oral stories relayed from generation to generation that lacks a common truth. Oral stories are highly diluted with subjectivity and prejudice, hence provide divergent narratives. As mentioned in the first chapter, Alberto Pollera described Hbtyäs⁴³⁸ as the first chief from the Bet-’Asgädä to be honored with the title of Kántibay. The Abyssinian king in Gondär bestowed him the titles of Kántibay, Baḥri Nägasi⁴³⁹ and the Nägarit during his visit demanding pledge of the king in protection of his country.⁴⁴⁰ According to the document Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), Sämäräl’ul was the first to attain the title of Kántibay.⁴⁴¹ The oral story of the Bet-’Asgädä tells that, Sämäräl’ul was pitiless and had bloody animosity with his cousins. Numerically, as his group was less than Gärəgis’, he was certain that after his death the power would not be retained by his son. Therefore, to avoid the inevitable transfer of power to his counter group, he buried his Nägarit, just some time before his death. To avoid witness of whereabouts of the burial site, he killed all the slaves that took part in that process, therefore it remained a mystery.⁴⁴² From that time on, his descendants are insulted as “*Wäd Däfan Nägarit*” literally meaning; “the son or children of the one who buried the Nägarit”. After the death of Sämäräl’ul, Yaqob the son of Gärəgis’ became the chief, and as a substitute to the obscured one, he brought a new Nägarit from Käbäsa (ከበሳ) or the highland probably from Gondär.⁴⁴³ This act of misdeed is an expression of how far the animosity was bitter and the effect of the power struggle within the family was dire.

After some time, Yaqob’s feet got paralyzed due to the scheme of the Hbtyäs family, a power contestant family made him to fall from his horse. However, the action was conducted in

⁴³⁷ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 3.

⁴³⁸ Also sound as ’əbtes is the corruption for the Təgrña / Christian name Habtä- ’əyäsus (ሃብተ-እየሱስ) meaning wealth of Jesus or a wealth given by Jesus in the form of a child.

⁴³⁹ Until the 1940s, the Kántibay of Ḥabab used various prefix titles like Kántibay of Ḥabab, lord of the Sahəl and the Red Sea.

⁴⁴⁰ As it is explained in Chapter two, Hbtyäs went to Gondär in person seeking protection against the frequent raids by the armed groups from the Ḥamasen. The reason why the Ḥamasen lords raided the Sahəl areas was because of the weakened position of the central power in Gondär, because of which it failed to check the lords. In subsequent periods the king failed to materialize his promise and the Bet-’Asgädä ceased presenting gifts and expected no protection. This had similarities with those of the European experiences that when the supposed central polities weakened the local lords grew in strength and exerted their influence and subjected the weaker groups.

⁴⁴¹ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 3.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

secrete and during his ailment, Hbtyäs treated Yaqob well. Consequently, the latter bequeathed Hbtyäs to be the chief of the family. The oral tradition claimed that Hbtyäs was the main conspirator, but Yaqob failed to know the secret. From that time until the coming of the British Military Administration and the weakening of their power, the chieftainship of Ḥabab, the strongest of the Three Mäfläs settled in the hands of House of Hbtyäs known as ‘Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ).⁴⁴⁴

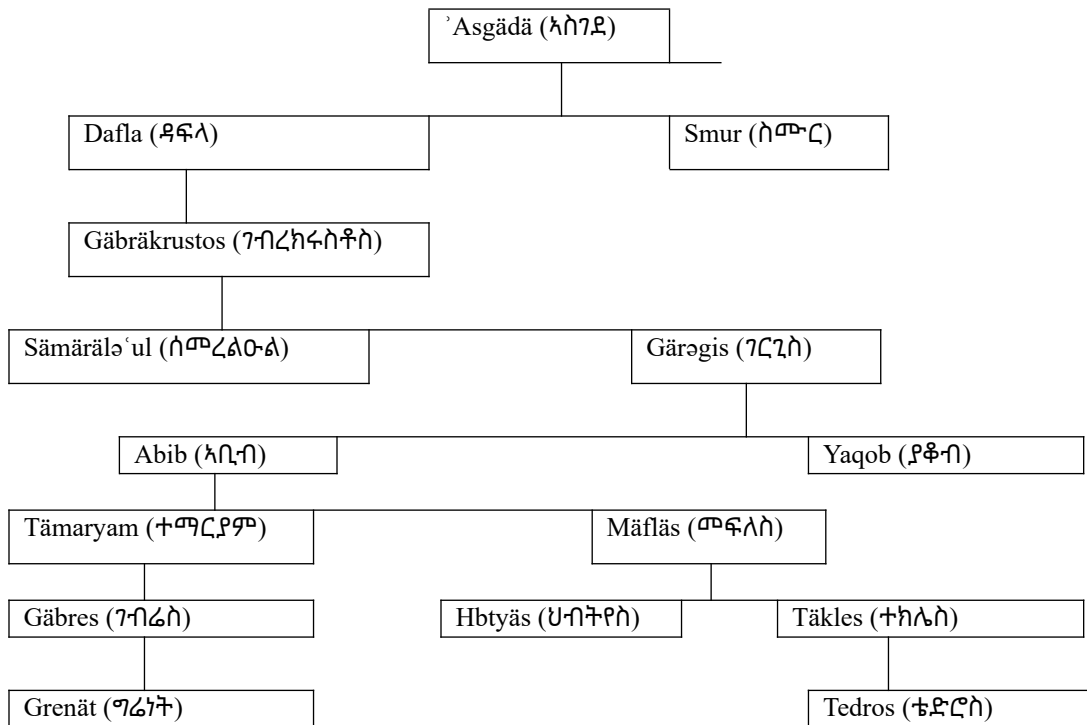


Table 3:The genealogical order of the Bet-’Asgädä. EPLF, *The Origin of Sahäl People*, (መበቆል ህዝቢ ሰሌል), p. 110

Once the Bet-’Asgädä became the lords of the northern highlands, they imposed their rule either by will or force on the various tranquil nomadic communities that survived through seasonal movement between the wet summer of the highland and the raining season of the arid coastal lowlands. However, after five generations, the unity of the Bet-’Asgädä family plunged into disarray⁴⁴⁵ and this was because of power struggle, conflict of interest and disagreement on

⁴⁴⁴ As we can see from the family tree, Abib was the father of Mäfläs and grandfather of Hbtyäs and his name Abib was originated from an Arabic word Mahbub/ Habib which means beloved. As a result the name retained by the largest and home to the core ruling family of the Bet-’Asgädä, ‘Ad-Ḥabab. However, it is not clear or at least need further research for how an Arabic name was given to Abib while the he was still a Christian.

⁴⁴⁵ According to D’Avray’s account, throughout the 17th century, the leadership of the Bet-’Asgädä was descended in proper order i.e from ’Asgädä to Abib for five generations. However, during Abib’s reign the first great division emerged within the family. Tämaryam, the second son of Abib revised the status quo. First he disagreed on the

the sharing of their booty.⁴⁴⁶ The central power of the family was retained in the hands of the eldest son of the Mäfläs family that descended from Hbtyäs, it is largely known as the ‘Ad-Ḥabab.⁴⁴⁷ It was named after Abib/Ḥabib (ሓቢብ), the great-grandson of the founding father ‘Asgädä.⁴⁴⁸ Throughout the seventeenth century, the headship of the clan descended peacefully through the order of first birth rights. However, during the reign of Ḥabib, the great schism appeared and the family gradually divided into three sub-clans. Out of which the ‘Ad-Ḥabab constituted as one of the Three Mäfläs (ሰለስተ ጦፍለስ) but was the strongest group with higher number of population, wealth and influence. At the top of the hierarchy of leadership in the Ḥabab was the direct descendant of ‘Asgädä. Headquarter of the clan was at ‘Anagit (ዓናጊት), where the Dögä (ደግ), the capital of the Kántibay was located.⁴⁴⁹ There, the munitions store was to be found, and the armed men and those of Šumaglā with no defined villages of their own lived closer to Kántibay. At ‘Anagit there was a Təgrä village and the residents were responsible for offering services to the Kántibay as head of the clan.⁴⁵⁰

The ‘Ad-Tämaryam came in to being when Tämaryam⁴⁵¹ himself, the second born son of Ḥabib, entered into discord on the division of the spoils of their great raid against the Hadändowa and ‘Adobana communities. Afterwards, Tämaryam decided not to stay under his elder brother Mäfläs’s rule. Then by the end of the seventeenth century, together with his family

division of the spoils looted from Hadändowa (ሃደንዶዋ) and ‘Adobana (ዓዶባና) and later he refused not to be the subordinate of his elder brother Mäfläs, thus by the end of the 17th century he decided to seceded and moved together with his subordinates representing 1/4 to 1/5 of the Bet-‘Asgädä strength to Labka valley area in the south. The main body of the Bet-‘Asgädä remained in the highlands of Rora and Naqfa region which took the name of Ḥabab after the name of their father. Mäfläs had two sons; Hbtyäs and Täkles. Hbtyäs took power and during his reign he was tired of the raids from Ḥamasen and to stop such incursion, he approached to king Iyasu of Gondär. Gained approval of his Kántibayship and granted protection from raids came back to Sahäl. It was this time the second schism within the family erupted. Following the death of Kántibay Hbtyäs, Täkles the younger brother of diseased Kántibay, declared himself as the head which was against the rule of the family which followed the primogenitor seized the ruler-ship of Ḥabab, Kántibay. Fkak, the eldest son of Hbtyäs was supposed to succeed his father was too young. Some years later, Fkak took his right of Kántibayship by himself, thus Täkles was politically defeated and seceded together with his followers to the ‘Ansäba river area, west of the ‘Asgädä slopes and the valley of Gärgär and found the ‘Ad-Täkles clan, the third clan of the Bet-‘Asgädä. Document 25 of the Naqfa documents put Täkles as the seventh head and the second Kántibay of the Ḥabab. Following Həbtyäs, only his grandson ‘Ezaz managed to approach the king to renew the submission thus received the confirmation of the rank of Kántibay and additional title of Baḥri Nəgasi ‘lord of the sea’. The later title continued to be used by his succeeding Kántibays.

⁴⁴⁶ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛገታ ኤርትራ), 1986, *cit.* p. 78.

⁴⁴⁷ The ‘Ad-Ḥabab in general and the Kántibay in particular due to his descent from the eldest son of the family and the numerical strength the clan possessed, represented as the core of the Bet-‘Asgädä. To realize such superiority, the Kántibay enjoyed respect from the chiefs and ordinary people of both cousin clans during any encounter.

⁴⁴⁸ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, *cit.* p 194.

⁴⁴⁹ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, *cit.* pp. 45-46.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ Tämaryam is a corrupted form for the popular Təgrña name of Habtemariam (the wealth of St. Marry or a wealth given by St. Marry in the form of a child).

and followers left Rora Ḥabab and moved down to Labka Valley to found his clan, the ‘Ad-Tāmāryam.⁴⁵² Tākles⁴⁵³, the founding father followed the same way as his uncle Tāmāryam did. During the move, Tāmāryam took with him a quarter amount of the strength of the Bet-’Asgädä. After the secession of Tāmāryam from his home to form the second group of the Bet-’Asgädä, Ḥabab became the name of the remaining core body of the Bet-’Asgädä in Naqfa and Rora Ḥabab regions.⁴⁵⁴

Hbtyäs, the sixth chief of the clan, submitted himself to king Iyasu of Gondär and returned with title of Kántibay and Nägarit that were essential elements of power.⁴⁵⁵ Tākles, younger brother of Hbtyäs and similar to Tāmāryam was not satisfied with his subordinated position. Hence, after the death of Hbtyäs, the discontented Tākles, contrary to the rule of succession of the family declared himself Kántibay of Ḥabab and seized the Nägarit.⁴⁵⁶ This happened because the son of the Kántibay that was supposed to take the power was so young. When Fkak, the son of Hbtyäs matured in age and wisdom, he regained the Nägarit and became the holder of the core family leadership of the Ḥabab clan. However the disgruntled Tākles was not interested to be ruled under his nephew and seceded to form his own clan, the Ad Tākles.⁴⁵⁷ He took his family and subjects to ‘Ansäba valley, the western slopes of the Rora Ḥabab and the Gärgär valley.⁴⁵⁸ Tākles established his centre at *Dägä* ’ät-’atba⁴⁵⁹ (ድገ እት አትባ) together with sixteen families that accompanied him. These families were descendants of the different clans

⁴⁵² Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 49-50.

⁴⁵³ Tākles is the corruption for the Təgrña name Täklä-’əyäsus (ተኸለ እየሱስ), ‘plant of Jesus’.

⁴⁵⁴ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 49-50.

⁴⁵⁵ Antony d’Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 13.

⁴⁵⁶ Therefore, in the chain list of Ḥabab chiefs, Tākles is the seventh head of the clan and the second Kántibay.

⁴⁵⁷ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 50-51.

⁴⁵⁸ The current chief of ‘Ad-Tākles is Mehamed Usman Mahmud. I met him in Kärän and spend many hours in the week long field work. He is courteous and being his guest I enjoyed meal and coffee in the various restaurants in Kärän and his home. His personality was beyond my expectation, no any exaggerated dresses or life style, but he lives like any ordinary person and in ordinary home at ‘Ad-Ḥabab neighborhood in Kärän. He counts to be in the 12 generations from Tākles, the founding ancestor: Mähāmäd (ሙሐመድ) (himself), ‘Osman (ዖስማን), Maḥmud (ማሕሙድ), Mähāmäd (ሙሐመድ), Näsrädin (ነስረዲን), Drar (ድራር), ‘ätel (ዕቴል), Ğämil (ጀሚል), Ğm’ə (ጅምዕ), Gälaydos (ገላይዶስ), Tedros (ቴድሮስ), Tākles (ተኸለስ), Mäfläs (ሙፍለስ), ‘Abib (አቢብ), Gärgis (ገርጊስ), Gäbräkrustos (ገብረክርስቶስ), Dafla (ዳፍላ), ‘Asgädä (አስገደ),,,,,,

⁴⁵⁹ *Dägä* ’ät-’atba ((ድገ እት አትባ)) is located in Habäro district. It was the center of the ‘Ad-Tākles clan, and was equivalent to the other two centers of Naqfa for the Ḥabab and ‘Afə’abät for ‘Ad-Tāmāryam. However, the settlement was ruined by the Ethiopian forces in 1971. After the massacre that consumed 91 people including men, women and children, the remaining migrated to other parts of the region and the Sudan. Currently, *Dägä* ’ät-’atba is inhabited by less than ten families from ‘Ad-Tākles and many other clans.

that migrated from Ḥamasen together with 'Asgädä, but probably because the schism was inharmonious he was not allowed to take his share of the Təgrä from Ḥabab.⁴⁶⁰

On his way to his new land, Täkles encountered with a small Təgrä family of Sabur clan that to constitute the first Təgrä subjected by the 'Ad-Täkles.⁴⁶¹ Owing to the proximity of Habäro district, the new home of 'Ad-Täkles to the Bilen and Marya, they experienced a hostile relationships characterized by mutual raiding. It is believed that the unfriendly environment has induced the 'Ad-Täkles to set up a distinct leadership in their early days of settlement. The leadership was not under a high-handed individual chief like the neighbouring clans; it never had the supreme juridical authority but managed by a council of Šumaglā or elders. Such democratic institution of power empowered the unity and military leadership that lacked by the other competing clans.⁴⁶² Therefore, following the breakaway of Täkles' from the core of 'Asgädä family, Hbtyäs became the head of the hub clan that occupied the Rora Ḥabab, Naqfa and all the eastern slopes and plains down to the sea and retained the name 'Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ).⁴⁶³ Ferdinando Martini visited the 'Ad-Täkles country described it to be miserable and rocky. For that reason they were in constant contention with the Ḥabab.⁴⁶⁴ The 'Ad-Täkles wanted to cultivate in the fertile Rora Ḥabab plateau, but the Ḥabab do not allowed them.⁴⁶⁵ As a result they reduced to seeking the best of their fortunes in camel breeding.⁴⁶⁶ However, as we can see in the later parts of this thesis, despite the barrenness of their land, the 'Ad-Täkles were the most agrarian community than their cousins in the northern highlands.

Hence, the houses of Hbtyäs, Tämaryam and Täkles altogether are known as the Rule of Three Mäfläs (ግዝኣት ሰለስተ መፍለስ). Each of which has organized their own autonomous clans in their respective territories and the chiefs got the title of Kāntibay (ከንቲባይ).⁴⁶⁷ From the 'Ad-

⁴⁶⁰ G.K..N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 161.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 194.

⁴⁶⁴ According to Ġa'əfär Saləḥ 'Omär, Näsradin Moḥamäd Näsradin, my informants in Kärän, the 'Ad-Täkles in addition to the barren and small territory they had, they had no peaceful relationship with the neighboring clans and they had constant fights that cost them lives. They fought and raided including with peoples in far places like the Ḥafära in the west, Gädäm in the neighborhood of Massawa, 'Ala and Säläd in the northeastern parts of 'Akälä Guzay etc.

⁴⁶⁵ Therefore, the quarrel between the 'Ad-Täkles and the 'Ad-Hbtyäs (Ḥabab) was of two reasons: the 'Ad-Täkles' demand right of use for fertile agricultural land in Ḥabab area and the old claims of the Nägarit. Bot claims were rejected by the Ḥabab that led for continuous bloody conflicts and grudges.

⁴⁶⁶ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D'Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell'Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vo. IV, 1946, p. 113.

⁴⁶⁷ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛንታ ኤርትራ), 1986, cit. p. 78.

Tämaryam, the first Kántibay was Grenät, and from ‘Ad-Täkles was Tedros (ቴድሮስ). The leaders of ‘Ad-Tämaryam and ‘Ad-Hbtyäs (Ḥabab) are still known as Kántibatat (plural of Kántibay), but in the case of ‘Ad-Täkles the title of Kántibay ceased after Dafla (ዳፍላ) the son of Našəh (ናሻሕ) grandson of Kántibay Tedros (ከንቲባይ ቴድሮስ).⁴⁶⁸ Following the death of ‘Ezar (ዕዛር), *Bahri Negasi* Tedros Našəh, the grandson of Täkles in an effort to reclaim the Nägarit deposed Nawd (ናውድ), the son of ‘Ezar and retained the Nägarit for three years. However the latter regained his position and retained the Nägarit by his successors. Since the loss of the Nägarit from the hands of the Bahri Nägasi Tedros Našəh, the ‘Ad-Täkles chief ceased to use the title of Kántibay. Thence, the dignitaries are known by the title of Šum (ሹም).⁴⁶⁹ The main reason for ‘Ad-Hbtyäs (Ḥabab) to get prominence and power was mainly due to their big number and home to the elder son of the ‘Asgädä line. The ‘Ad-Hbtyäs (Ḥabab) were divided into three houses: ‘Ad-Fkak, ‘Ad-’Edris, ‘Ad-Hbtyäs. These houses were composed of 40 fractions. Each of these fractions in turn assembled into 12 groups, most of which had their own chiefs. ‘Ad-Fkak had seven groups, ‘Ad-’Edris also had four groups, and the ‘Ad-Hbtyäs were of a single house.⁴⁷⁰

Owing to the Ḥabab was the hub of all the Bet-’Asgädä, they had the chance to retain big number of Šumaglā and Təgrä subject clans under their sovereign rule which made them to be larger than that of both ‘Ad-Täkles and ‘Ad-Tämaryam.⁴⁷¹ In the pre-colonial period, the numeric quantity of respective clan was not specifically known but only on the general number of the people, territory and livestock. Ferdinando Martini’s census of 1894 shows the demographic variety among the Three Mäfläs and particularly the human and livestock superiority and strength of the ‘Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ) was significant than their cousin clans. However, as we can see from the tables, the human and animal wealth of ‘Ad-Täkles was greater than that of ‘Ad-Tämaryam. Therefore, number of population could not be the reason as a factor for the

⁴⁶⁸ The title of Kántibay was maintained in the Täkles clan only for three generations.

⁴⁶⁹ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), p. 4. Currently the ‘Ad-Täkles have their Šum living in Kärän. His duty is to take care of the relations of his clan with the neighboring clans be it in peace or conflicts. In cases of killings with in the clan or other clan members, the Šum take the responsibility of organizing the procedure, negotiate on behalf of his clan members and collect the divided of the members of the clan to be payed for compensation. Moreover, he is the most respected figure representing the clan.

⁴⁷⁰ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo, Vol. IV., cit.* p. 120.

⁴⁷¹ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), p. 4.

degrading of the title of head of ‘Ad-Täkles from Kántibay to Šum.⁴⁷² Below are tables showing the number of population and animal wealth of the Three Mäfläs in different periods of time:

SNO.	Clan Name	Popn. 1894	Popn. 1931
1	‘Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ)	18,393	25,000
2	‘Ad-Tämaryam (ዓድ ተማርያም)	2,345	7,000
3	‘Ad-Täkles (ዓድ ተክሌስ)	4,048	9,800
Over all		24,786	41,800

Table 1, The number of population of the Three Mäfläs in 1894 and 1931. Source: Pollera, Alberto, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, p. 202.

SNO.	Clan Name	Cattle	Sheep and goats	camels
1	‘Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ)	15,000	300,000	7,000
2	‘Ad-Tämaryam (ዓድ ተማርያም)	5,400	50,000	500
3	‘Ad-Täkles (ዓድ ተክሌስ)	-	-	-
Overall		20,400	350,000	7,500

Table 2, The animal wealth of the Three Mäfläs in 1898/99.⁴⁷³ Source: d’Avray, Anthony et al., *Nakfa Documents* p 133

SNO.	Clan Name	Cattle	Sheep and goats	camels
1	‘Ad-Ḥabab (ዓድ ሓባብ)	16,587	291,686	6,365
2	‘Ad-Tämaryam (ዓድ ተማርያም)	9,469	35,225	1037
3	‘Ad-Täkles (ዓድ ተክሌስ)	14,589	72,064	1,370
Overall		40,645	398,975	8772

Table 2, The animal wealth of the Three Mäfläs in 1934. Source: Pollera, Alberto, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, pp. 202-203.

The Three Mäfläs’ relationship was characterized with discord and mutual plunder. It is said that there was no any time that they coexist in harmony and cooperation. The main reasons of the conflict and killings were the need to increase once subjects, territory, and competition for power and domination. Power struggle within the house of ‘Ad-Ḥabab was full of mistrust,

⁴⁷² According to Alberto Pollera, in 1889 census the ‘Ad-Tämaryam were assessed to pay about a quarter of the amount of tribute that was payed by the Ḥabab. This shows that, the wealth and numerical strength of the Ḥabab in relation to the ‘Ad-Tämaryam.

⁴⁷³ According to the new administrative decree of 30 April 1901, n. 22 the Italian Colonial Administration put the Ḥabab and ‘Ad-Tämaryam under the *Residenze* of Sahel, while the ‘Ad-Täkles due to their proximity were entrusted to the administration of the Kärän.

betrayal and fratricide. It continued without interruption until the early years of Italian Colonial Administration.

As part of the usual practices of attacks and counter attacks, in an unknown time, the 'Ad-Täkles overrun the 'Ad-Ḥabab territory and returned back with booty of hundreds of cattle and robbed the Nägarit of Kántibay Ḥasen (ከንቲባይ ሓሰን) of Ḥabab. The Kántibay ordered his people that until the Nägarit was retained back no one should shave once hair and beard. Then the decree sustained for two years. The people became hirsute, for that reason they were used to be called as Ḥamasa (ሓማሳ). In revenge, the 'Ad-Ḥabab attacked the 'Ad-Täkles at the battle that took place at 'Ab-'Amər (አብ ሳምር). During the arrival of 'Ad-Ḥabab, the 'Ad-Täkles were not alarmed, underestimated their enemy and were playing Gābāta (ገበጥ).⁴⁷⁴ Disregarded the power of 'Ad-Ḥabab with contempt, the 'Ad-Täkles said that, “the Ḥamasa are already came, thus, until we crush them and made them back to where they came from, let us stop but not ruffle the game and put our stick on the Gābāta playing board”. Unfortunately, the 'Ad-Ḥabab won the fight, killed many of the 'Ad-Täkles and could successfully regain their stolen Nägarit. Many dignitaries of 'Ad-Täkles including Gäladyos were killed in that incident. Another bloody fight was waged during the reign of Kántibay Ḥasen. It took place at Mo'o (ሞዎ) involving the Three Mäfläs and is still in the memory of the community.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ Gābāta (ገበጥ) is traditional game similar to chess, the board is made with stone or wood played in all areas of the country.

⁴⁷⁵ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONSOLIDATION AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE ARISTOCRATIC SYSTEM

Introduction

The main theme of this section is on the symbiotic relations of the two classes. To deepen the issue, the chapter will discuss; the different mechanisms employed by the lords to solidify and eternalize the system, the duties and obligations of the Təgrä and the lords respectively, the special privileges the lords enjoyed, the organizational schemes of the Təgrä groups and the role of the women will be the last part to be discussed. As explained in previous chapters, the Bet-ʾAsgädä had established a stratified social arrangement. This social order put the direct descendants of ʾAsgädä at the most privileged position followed by their cousin families.⁴⁷⁶ The various families with no blood relation with the Bet-ʾAsgädä but which have come together with them from Ḥamasen were honoured groups and could be considered as the second classes in the pyramid, and the Təgrä with the right to own property with obligation to provide seasonal and occasional dues from their products to their lords were better than those of few slaves with no right of property ownership. As we shall see in the following chapter, the religious families that perform religious function also elevated to the level of higher echelon of influential position. Although insignificant in number and influence, in the Bet-ʾAsgädä clans there were also a variety of groups with semi-slave status acquired as war prisoners, through purchase and illegitimate births. They were mostly serving under the highly privileged families. However, in this study, only the two main social classes, the Bet-ʾAsgädä as privileged ruling class and the subjected Təgrä as a servile class will be considered for discussion as the main actors of the aristocratic bond.

The aristocratic system of the Bet-ʾAsgädä that was formed in two groups of people in the form of lords and subjects was a relationship that critically defined the everyday lives of the subjects. The lords, a privileged minority originally Təgrña speaking from the Christian central plateau gradually secured the ownership of the land, adopted the language and religion of the subjects, and fully benefited from the full access they had on the livestock, the major source of

⁴⁷⁶ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 35.

wealth and status. The Šumagälä lords live out of the services and provisions provided by their Təgrä, hence they created an interdependent order which defined class structures that strengthened their ruling position. Therefore, the Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocratic system that commenced through both coercive and peaceful means gradually evolved into two clearly defined classes with characteristically deep social divisions. By all means the aristocratic system was tightly integral to the economic, social and religious aspects of both communities. Typically the relationships of the two classes had a contractual form. The Təgrä subjects lived restricted in defined socio-economic borders destined as providers of labour and material services to their lords. In return, the lords offered protection and the right to use the pasture lands. Therefore, in the mutual relationship, the lords had dominant role through the ownership of the land and its resources, hence the size of the community and the type of economy the society engaged affected the nature of the relationship.⁴⁷⁷ As we have seen in previous chapters, farming was practiced only during the early days of the Bet-ʿAsgädä family in Sahəl, but later abandoned and nomadism became the main economic activity of the community. Such livelihood sustained until the Italians came and pushed the clan to adopt cultivation.⁴⁷⁸ For that reason the Ḥabab bartered their dairy products for grain and paid their dues in kind. Ferdinando Martini, the then new governor in 1898 met the cousin of the Kāntibay who was responsible for the purchase and advised and encouraged to introduce farming in their clan.⁴⁷⁹ However, as we shall see in the upcoming chapters, during the early days of Italian colonial era, especially in the ʿAd-Täkles farming was introduced and the Təgrä customary dues were transformed in to agricultural products equivalent to the classical dues in dairy products. The equivalence of the amount was decided by the lords, where thanks to the customary old and firm cast division, negotiation and argument was not entertained.

Organized under their own clans and the umbrella clans of the Bet-ʿAsgädä, the Təgrä were under full control of their lords and through such closer association, both classes carry out their respective duties and obligations. The conventional dues paid, services provided and other practices of social relationships between the Bet-ʿAsgädä and the Təgrä was not sanctioned

⁴⁷⁷ Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. p. 168.

⁴⁷⁸ The table provided by Ferdinando Martini's *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D'Africa* vol.III, P 241 displayed the list of cultivation tax of each division. For the consecutive two years of annual tax (1901-1902 and 1902-1903) the cultivation tax of Sahel Division was the lowest. This emphasized the low level of cultivation practices in the region.

⁴⁷⁹ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D'Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell'Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vo. I, 1946, p. 65.

through written customary laws like other clans of Marya and Mänsa‘ə, but was taken as a customary norm. In this aristocratic order the women were limited to domestic works with no visible social role but had a significant position in the economic production of the system. Therefore, as this chapter is discussing on the mutual interdependence of the two classes, the role and position of the women will be explored.

4.1. Consolidation and Continuity of Bet-’Asgädä Aristocracy

For the masters, the Təgrä were the basic sources of labor and livelihood, thus providers of power and authority at a small cost. But the service could be enforced and its continuity ascertained only if the lords exercised a strict supervision over the daily conduct of the servants. Therefore, the consolidation of the Bet-’Asgädä’s aristocratic superior position was associated with the initial period of the evolution of the system. As has been explained above, the Bet-’Asgädä not long after they moved to Sahəl, they confirmed their superior position up on the Təgrä people. The subjects were of diverse in origin, evolving from both; the remnants of ancient communities and the slaves or the weaker and smaller groups that were seeking protection.⁴⁸⁰ In the aristocratic order of the Ḥabab and ‘Ad-Tämaryam sections, the descendants of both groups were classified as Təgrä and Makət respectively.⁴⁸¹

Moḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd provided a general explanation on the docility and peaceful nature of the Təgrä that supported the lords to impose and consolidate their rule. The Təgrä people had the culture of respecting the rule for the sake of maintaining peace and stability than for the fear or respect of individual chiefs, and the Bet-’Asgädä developed a system of governance that deprived the right of an individual to say or initiate any resistance as the Təgrä clan chiefs were holding the responsibility of control on their respective domains.⁴⁸² Such chief represents the clan and through him only was possible the Təgrä members to express their feelings or ideas, and this chief had already accepted the superiority of the Bet-’Asgädä, so lords indirectly controlled any possibility of resistance.⁴⁸³ In case of individual level crimes or attempts of resistance, the defiant might seek asylum in the neighboring clans or to the plateau. Extradition of the refugee was considered as indignity, so stayed there like the ordinary residents of the clan with full protection

⁴⁸⁰ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 16.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Interview, Moḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd, 10 September 2021, ‘Asmärä.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

of the hosting chief.⁴⁸⁴ According to Moḥamādsə'īd Ḥamd's clarification, the Təgrä chiefs were serving as middle men and agents of the Bet-'Asgädä lords in checking and silencing any possible protests from members of their clans. Hence, they had a significant role in consolidating the aristocratic system upon their people.

Therefore, to avoid any possible resistance and to consolidate their status, the ruling class administered a system in a way that secured their interests and managed to perform different mechanisms. These were including; declared the ownership of the land and the subjection of the people, dismantled the preexisting social organizations or clans of the Təgrä communities and merged them under their greater umbrella social groups and they administered a discriminated intermarriage practices. The ruling class also imposed an emotional control on the Təgrä and could built strong and sustainable political linkages with the regional and international colonizing powers. As we shall see below, through these five factors, the Bet-'Asgädä consolidated their rule and ascertained the continuity of their privileged position.

4.1.1. Subjection of the People and Ownership of the Land

As discussed above, the Bet-'Asgädä established their social and political control over the ancient inhabitants of the area. The seizure was by the right of conquest and compelled the groups to be ruled under their domination. Due to the small number of the Bet-'Asgädä in contrast to the numerous subjected Təgrä clans, they applied the duty of protection through the introduction of meticulous political discipline and reinforced it with relentless and distinct social arrangement.⁴⁸⁵ Through such method, the ruling families of Bet-'Asgädä weakened the Təgrä groups and easily apportioned among themselves. In the established aristocratic system, the Təgrä was bound to his lord with some basic rights like owning cattle and farming his lord's land for his own profit and in return obliged to pay dues and services to his landlord.

Both in agrarian and nomadic economies, the ownership of the land and the human labor were indirectly commanding the main source of production and power. The Bet-'Asgädä as a powerful ruling class in their initial period in power steadily controlled the land and people. They thoroughly partitioned the Təgrä speaking inhabitants of different clans and the land among themselves.⁴⁸⁶ Following the division of the land in to the different branches of Bet-'Asgädä, the

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 162.

⁴⁸⁶ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ፖፖሎክዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), pp. 6-7. For detailed description of the territorial division see in chapter three of this thesis.

inhabitants of those lands were made to be Təgrä or subjects of the respective occupying lords. For example, those of Təgrä inhabiting in the Rora Ḥabab and Naqfa territories were made to be divided and allotted among the lords of the Ḥabab clan. Specifically, the Təgrä inhabiting the Ḥabab territories were divided in to the three sons or houses of Dawəd (ዳውድ), namely; ‘Ad-’Edris (ዓድ ጸድሪስ), ‘Ad-Hbtes (ዓድ ሀብቴስ), and ‘Ad-Fəkak (ዓድ ፍካክ).⁴⁸⁷ The ‘Ad-Hbtes were lords to the Təgrä living in Rora Laba (ሮራ ላባ), Gäbgäb, ‘Arhaṣät (ኣርሃጸት) up to the banks of Naro (ናሮ) plains. The ‘Ad-’Edris were also lords to the Təgrä living in Qätanit (ቀጣኒት), Maret (ማሬት), and Rora Qäyḥ (ሮራ ቀይሕ). The remaining Təgrä living and grazing in the rest of Ḥabab territories were belonging to ‘Ad-Fkak of Kántibay ‘Osman (ካንቲባይ ያስማን).⁴⁸⁸

The Bet-’Asgädä particularly the ‘Ad-Täkles in the banks of ‘Ansäba River claimed to own all cultivable and pastoral lands in their respective clan territories and obligated the Təgrä that cultivate the land to pay Mägasa, around a quarter of the yield crop. The same was applied to the livestock of the Təgrä, where they required paying a large sum of dues payable in cash or kind and services offered to the lords.⁴⁸⁹ In addition to the Mägasa, the Təgrä should pay tax from the yield of their crops to the head of the clan, in the ‘Ad-Täkles for example, it was know as ‘əbela (ዕቤላ).⁴⁹⁰ The Bet-’Asgädä administered the land, they distribute the land according to the demands of the applicant and it became inheritable to the next generation as long as the holder paid his dues.⁴⁹¹ Therefore, in the ‘Ad-Täkles, since the late 19th century like the universal feudal orders, the partially farming Təgrä worked and grazed on the land and paid tribute to the Ṣumaglā, land lords. Such procedure of subjection was the same in all Three Mäfläs cousins.⁴⁹²

Therefore, every Təgrä family living in the territories of the Bet-’Asgädä was made to be subject under a certain lord, and the lords perhaps enjoyed the ownership of Təgrä like a property. Due to the hereditarily bounded attachment with once lord, the Təgrä were not allowed to change a lord without the willingness of the lord himself.⁴⁹³ However, according to Moḥamädsə‘id ‘Osman, if his lord had failed to protect him or deprived him of his basic rights, a

⁴⁸⁷ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), pp 6-7. However, in my opinion it is doubtful, such division of the Ḥabab into three houses seemed a later time classification and not of during the subjection of the Təgrä. Because the names listed except Hbtes represents an Islamic name while Islam was introduced in very later time, at least five generations from Hbtes.

⁴⁸⁸ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 10.

⁴⁸⁹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, *cit.* p. 243.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ Interview, Mohamedsaid Osman, 10 September 2021, ‘Asmārā.

⁴⁹² EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 10.

⁴⁹³ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, 1944, *cit.* p. 16.

Təgrä had the right to sue his master to the Kántibay or the clan chief, and then if the lord could not fulfill his obligations, the Təgrä could change his lord.⁴⁹⁴ In many cases, as explained in previous parts the clan identity of the ancient and weakened Təgrä clans was faded and mostly known by the clan names of their overlords. Therefore, the degree of intelligibility of the Təgrä identity was diluted significantly.⁴⁹⁵ A society with no clear past is living in a bleary state of affairs and with no clarity. Thus became easy for subjection and domination. Such act of ownership of the land and subjection of the people, including the weakening the clan identity of the Təgrä had played a significant role in consolidating the position of the Bet-ʾAsgädä aristocratic system.

4.1.2. The Dismantled Təgrä Clans and Spread Under Various Clans of Bet-ʾAsgädä

The Təgrä speaking peoples inhabiting the Sahəl prior to the coming of the Bet-ʾAsgädä were organized in small families and kinship. Such levels of social formation were naturally weaker in defending themselves. Therefore, it was their organizational vulnerability that made them seek protection of the Bet-ʾAsgädä.⁴⁹⁶ The feeble Təgrä clans easily weakened and partitioned in to the various Bet-ʾAsgädä families, and then it became easy and suitable for the consolidation of their aristocratic system. Such division of the Təgrä was irrespective of their original clan affiliation which had practical similarities with the colonial conquest of the Europeans in Africa. Many African clans with common history, language, religion and other values were made to be citizens of different countries. The same was true in the Təgrä of Sahəl. Members of the same Təgrä clan could be subjected under the three houses of the Bet-ʾAsgädä lords living far apart, and the worst could happen for various reasons when father and son became Təgrä of different lords. With the increase of the Bet-ʾAsgädä households, the Təgrä families were further divided so as the new lord family to get its share of servants.

The extreme exploitative nature of the relationship and the heinous leadership of the Kántibay had emotionally weakened the Təgrä. The dues the Təgrä had to pay and the services they expected to perform was demanding. Beyond the material value, implicitly it signaled that

⁴⁹⁴ Interview, Moḥamädsəʿid ʿOsman, 10/09/2021, ʾAsmərə.

⁴⁹⁵ The degree of waning of Təgrä original identity was proved during the clan reorganization of the late 1940s. During the reorganization, those of liberated Təgrä with no clear original background forged new Təgrä clans based on consensus with members other clans.

⁴⁹⁶ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

their survival was at the mercy of the lords. In some instances, the bullying character of the Kāntibay had demoralized and made the Təgrä to be submissive to their lords. A case in point was Kāntibay Ğawəḡ's (ከገቲባይ ጃውጅ) administrative heritage. He was known to have been the cruelest Kāntibay, thus was extremely feared by the community. Once up on a time, when he suddenly stared at 'Amr wād 'Aḥmād (ዓምር ወድ አሕመድ) of 'Ad Baryay (ዓድ ባርያይ) of Ḥaşāla clan (አሸላ ቆቢላ), it is said that the latter had panicked and declared, 'I am your slave' (ባርያኸ እዩ), from that time on members of his clan, the 'Ad Baryay (ዓድ ባርያይ) are insulted as 'the son/children of the one who enslaved by reprimand of the Kāntibay' “ወድ ገብር አብ ግንዛት.”⁴⁹⁷ Therefore, the overall process indirectly weakened not only the unity of the Təgrä (ትግረ) clans, but morally and emotionally degraded the individual Təgrä. The mobile nature of the nomadic economy had already dispersed the concentration of the Təgrä communities, and weakened their potential for unity and defense. Consequently, the divided and weakened form of Təgrä communities deemed to seek protection from the lords which laid the favorable condition for the consolidation of the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä.

The divided and weakened nature of the Təgrä social formation was the main pillar for the consolidation of the authority of the lords. The disarrayed Təgrä became susceptible for the Šəmaglä, and remained without any definite leadership to guide and advocate their rights, but under the umbrella chiefs of the ruling class. The consequence of such weakness was realized in the early twentieth century, when in the early 1940s they bewildered and unable to organize beyond their pieces of families and sub-clans pinched to form a clear agenda and familiar leadership.⁴⁹⁸ The difficulties in reorganization of the Təgrä clans through reconstruction of their old clan identities was an attempt to undone the dispersion of the Təgrä throughout the last three centuries of subordination.

4.1.3. The Limitation of Inter-Class Marriage

Although both sections of the society lived in the same settlement area, socially they were divided and yet the intermarriage was imbalanced and discriminatory. Socially the two classes follow different customs. In marriage, the Təgrä clans marry each other and had similar or the same regulations, decorum and tradition. Similarly, the Bet-'Asgädä clans too had their own custom. The autonomous clans and families also had their own rules and traditions, nevertheless

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁹⁸ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let not separate)*, cit. p. 95.

the slaves had their own tradition of marriage but restricted within themselves.⁴⁹⁹ In the case of the ruling class, the marriage relationship was among the equivalent nobles, however there were rare relationships transcend the class boundaries. Such marriages represented and favored for one side of the classes. The men from Bet-’Asgädä could acquire beautiful girls from the Təgrä sections.⁵⁰⁰ This became legitimate marriage and the offspring took their father’s side and considered as noble blood and face no discrimination or humiliation and the woman enjoy honor equivalent to the other wives of the lords. She ceased all the labor works performed by the Təgrä women, and she became chatelaine with Təgrä women serving her.

Generally in the laws of aristocratic clans, particularly in the Maria clan, unlawful sexual relationships were crimes and handled with harsh penalties. Unmarried or widowed woman from any class, if impregnated out of marriage was fated to be hanged together with her counterpart and the newborn was condemned to death.⁵⁰¹ In the Bet-’Asgädä marriage between a man from the Təgrä class and a girl from the ruling class was totally unacceptable and illegitimate.⁵⁰² Viewing the laws of marriage in the Maria clan,⁵⁰³ if a boy from the ruling class seduced a young Təgrä girl who afterward became pregnant, the infant was undoubtedly suffocated to death, but the pairs pardoned to go free.⁵⁰⁴ The class based marriage has boldly marked out the boundary that maintained and preserved the patriarchal purity of the lord’s blood. But the marriage restriction seemed not an absolute one, ’Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans said that seldom the lords used to wed their girls to their Təgrä if the lord was happy by the good works and deeds of his Təgrä.⁵⁰⁵

From such discriminating relationship we can understand how deep the belief of the ruling class’ superiority was entrenched and how undignified attitude they had toward the Təgrä. Adhering to the above superior feelings of dominance that denied any leeway by the ruling class up on the Təgrä had potentially psychological implications in the development of self-defining attitude of We, the lords and They, the subjects and vice versa. In this way, the discriminating marriage system practiced by the ruling class helped the Bet-’Asgädä lords to maintain their

⁴⁹⁹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ለብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 10.

⁵⁰⁰ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, *cit.* p. 199.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.184

⁵⁰² Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, *cit.* p. 36.

⁵⁰³ As the Marya are immediate neighbors of the Bet-’Asgädä and both with aristocratic hierarchy, it was highly possible to share similar values and customs with regard to the inter-class marriages.

⁵⁰⁴ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, *cit.* p. 174.

⁵⁰⁵ Interview, ’Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

distinctive blood purity and class interests. Hence, rift between the two groups' grew deeper and wider, consequently strengthened the aristocratic order to be a lasting social relationship.

4.1.4. The Emotional control

The peaceful native peoples with distinctive culture and way of life together with their land fall under the subjection of an organized small group of people with different cultural values. For the ruling class creating and implementing ideas and practices that broaden the psychological gulf between them and the subjected groups was vital. As we can read below, downing and mistreating the Təgrä like animals, for example calling the them as 'Aṭal Təgrä (አጣል ትግረ) which signify for the consideration of the Təgrä equal to the goat. As explained above, the denial of intermarriage, restricting some material cultures, dressing, housing etc exclusively to the benefit of the members of the ruling class were some of the main *modus operandi* that buttressed and maintained their superior position and interests. Applying the various grievous insults and derisive terms was the utmost hit that culminated the emotional breakdown of the Təgrä. In the succeeding generations, with no possibility of attaining once freedom, for a new born Təgrä his future was being the property and servant of an individual or a family fully devoted in a sub-humanly manner for the whole of his life. Such kind of undignified persona was built by the lords; though seemed more exaggerated, Bongiovanni described the Bet-'Asgädä's treatment of their Təgrä in the following;

“The Bet-'Asgädä are accustomed in derision to apply the nickname of 'Aṭal (goat) to the Təgrä Base of birth and of spirit the sense of whatsoever stimulus of valor and honor has died, nor did it raise the mind higher than to graze day by day, without ever taking thought if life is one of poverty, like the animals born without reason are born to toil. It follows that they will do nothing by spontaneous will to get for themselves a more satisfying life; the Bet-'Asgädä would remain permanently at the Dəgä to pray, to pass the time in discussions naturally of no value and there await till the Təgrä bring them milk, butter and from time to time also some goat the greater to give a mark of respect to their lord. The Təgrä do not care about drawing advantage from the produce of their beasts, they would take their camels to pasture without thinking, even distantly, to send them on caravan to gain profit; they would limit themselves in every village to taking their turn in pasture flocks.”⁵⁰⁶

In such manner the lords made the Təgrä to lose their dignity and indifferent to

⁵⁰⁶ Antony D'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. pp. 107-108.

themselves but devoted to the service of the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords. Therefore, the subjected mentality was deeply framed in the blood of the Təgrä that consolidated the formidable position of the lords.

The psychological degradation and downing of the Təgrä was imprinted from the childhood. ʾIbrahim Sulṭan in his interview on how he joined the Təgrä struggle and the subsequent national politics of the 1940s was conducted in Cairo, in 1982.⁵⁰⁷ He recounted that the reality of the Təgrä-Šumaglā class difference was clear from his early childhood. He remembered that the Šumaglā called them bugs and treated them as subhumans. The wealth of the Təgrä was under the control of the lords, every activity of the Təgrä be it marriage, travel, business etc was at the permission of his lord. The Təgrä was made to declare and known himself as the servant of a new born Šumaglā.⁵⁰⁸ Such humiliation put on the mentality of the Təgrä and resulted for an emotionally degraded and docile personality that lived on the fear of the lords that prolonged and cemented the aristocratic order. However, such embarrassment became unbearable for the Təgrä intelligentsia of the early twentieth century. They used it as a driving force in pushing and justifying their struggle and agitating their people for protest in demand of emancipation.

4.1.5. Political Linkages with the Regional and Occupying Powers

Like the other lords in the Təgrä Speaking areas, the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords were subjects and beneficiaries of vital material support from the regional and international powers dominating the area. The successive powers that established their rule over the Bet-ʿAsgädä area were; the Ottoman Empire, the Abyssinian Kingdom, the Funj Sultanate, the Egyptian Empire and Italian Colonial Administration. In comparison to other Təgrä territories, due to its topography the Bet-ʿAsgädä country was the least intervened area. The lords in all cases were assigned as tributary chiefs and left free to exercise their powers in their respective territories. Therefore, the foreign powers for the lack of sufficient staff or to avoid possible resistance maintained the chiefs intact but only demanded submission and dues. They left the chiefs free without much intervention in their internal affairs as a result maintained their social orders. But to maintain the ties with their subordinates and to restructure their administrative orders, the dynastic polities sporadically

⁵⁰⁷ Ibrahim Sultan, Interview, 1982, Cairo.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

interfered in the local affairs of the lords.⁵⁰⁹

For centuries, the absence of a regional strong polity that serves as protector has helped the Bet-ʿAsgädä to play that role and could be considered as the main factor to consolidate their position. Naturally aristocratic systems are the hierarchical arrangement of classes which classified as; those of the ruling class and the ruled ones, the exploiter and the exploited, the middle men and the subjects, the protector and the protected, the powerful and the weak etc. Therefore, in relation to the outside powers, such ready made social structure was convenient for; governance, taxation, conscription and other administrative activities of the foreign political powers. In the case of Bet-ʿAsgädä aristocratic system, the various regional and international powers recognized their superior position and fully supported them for the maintenance of the customary class privileges.⁵¹⁰ Moreover, the Bet-ʿAsgädä territory did not attracted invaders for conquest because the country had no harbor worth taking, no lucrative caravans, cities, and industries that tempting for control.⁵¹¹ The powers, so as to expedite their objectives authorized the preexisting aristocratic position as it was with full rights and power including; the ownership of the land, the right of administrative and customary revenue collection and authority to serve as an administrative representatives. Moreover, the foreign powers were not caring about relieving the exploitation of the Təgrä (ጥገረ), but were concerned mainly about ensuring their influence and interests in the region. Therefore, the powers accomplished their interests through the empowerment of the Bet-ʿAsgädä (ቤጥ አስገደ) and other ruling classes of which helped to strengthen and maintain their classic position.

4.2. The Duties of the Təgrä

The Bet-ʿAsgädä subjected the various clans in Sahəl known as Təgrä, and reduced them to a quasi-slavery status. Such phenomenon has drastically transformed their economy. The ruling class abandoned their traditional farming practices and joined the livestock raring economy of their subjects.⁵¹² Later with the accumulation of power in their hands, the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords

⁵⁰⁹ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. p. 35.

⁵¹⁰ The various occupying and colonial powers including the Ottomans through their Naybs in Massawa, the Abyssinian from Gondär and Təgray, the Egyptians through Munzinger, and the Italian colonial administration did not disturbed the aristocratic tradition but endorsed the customary superior position and rights of the Bet-ʿAsgädä. They used the lords as their representatives in all administrative apparatus.

⁵¹¹ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 31-32.

⁵¹² According Ferdinando Martini, during his tour around 1903, there was no any cultivation in the Rora Baqla but he observed a number of ruined agricultural footprints that ascertained the existence of ancient agricultural practices.

forsaken any labour activity and became entirely parasites of their Təgrä.⁵¹³ F. Martini stated that the nobility status does not allow the lords to work, the wealth i.e. the cattle were the property of the Təgrä. The Bet-ʿAsgädä were not living on income or work, but on oppression: from rounding in different *zariba* or camps of the subjects.⁵¹⁴ In the different camps the goats or the camels milked three times every day; two milking for the Bet-ʿAsgädä guests and the remaining one for the families of the host Təgrä. The guests having no food at home, go from *zariba* to *zariba* in search of food or milk.⁵¹⁵ The lords, both men and women totally distanced themselves from the works like ploughing, fetching of water and wood etc. but also from the daily necessities to be totally dependent on their Təgrä, for example; they do not milk a cow and grind food but such activity was done only by the Təgrä. In such cases if the Təgrä was absent for some reasons so did not prepared the milk for a day or if the Təgrä woman said she could not grind the food for any reason, the Bet-ʿAsgädä men and women spent the day and the night without drinking milk or eat the meal because they assumed both works as an undignified tasks for them.⁵¹⁶

However, the Təgrä had unrestricted rights of property ownership and accumulation of wealth. They owned their livestock and had full right of ownership and unlimited grazing rights in the clustered settlements inside territories of the overlord clans. Such so-called privileges of property ownership, grazing rights and protection offered by the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords were given back in different forms of dues and services mentioned below.

4.2.1 Təgrä Groups with Special Duties

The servile duties of the subjects were not evenly distributed in all of the Təgrä groups.⁵¹⁷ Some clans were free from the dues or enjoyed the reduction of the payment for many reasons including if they had good friendship with the chief, had marriage relationships and if the members of the clan were brave fighters that had pleased the lord.⁵¹⁸ But many of the Təgrä were made to provide the servile services. Therefore, in the Təgrä class there was no uniformity of the services offered, but there were various sorts of special duties performed by different clans or

⁵¹³ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 196-197.

⁵¹⁴ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV. cit. p.111.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Interview, Moḥamädsəʿid ʿOsman, 10 September 2021, ʿAsmärä..

⁵¹⁷ Antony DʿAvray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 60.

⁵¹⁸ Interview, Moḥamädsəʿid ʿOsman, 10 September 2021, ʿAsmärä.

classes within the subjected groups. Some clans were assigned as providers of special duties or services. For example the 'Asfāda clan were providers of wives to the Ḥabab men, and the 'Agdub (አግዱብ) were herdsmen responsible for taking care of the seasonal movement of the Ḥabab herds according to the rain and availability of grass and water.⁵¹⁹ Special case is of the Saho (ሰዎ) and Bet-Lealit (ቤት ለዓሊት) clans that had significant role in recovering the Nägarit of the Ḥabab from the 'Ad-Täkles and in return enjoyed the privileges like honour, reduction of payment and gain some authorities with special representation in the councils.⁵²⁰ The 'Ad-'Amdoy (ዓድ ዓምዶይ) served as representatives of the lords of Bet-'Asgädä in different Təgrä camps.⁵²¹ In return for their middlemen service, 'Ad-'Amdoy enjoyed a relative privileges described in detail in the subsequent headings.

The 'Ad Dərqä (ዓድ ድርቅ) and the 'Ad-Mu'alim were the two religious clans performed the religious services. They provided *Qadi* (ቃዲ), a judge in Sharia law, and they led prayers and read Quran services.⁵²² In return for their role of conducting funeral services, they were rewarded with the skin of the bull sacrificed in the tomb, a small amount of meat and Maria Theresa Thalers. Both groups, in recognition of their religious services were exempted from revenues.⁵²³ It is believed that, there were some clans almost died out in the long process of aristocratic servitude. In that case, during early years of their arrival, the Italians discovered the members of some clans to be so little.⁵²⁴ During the investigation, it was not known if they had any special duties like the other clans.⁵²⁵ In my opinion, the most probable reason for the numerical decline of the members of these clans could be the nomadic life style that forced them to leave the area and spread widely. The dispersal of members of the same clan to a wide area had a significant impact in weakening their mutual network. The deliberate dispersal of members of these clans among the various families of the Bet-'Asgädä lords had already been the main reason for the numeric decline of these clans thereby loss of their special duties.

⁵¹⁹ Antony D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 35-36.

⁵²⁰ Interview, Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman, 10 September 2021, 'Asmära.

⁵²¹ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛት ጣልያን), pp. 7-8.

⁵²² These religious clans claimed to have come from Mecca and dispatched to each of the Bet-'Asgädä clans to provide religious services. The 'Ad-Mu'alim was serving the 'Ad-Temariam, the 'Ad-Dərqä was divided into the three branches of Ḥabab; 'Ad-'Edris, 'Ad-Hbtes, 'Ad-Fkak where each group had their own followers to whom they give; prayers, readings from the Quran, funeral services etc. in return they received; hide of a cattle sacrificed on the funeral ceremony, a little meat, and a few cash. The Qadi was reserved for the 'Ad-Dərqä.

⁵²³ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, p. 14.

⁵²⁴ These clans were; Mäkal (መከል), the Säbalit, the Dagdägä, the Saho, the Rābḥat (ረብሐት), the Kawkana (ካውካና), the Səḥmano (ሰሕማኖ), the Dob'at etc.

⁵²⁵ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, p. 36.

The Hadändoy and the 'Aṭal-Təgrä (አጣል ጎጣረ) were the two groups of Təgrä subjects with varied duties. The Hadändoy, were a group who believed to have migrated along with the 'Asgädä family from Ḥamasen. Despite their servile status, they were not lowered to the level of the 'Aṭal-Təgrä and considered as the most loyal and devoted servants mainly responsible for the domestic works of the Šumaglā particularly in the lord's houses. They were not expected to provide milk cows but only with lighter obligations, thus there existed significant differences between them and the Təgrä, however had less visible difference with those of weakened Šumaglā.⁵²⁶ Thus, were relatively privileged and treated as humans than the 'Aṭal-Təgrä subjects that used to be considered as sub-humans.⁵²⁷ The term 'Aṭal (አጣል)' means goats, therefore the Ḥabab were considering and treating them simply as animals, a mere 'goat'.⁵²⁸ Generally, the Təgrä had the duty to perform the works which the lords considered as an undignified labour-intensive works including; herding animals, milking cows, working in the farming etc. Especially the Kāntibay because they were not satisfied by the available Təgrä labour, used to own slaves.⁵²⁹ Throughout their life, the Šumaglā were living in leisure and assumed the labour work in contempt. Therefore, the serfs were bound to supply the lords their everyday demands, customary dues, services and special gifts on various occasions as discussed below. In this form, the Təgrä suffered the greater burden to comfort the life of their lords.

The 'Aṭal-Təgrä were designated to the service of the lords more or less in a slavery condition. They were duty-bounded serving as; shepherds, goatherds, stockmen, muleteers and cameleers, and were in charge of milking and production of cheese, butter, wool and meat, extraction of salt from the pans of Ḥasmät (ሓስመት) etc. To the contrary, the Bet-'Asgädä were idle in their *Dəgä*.⁵³⁰ The author of the document number 62 of the Naqfa Documents described

⁵²⁶ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 196-197.

⁵²⁷ The sub-human or equivalent to slave view of the 'Aṭal-Təgrä by the Šumaglā was well expressed in the custom of homicidal incidents. If 'Aṭal-Təgrä was killed by his equivalent belonged to another lord, it was considered as no crime had been committed, because the offspring of the dead were simply substituted the position of their father as providers of goods and services. So the lord of the dead had no loss. The worst explanation comes when 'Aṭal-Təgrä killed a Šumaglā other than his own lord; again the killer was not guilty, so not punishable. The Ḥabab explanation for this was that if a bull killed a person, the bull is not to be punished but the owner. Thus the killer Təgrä was not punished but transferred to the heirs of the deceased lord. Just like in the feudal society, the lord was responsible for the actions of his slaves, so the Šumaglā too for the actions of his Təgrä. This explains that, the Təgrä were denied the personal liberty and considered as a property. Contrary to the above rule, if a Šumaglā killed a Təgrä of another lord, the heirs of the latter lord had the right to make vendetta and to kill a Təgrä of the former which was against the immunity enjoyed by a killer Təgrä.

⁵²⁸ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 196-197.

⁵²⁹ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛት ጣልያን), cit. p. 12.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

the condition of the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords in comparison to the highly exploited Təgrä as follows;

“The Bet-ʿAsgädä remained permanently in their village, the *Dəgä* (ደግ), to pray and to pass the time in discussion that are naturally of no importance in the slightest and to await (when they are not making a burden of themselves by imposing their presence on the villages) for the Təgrä to bring them milk, butter and from time to time goats in order the more to ingratiate themselves with their lords.”⁵³¹

Despite the indignity of the Təgrä by their Bet-ʿAsgädä masters, the Təgrä had the right of owning cattle, sheep and goats and in legal terms the Təgrä had the rights of solving disputable issues legally as long as not affecting the rights and interests of the Šumaglā.⁵³² Thus in legal terms a Təgrä was not an absolute property of his lord like a goat or a slave. The bond of relation between the Šumaglā and the Təgrä was that, the former were masters only in authority but not in ownership.⁵³³ Therefore, in case of unbearable treatments, though not practically utilized by the Təgrä, they had some outlets like abandoning once lord and seek better life elsewhere.⁵³⁴ In this case the Šumaglā could not have any right of say or lordship on him. One of these exits was becoming a servant in the caravan passing along their country. However, this might not have been the only possibility but was not the choice of the Təgrä, because such decisions put them outside of their clan and could throw them into enslavement by other clans or in the hands of gang of robbers.⁵³⁵

While serving their lords, if the Təgrä committed mistakes or if failed to fulfill their duties, some times even if it happened beyond their control were treated harshly. For example, a man from ʿAlmäda, Təgrä of ʿAd-Täkles was herding cattle of his lord, and accidentally one of

⁵³¹ Document 62 of *Naqfa Documents*, in Anthony D’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 37.

⁵³² The religious family/clan of ʿAd-Därqä used to settle the disputes between the Təgrä based on a law derived from *Qoran* known as ʿCalil’.

⁵³³ Anthony D’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 45.

⁵³⁴ ʿAbä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans said; if a Təgrä felt that his lord treated him badly, he can shift a lord in another *Fära ʿə* with in the clan of Bet-ʿAsgädä. The shift of lord had its custom/ procedure, the Təgrä asks the chief to call a meeting and sue his lord for ill-treatment for example if the lord failed to rescue his looted cattle. Then he justified his shift to another lord in other *Fära ʿə* believing a better treatment. But if his lord admitted his failures and asked an apology and in return promised for compensation of a new land, give him a girl for marriage (in special cases Təgrä men used to marry Šumaglā women if the lord was happy with the service and conduct of the Təgrä) or amnesty for dues he might abandon the move and stay under his lord. But if the lord was steadfast not to admit his faults and to promise good treatment the Təgrä could change a lord. But a Təgrä to shift to another clan like to Marya or Mänsa ʿə was prohibited, to do so he must have flee and seek refugee in his desired destination clan.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

the herds was died and the Təgrä slaughtered and ate it. As a result, the lord declared the Təgrä to be a slave for not reporting the incident and for not bringing the meat to him. The relatives of the Təgrä asked the lord why he enslaved their brother and told him they were ready to compensate his cow, but he replied that his cow was equivalent to four cows and they gave him his demand regained the Təgrä status of their brother.⁵³⁶ According to Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, the mistreatment varies from clan to clan, hence the 'Ad-Tämaryam were better than the 'Ad-Ḥabab and 'Ad-Täkles. Based on the information of Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, the lord was entitled to decide the status of his Təgrä down to slavery, and at the same time the Təgrä had the possibility to buy back his Təgrä status. But if the Təgrä was poor and had no relatives helping him, he would be destined to be a slave. Hence, the lord had almost an absolute authority on his Təgrä.

The lowest caste in the Bet-'Asgädä and other aristocratic clans that graded beneath the Təgrä and the slaves were the Dada (ዳዳ).⁵³⁷ It was a social class mostly associated with age and services. The Dada were young mostly black African in physique and specially fed, so physically very strong. They were needed particularly during their productive age. When they got older they relieved from the previous laborious services.⁵³⁸ They were mostly acquired as war prisoners, as gifts, purchased from markets and from the sex servants of the Šumaglä themselves. In the later case, the women were known as Ğarät (ጃራት), they were primarily providing sexual services to the Šumaglä extra to their lawful wives and those unsolicited offspring got castrated so as not be reproduced and became Dada that chiefly devoted for labor works.⁵³⁹ Hence, the Təgrä were in better status than the Dada, for they had the liberty of movement, property ownership, the right to establish family and continuity of descent.

Therefore, the sub-humanly handling of the Təgrä and the immunity they had been granted for not being liable for their homicidal deeds sounds that the lords considered them as if animals that lacked conscience and responsibility. The lords shouldered the accountability on behalf of their subjects, and made them simply the providers of various services and dues on which their life was dependent. Martini, Alberto Pollera, Anthony d'Avrey and Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ገጠጠኦታዳር፣ ቅድሚያ ሙግዛእቲ ጣልያን), consented that the lords had reduced the Təgrä into almost bare slavery and described the various duties of material offerings

⁵³⁶ Interview, Šäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, 18 October, 2021, Kärän.

⁵³⁷ Interview, Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Omär, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵³⁸ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

and service provisions as follows;

4.2.2. Material Gifts

Mädhanit (ጠድሃኒት); was an annual provision of butter by the Təgrä to his lord. The amount of the butter to be offered was valued according to the number of cattle, sheep and goats owned by the Təgrä and calculated in terms of Maria Theresa Thalers.⁵⁴⁰ Accordingly, a sum of butter expected from a herd of forty cattle was equivalent to four Maria Theresa Thalers and an equivalent of two Dollars from each flock of fifty sheep or goats. The herd of cattle and flock of sheep and goats was bare number irrespective of the age and sex. Considering the huge number of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats of the Ḥabab, fifty thousand of Cattle and three hundred thousands of stock in the 1898, the *Mädhanit* was vital in the standard of living of the lords.

Ṭälit Ḥəg (ጠሊት ሕግ); this was a gift of a goat or a sheep given by a Təgrä to his lord during the feast of *Ḥəg* (ሕግ) or *ʿIdā ʿAlā ʿAdəḥa* (ዒድ ኣል ኣድሓ) or in relation to the Pilgrimage of the lord to Mecca.

Wotə Ṭähayə (ዎት ጸሓይ); the two words denoted for a cow and dry season respectively. Therefore, this duty was the provision of a milk-cow per the herd of cattle by a Təgrä to his lord during the dry season. According to Ferdinando Martini this provision was terminated.⁵⁴¹

Wotə Ḥalib (ዎት ሓሊብ); the two terms are referring to a cow and milk respectively, thus this obligation was similar to the above provision except the seasonal variation. This duty was the furnishing of a milk-cow by a Təgrä (ትግረ) to his lord during the wet rainy season.

Wotə mākan (ዎት ጠግካግ); the term denoted to a sterile cow. Therefore, according to this obligation, the Təgrä was supposed to provide a barren cow to his lord for meat consumption.

⁵⁴⁰ According to Kuroda, A., Maria Theresa Thaler was an official currency of the Austrian Empire. It was silver coin and was popular means of exchange in the Middle East and Red Sea regions of Africa as early as 1762 and 1769. despite the introduction of British pound, Italian Lire and Ethiopian currencies, the Maria Theresa Thaler continued to circulate as the main medium of exchange until around World War II. Although Queen Maria Theresa died in 1780, the Austrian Empire continued minting the same silver coin with the date of 1780 and her effigy even after her death. With such vast geographic coverage and influence, normally it was the official currency to the people in the northern highlands and the central plateau where the aristocratic payments were settled in that currency.

⁵⁴¹ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV. *Cit.* p. 118.

According to Ferdinando Martini this offer was already abolished.⁵⁴²

Nagalät Ḥaläg (ናጋለት ሓለግ); this was lamb's meat provision by a Təgrä to his fell ill lord (any sickness including syphilis or snake bit) until he was completely recovered. This was performed not only by his Təgrä, but if his subjects were far away from him for pasture or trade, those Təgrä of other lords in the neighbourhood were obliged to provide this gift. This obligation was terminated.⁵⁴³

Ṭälit Ḥalib (ጠለት ሓሊብ); was a nanny milk-goat offered to the lord uninterruptedly throughout the year. If the milk-goat was dried, the Təgrä had the obligation to replace it with another milk-goat.

Šämät Galəza (ሸመት ግልዛ); to protect the winter cold of the Naqfa and Rora highlands, the wives of the lords needed a blanket and warmth clothes. Therefore, the Təgrä had the duty to prepare or spun and woven those items from the wool of their sheep and offer to their lords. As driving camels and the flocks and herds during the two seasonal migrations was the responsibility of the Təgrä. During such movements, the Təgrä were duty bound to prepare and decorate the shaded platform on the top of the camel that sheltered the lord's family from harmful sun heat and hot winds.

Ṭälet Kämis (ጠለት ኸሚስ); was a goat gift, especially concerned to the Təgrä shepherds living around the Kántibay. If the Təgrä was unfortunately despicable for some reason, he was required to make the offer on a monthly basis. Then the lord can take the gift for him or forwarded to the Kántibay.

Rfä'it (ርፍዒት); it was a gift in the form of money, cattle or grain given in times of special occasions like; wedding, baptism, sickness etc. The purpose of this offer was to win the compassion of his master. Therefore, it was given if the lord was influential enough in winning somebody's ears, particularly the Kántibay. The Təgrä offered the gifts if he was seeking acceptance, therefore it was almost bribery.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

Ryal bə'al gäṣə (ርያል ብጻል ገጽ); this was the money paid to the lord of the father of the bridegroom during wedding ceremony. *Ryal Bə'al Gäṣə* as a tradition is still in practice, but these days it has changed its function, and the money is given as a sign of respect to the older man in the neighbourhood.

Hərdet Rgaz (ሕርደት ርገዝ); was a gift of livestock offered by the Təgrä on the occasion of funeral services of any member of the lord's family. The present was not specified but depended on the Təgrä's possession or means.

Ṣumbalot (ጹምበሎት); this was a livestock gift offered by the Təgrä during the wedding ceremonies of any member of the lord's family. The number of cattle offered for meat had no limit but depends on the capability of the Təgrä.

Riyal Mäṣāngäl (ሪያል ሙሸንገል); this was a kind of annual tax amounted to one Maria Theresa Thalers from every adult Təgrä given to the lord. This was collected in addition to the fulfilment of the above listed duties. This provision was already abolished.⁵⁴⁴

In the Bet-'Asgädä, when a Ṣəmaglä visited to his Təgrä's house, inevitably he was expecting good entertainment. But, if the expectation was not realized, the disgrace becomes intolerable and to his debasement. For example, a Ṣəmaglä visited his Təgrä hoping good host, but if the Təgrä awaited his lord with no food or drink available to provide, the Ṣəmaglä orders his host Təgrä to cover him with textile for not to be known by other people around him that he was not treated well by his Təgrä.⁵⁴⁵ The Ṣəmaglä were so proud and extremely seeking dignity and glory.

4.2.3. Service Provisions

Hospitality; this was the duty of a Təgrä to host the visiting lord. This duty made the Təgrä responsible to treat his lord with food and accommodation during his touring stay in the camp or the Təgrä dwelling area. In this duty the Təgrä provide hospitality to his lord for limited period of time and the Təgrä was supposed to provide his lord a bowl of milk twice a day.⁵⁴⁶ According

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁴⁵ Interview, Ṣäḳə 'Edris Ḥusän Moḥamäd, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁴⁶ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV. cit. p. 119.

to the reports of early days of Italian period, the above list was not the only duties of the Təgrä, but the most poignant even difficult to believe were the sensual rights enjoyed by the lords as part of the hospitality. The source stated that during the early days of Italian period, Vittorio Fioccardi the commissioner of the district abhorrently observed and documented that; when a Šumaglā visited his Təgrä village, the former had the right to spend the night on the latter's bed or with a girl that he felt beautiful.⁵⁴⁷ The document further put in plain words that, the Təgrä expressed their happiness for the coming of the Italians as they disqualifed these detesting acts that relieved them.⁵⁴⁸ Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Omär rejected this narrative and expressed his dubiety that, it might have been happened during the ancient Bälāw era.⁵⁴⁹ He claimed that both the Bet-'Asgädä and the Təgrä were people of the book. The Bet-'Asgädä were pious Christians so in no way they could do it and the Təgrä were also Muslims, the books ordered them to defend and if needed to sacrifice once life for their wife, religion and homeland.⁵⁵⁰

Mähamäd 'Abdäla Suleman recounted a poem that strengthens the argument that the custom and religion of the Təgrä speaking communities do not allowed for such practices. The incident happened during Alula of Təgray. He invaded a Marya village; the residents were either rapped and being killed or left their homes to the surrounding mountains for hiding. But a man called 'Ali Bäkit Mähamäd was left in his hat together with his wife, for he was ill with malaria. Every soldier that entered his hat was not coming back, as all got killed by his sword. The dead numbered a total of seven and 'Ali Bäkit got killed bravely.⁵⁵¹ The poem was said in honour and glory of 'Ali Bäkit for he sacrificed his life to defend his wife not to be raped or killed by the enemy as follows;

ዓሊ በኸት ወድ መሓመድ ፍንግሕ ጀነት ኣቲቱ = By tomorrow, 'Ali Bäkit will be in Paradise.

ሰብዕ ቅጉላ ምና ኣሉላ በደል ወርሳ እሲቱ = For he killed seven enemies in defence of his wife.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁷ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 197-198.

⁵⁴⁸ This sexual right of the Šumaglā is so dubious because both the Šumaglā and Təgrä were Christian and Moslem respectively. Therefore, it would not be tolerable to see and allow their lords to enjoy their bed and the lords would not dare to do so, but there might be rare cases. So taking this as a general phenomenon throughout the clan seemed more of dishonouring the Təgrä.

⁵⁴⁹ Interview, Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Omär, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Interview, Mähamäd 'Abdäla Suleman, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁵² Although the incident happened in the neighboring Marya clan, but we can considered this dignified action as the culture of all Təgrä speaking people. So was to the Təgrä of Bet-'Asgädä.

This poem was an expression of honour for the heroism of ‘Ali Bākīt for sacrificing his life to defend the dignity of his wife. Another poem was said by Wād Korof (ወድ ኮሮፍ) from Sāb lä‘alit (ሰብ ለዓሊት), Təgrä of Ḥabib. He versified the poem in response to the ‘Ad-Täkles’s assertion for the ownership of Naqfa and Rora Ḥabib. To defend for any possible attack by the ‘Ad-Täkles, the Kāntibay of Ḥabib was mobilizing his followers.⁵⁵³ Therefore, the poem was aimed to agitate the Ḥabib and to warn the ‘Ad-Täkles that it was impossible to realize their territorial claims;

ኢያ ሓጥር ልብላ ምን ክትፎቶ ግረቦ፣ ፍንጌ ሕምብርታ ውከቦ= Who the gallant is allowing others to cut and take part of his body? The wife’s part located between navel and waist is not given to other man.
 እይ ጸጋይ (ኣየናይ ለዋህ) ልብላ ምስል እስቶ ስከቦ= Who ingenuous is allowing sleeping with his wife?
 ናቕፋ ሓምልማል ኢትሃየቦት እብ ሃቦ= Naqfa is not owned as a gift/ not gained easily.⁵⁵⁴

This poem was targeting mainly against the assertion of the ‘Ad-Täkles to Naqfa. Its core idea was that even if a person is so generous, he can not allow someone to sleep with his wife, and so was the Ḥabib for Naqfa. It signalled the ‘Ad-Täkles the same memo, and the main message was that it will never be given to them and reminding them for its despair. It also compared the importance of Naqfa to a wife and this expression ascertained how the Təgrä valued their wives. So considering the above two poetic wordings, it seemed less probable the Təgrä would allowed their lords to enjoy sexual relation with their wives, and the Šumaglā on their part to commit such awful and religiously unsupported deeds. But even if it was practiced, it would have been a grave insult to the Təgrä since they simply allowed and looking silently while the Šumaglā enjoyed their bed.⁵⁵⁵ Ğa‘əfār Saləh ‘Omär added that because of the religion and culture, virginity was highly valued by the Šumaglā and the Təgrä. Even would be a shame for the Šumaglā to sleep with a wife of a Təgrä that he considered an inferior being, and he concluded that it was a defamation of the Bet-’Asgädä.⁵⁵⁶

The Təgrä was expected to provide his duties and services accordingly and on time. If a

⁵⁵³ Interview, Mähämäd ‘Abdäla Suleman, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ If this was a reality, the identity or fatherhood of most Təgrä whose mothers had sexual intercourse with their lords would be in question, and this would be a shame for the Təgrä to accuse the Šumaglā with such malpractices.

⁵⁵⁶ Interview, Ğa‘əfār Saləh ‘Omär, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

Təgrä failed to accomplish the required duties and infringed the Bet-’Asgädä’s custom, it had severe consequences. The disciplinary measures taken against such transgressions were including; deprivation of property and expulsion from living and grazing in the territory and other harsh penalties.⁵⁵⁷ The worst ruling order was declared during the reign of Kántibay Ğawğə (ከንቲባ ጃውጅ). In this edict, those Təgrä failed to fulfil their servile duties were deprived the existing little Təgrä rights and threw down into slavery.⁵⁵⁸

Gämäl Şä’an (ገመል ጸዓን); in addition to securing the milk, meat and butter provisions, the Təgrä had the duty to provide a pack camel to transport the lord’s family including women and children during the seasonal migration to and from the highland and coastal lowland.

Nada (ናዳ) (warning); this norm was requiring the Təgrä to uphold and respect the calls and orders of his lord. Therefore, if a Təgrä found to be disobeyed to such orders was made to dispossess a third of his property. In other words this was a measure for the degree of loyalty of a Təgrä to the dignity and honour of his lord.

In addition to these dues and services offered, the Təgrä would submit 1/4 of his harvest to the landlord or the Şumaglā. To describe in the words of the Kántibay, the general purpose of all the above customary duties from the Təgrä section of the society were; it enable him to possess a personal wealth large enough to satisfy all his individuals holding important positions, maintenance of individuals who were in charge of providing him with relevant information of what is happening in the villages, helping the needy, and keeping a standard of quasi state that astounded the masses.⁵⁵⁹ While the Təgrä were required to provide that much duty, Māhamädsə’id Ḥamd insisted that the Təgrä-Şumaglā relationship should not be associated equivalent to a master and servant way of relation. He justified his claim that, the ruling classes were providing peace and stability and there was rule of law without any discrimination irrespective of their background or class. They were equaled in front of the law. The Təgrä had the right to sue his lord or other lord to the Kántibay or clan chief for any mistreatment they committed on him. Therefore, it was not difficult time for the Təgrä.⁵⁶⁰ This kind of explanation

⁵⁵⁷ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 11.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, in the neighboring Marya clan, if a Təgrä failed to accomplish his duties or infringe the ruling, the lord had the right to declare him a slave or Dada. But Bet-’Asgädä there is no information of such penalties except the case of Kántibay Ğawğə.

⁵⁵⁹ Antony D’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, *cit.* p. 59.

⁵⁶⁰ Interview, Māhamädsə’id Ḥamd, 16 September 2021, ’Asmärä.

was common during my encounter with people especially the Təgrä speaking individuals of Šumaglā background. On the other hand, people with Təgrä roots uttered the oppressive and exploitative character of the aristocratic era. Thus need cautious consideration of the two conflicting subjective rationalizations.

Assuming all the above duties to be performed by a Təgrä family in service of its lord, one can imagine the hardships that each and every member of that family had to face. The father and the matured boys would be lifelong busy herding their own and the lord's stock wondering after water and pasture, and swinging during the seasonal migration to and from the coastal and highland summers. During such movement, the Təgrä was responsible for transporting the lord's family using his camel, providing milk and meat in holidays and other important occasions etc. Not only this, but offering labour services of milking, fetching of wood and water, and working the land of his lord. After the introduction of farming in the early decades of the last century, the labour works of the subjects was intensified. The women seemed to be drudged equivalent to their men. Therefore, the Təgrä were socially, economically and psychologically subjected to a lowered and undignified living wholly available at the disposal of the lords at the cost of their private lives.

The commonly pressing economic problem of the Təgrä was not only feeding their lords, but the relatively heavy tax ordered by the regional powers and colonial administrations was extracted only from the Təgrä.⁵⁶¹ It became hard for the subjects when they demanded excessive amount during the unproductive seasons. In this case, the Šumaglā were all the time beneficiaries for they were not paying taxes, but served as middlemen and retain their fraction out of the collected revenue. The suffering of the Təgrä in relation to taxation was experienced during the harsh treatment of the Kāntibay in the times of the Ḥabab defection to the northeastern Anglo-Egyptian-Sudan. The clan defected during early days of the Italians due to pasture issue and in opposition to the heavy taxation and other demands including conscription and pack animals by the new colonial administration.⁵⁶² During their refugee in Swakin, the Təgrä sought to complain against Kāntibay Maḥəməd (ከንቲባይ ማሕሙድ); the later discovered their scheme and punished the Təgrä by forcing them to feed his numerous soldiers for two months.⁵⁶³ As they were outside of their territories and living abnormally, it was not convenient and beyond the capability of their

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., p. 234.

⁵⁶² Gaim, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, cit. pp. 100-102.

⁵⁶³ Antony D'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 249.

unstable economy while in a strange land. Thus, the situation led for the Təgrä to flee to as far as places between Qarura (ቃሩሩ) and Därtit (ደርቲት) together with their cattle hoping the soldiers would not follow them. However, the soldiers tracked them and those caught were seized ten cattle from each person that would be taken and slaughtered as a penalty.⁵⁶⁴ The other event was the act of the Kāntibay using the Təgrä as instrument of punishment for the opponents and rival Šumaglā. In implementing his punishment, he took their Təgrä from them and distributed to his supporters, and seriously threatened for any one of them assisting the Italians.⁵⁶⁵

Retrospectively looking in to the duty of furnishing meat and other animal products by the Təgrä to the Bet-'Asgädä lords, which were the land owners in Sahəl seems to have historical similarity to the ancient practices of their ancestors in Ḥamasen.⁵⁶⁶ The Rstāña (ርስተኛ)⁵⁶⁷ in Ḥamasen had symbolic privileges in general known as rim (ሪም). Though vary from district to district, one of the privileges was that the provision of Lsan Manka (ልሰን ማንካ), the tongue of every slaughtered oxen during wedding or funeral feasts were presented to the Rstāña elders.⁵⁶⁸ Ḥamasen, being the original home of the Bet-'Asgädä, probably such aristocratic dues might have been their imports. The dues and services of the Təgrä also seemed to have been changing according to the new developments in the Bet-'Asgädä. For example, there were a number of services in relation to Islamic practices that most probably introduced after their conversion to Islam.

The above listed duties of the Təgrä were practised during the high days of the aristocratic order, but gradually reduced or abolished and as we shall see broadly in the next chapter, it was limited to the service of only the higher lords. Despite such down looking and poor treatment on the Təgrä, the lords were not hesitating to marry the beautiful ladies of their subjects, but not vice versa as it was against the dignity of the lords and used to be assumed as if degradation of their dignity. Consequently, the wedding was not a bond between the two classes rather it was a kind of unfair acquisition.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 250.

⁵⁶⁶ S.F. Nadel, 'Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau', Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, Africa: *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan. 1946), pp. 1-22.

⁵⁶⁷ Rstāña was referring to the first settler and owner of Rsti (ርስተ) land. Therefore, he is respected and privileged by the late comers to his ancestor's village/land.

⁵⁶⁸ S.F. Nadel, 'Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau', *cit.* pp. 1-22.

⁵⁶⁹ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, *cit.* p. 199.

4.3. The Responsibilities of the Bet-ʿAsgädä

In the Bet-ʿAsgädä, the direct descendants of ʿAsgädä represented the core of the clan with the highest ruling office. According to the clan’s tradition, the first born male descendant inherited the power. The other privileged land owning groups outside of the core descent were generally known by the title Šumaglā. They were mainly the descendants of the ʿAsgädä’s brothers and other families accompanying the core family during the great trek from Ḥamasen.⁵⁷⁰ Therefore, numerically the Šumaglā were larger than the core ʿAsgädä family and all Šumaglā were not equally rich and privileged lords. For many reasons they declined from their honored status. As explained in previous part, impoverished members of the Šumaglā class were degraded to almost the level of the subjected Təgrä.⁵⁷¹ Nadel emphasized the socioeconomic classification within the ruling class; Tono (ቶኖ) and Šumaglā. While the former represented to those members of the ruling class that combined social standing with wealth, thus grip the real power. The later term stands to represent the impoverished aristocratic group of the country-men. Despite of noble origin, they were lacking wealth and/or authority. Thus, the Šumaglā were not always lords, whenever they fallen in to poverty, even engaged in a subordinated position including as camel drivers.

The cream of the clan constituted a group of advantaged land and Təgrä owing class. But in general terms, the lordship of the Bet-ʿAsgädä had already taken hereditary form in the hands of few families. As a general tradition, a son born from the Bet-ʿAsgädä families was becoming a lord from his childhood, and the Təgrä of his parents visit him to show his eminence and parallel to this, a new born Təgrä was assigned to serve the lord for the whole of his life. Each child from both classes was destined to follow the fate of their predecessors; theoretically there was no any possibility of outlet in changing once status except in cases of complete impoverishment of the Šumaglā or remote exile of the subject. Therefore, in comparison to the Marc Bloch’s description on the characteristics of medieval European feudal lords, the Šumaglā of Bet-ʿAsgädä somehow demonstrated some similarities.⁵⁷² Looking on the responsibilities of the Bet-ʿAsgädä in reaction

⁵⁷⁰ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 19.

⁵⁷¹ Therefore, the social formation of the aristocratic clan can be categorize into three social hierarchies; the core Bet-ʿAsgädä, the middle class Šumaglā, and the subjected Təgrä.

⁵⁷² In *Feudal Society II*, according to Bloch’s description of Nobility; it requires a combination of two characteristics; “first, it must have a legal status of its own, which confirms and makes effectual the superiority of which it lays claim. In the second place, this status must be hereditary with the qualification, however, that a limited number of new families may be admitted to it, in accordance with formally established rules.” In relation to the

to their Təgrä duties seemed not a fair reciprocity. The lords were beneficiaries of the aristocratic order which administered an unequal reciprocal reaction to their Təgrä. The lords of Bet-ʾAsgädä for the services they received from their Təgrä provided the protection from any harm emanating either from outside or from within the clan and they allowed the Təgrä to live on and use the land for grazing pasture.⁵⁷³ Although both protection and pasture land seemed more fundamental to the survival of the Təgrä, but in comparison to the exhaustively exploitative duties, the obligations performed by the lords were more of natural and not laborious.⁵⁷⁴

In relation to the duty of protection from outside enemies, the document Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), described a weaker protection role of the lords. It stated that; the Bäni-ʾAmär, the Beja, the Funj of eastern Sudan and in the latter periods the Ethiopian forces under Alula and the Jihadist army of Mahdi under Uthman Digna used to kill people and took booty of thousands of livestock from the Bet-ʾAsgädä territories.⁵⁷⁵ During which the Bet-ʾAsgädä lords neither defended their people nor attempted any opposition to the invading powers that shows how far the Bet-ʾAsgädä lords' defense was ineffective. In the issue of fighting there is the claim from the Bet-ʾAsgädä that, when the fighting was between members of the same clan or among the Three Mäfläs, the Təgrä were not fighting but required only to provide the logistics to their respective lord.⁵⁷⁶ The Təgrä were excluded because the local fights were determinant for the balance of power with in the clan so it remained to be limited simply in between the Šumaglä. But the Təgrä were engaged if the fight was a large scale against outside enemies or raids. However, the Təgrä were neither allowed to own a sword nor trained in the sword fighting schools.⁵⁷⁷ The justification was because if the Təgrä had sufficient training and own the sword, he might kill his lord or initiate uprising.⁵⁷⁸

Šäḳə ʾEdris Ḥusän Moḥamäd of ʾAlmäda and ʾAbä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans of Mänsaʿə negated the above assertion of the Bet-ʾAsgädä that denouncing the Təgrä were not armed with sword. Both said that, the Təgrä owned swords and were brave fighters during

ownership of land as a means of ascending in to a lordship, Bloch stated that; “this dominant class has sometimes been described as landed class, and if by that is meant that fundamentally its members derived their revenues from their control of the soil.”

⁵⁷³ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, p 16. The land was owned by the lords by the right of conquest.

⁵⁷⁴ Pollera Alberto, *Le Popolazioni Indigene*, cit. p. 201.

⁵⁷⁵ Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. p. 6.

⁵⁷⁶ Interview, Ġaʿəfär Saləh ʾOmär, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

interclan and against plundering. 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans pointed out to the role of the members of 'Ad-Şawra and 'Almäda clan members during the fight of Marya and Mänsa'ə in union against the Bet-'Asgädä on a land dispute.⁵⁷⁹ Šäkö 'Edris Hüsän Moḥamäd on his part stressed his negation of Bet-'Asgädä's protection role against the bandits and said that; our forefathers were afraid of the Šumaglā for they were taking whatever they wanted like goats from their herds, but not from other enemies. He also said while the Təgrä were fighting and dying, to the contrary the Šumaglā were sitting in the commanding posts and proved his claim with the example of Ḥamädnur Šngeray (ሓሞድኑር ሽንጌራይ), who was a brave fighter from the Təgrä of Ḥabab. He wrestled against 'Iṣaq (እሻቕ), a Šumaglā of 'Ad-Täkles and he sliced 'Iṣaq from head down in to two.⁵⁸⁰ Most probably, debarring the Təgrä from fighting would seem for the benefit of the lords, but the Bet-'Asgädä side narration is a mere disarmed past of the Təgrä class. However, with such exaggerated narrations from both sides, members of the two classes are promoting their past by accompanying supporting stories with full of embellishments.

My informants mainly from the 'Ad-Täkles lords rejected the argument of unbalanced mutual reciprocal relations between the Təgrä and Šumaglā. They claimed that the Šumaglā were protecting and even sacrificing their lives in defense of their Təgrä, except when the raiding forces were stronger than they do. In the Bet-'Asgädä tradition, a Šumaglā was sacrificing his life fighting against his brother in cases of any abuses committed on his Təgrä than to defend for his own brothers. To prove their argument, they tried hard to describe a number of fights and sacrifices in the past by a Šumaglā against other Šumaglā within the same clan and outside to defend their own Təgrä.⁵⁸¹ And questioned that who in the world do you think sacrificed his life

⁵⁷⁹ Interview, 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁸⁰ Interview, Šäkö 'Edris Hüsän Moḥamäd, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁸¹ According to Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin and Ğa'əfär Saləḥ 'Omär, both the Təgrä and the Šumaglā of Bet-'Asgädä had respected each other and were living in harmony. The Šumaglā had the responsibility to defend their Təgrä. In this case the Šumaglā's duty to defend their Təgrä was told in the oral history of Bet-'Asgädä. some of the events that deserve mention were during the reign of Kāntibay 'əzaz (ከንቲባይ እዛዝ), the conflict between the 'Ad-Täkles and Ḥabib that run unsettled with animosity and warfare for 14 years was because a Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles were killed by 'Ad-Ḥabib. The deceased Təgrä were; 'Uman wed Zed (ዑስማን ወድ ኔድ) of 'Almäda and Hyab wed Ḥasän (ህያብ ወድ ሓሰን) from Rgbat. Another event was the when Ḥaḡə wed 'Elos (ሓጅ ወድ ኤሎስ), a Šumaglā of 'Ad-Täkles, a well known fighter of the clan was killed in Mänsa'ə while fighting to regain the plundered cattle of the Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles and still the spot where he buried is known Qäbr Ḥaḡə wed 'Elos (ቀብር ሓጅ ወድ ኤሎስ). Another sacrifice by the Šumaglā of 'Ad-Täkles to his Təgrä happened when Drar (ድራር), a Šumaglā campaigned against the Ḥdarb of Barka. The Ḥdarb killed seven Təgrä from 'Agdub sub clan of 'Almäda and looted their cattle. Consequently, Drar was killed while fighting to bring back the raided cattle of his Təgrä and because he died at Qämret (ቀምሬት), there is a saga and song known by Drar 'əb Qämret (Drar at Qemriet) (ድራር እብ ቀምሬት). Gärgis wed Grenät wed Tämāryam, Kāntibay of 'Ad-Tämāryam was killed while fighting against the 'Ad-Täkles because of a Təgrä. Other individual decision to save the lives of their Təgrä shows how they were responsible for their Təgrä. But in my opinion, the Šumaglā were associating any abasement of their Təgrä with their dignity. Therefore,

for his servants? So can we consider the services and dues provided by the Təgrä equivalent to the life of the Šumaglā? Life was better than the butter, goats, meat or any contributions and the dues collected from the Təgrä.⁵⁸²

The two obligations of the lords of Bet-ʾAsgädä, were the main pillars of the implicitly established contract with their subjects. With regard to the duty of protection, as a matter of fact, in defending once Təgrä, the Bet-ʾAsgädä lords were emotional in character. According to Michael Hasama Raka's description, like the other lords in the western lowlands and the ʿAnsäba area, the duty of the Bet-ʾAsgädä was defending their country and safe guarding their Təgrä.⁵⁸³ Individually, protection of their Təgrä holds special position. Letting once Təgrä suffering as a victim in the hand of other lord sounds the weakness of the owner lord, thus they associated it with offense of their personal dignity; as a result they keenly protect their Təgrä.⁵⁸⁴ However, the lord to have Təgrä and the capacity to protect them required him wealth and power. Therefore, the impoverished Šumaglā were not lucky to own Təgrä, but thanks to their honored noble blood were free from subjection.⁵⁸⁵ The same was true with the right to live and utilization of pasture lands for the Təgrä cattle in the lord's territory. Every Təgrä living in any of the Three Mäfläs territories, as a precondition was required to be subjected under the lord of the land he dwells. Any Təgrä failed to fulfill his duties was forced to leave the clan territory.⁵⁸⁶ But as every inch of the land was owned by either of the clans and the existence of eminent danger of attacks and plunder, the Təgrä were compelled to remain under the strong lords. Because of the inconsistent peace and absence of strong centralized polity, the region was characterized with semi-anarchic political condition. In such status quo, if any Təgrä family attempted to secede from its umbrella clan, it would be helpless from the attacks by any organized warrior or predator clans or groups

it was more of maintaining once stubborn pride and seemed more of brotherly fight of grudges than protecting their subjects. From the Təgrä side, the role of the Šumaglā mentioned above is rejected. For example Šäḳə ʿEdris Ḥusän Moḥamäd said that; the Šumaglā were oppressive of their Təgrä even when the latter uninterruptedly providing their dues and services, so the Təgrä were not happy. Justice was not served particularly in ʿAd-Täkles and Ḥabib, but the ʿAd-Tämaryam had relatively better treatment and justice towards their Təgrä.

⁵⁸² Interview: Ġaʿəfär Saläh ʿOmär, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, Mäḥamädsə ʿid ʿOsman, Mäḥamädsə ʿid Ḥamd et al, 14 October 2021, Kärän.

⁵⁸³ Michael Hasama, *The Story of Eritrea* (ዛጎታ ኤርትራ), cit. p. 79.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. p. 202.

⁵⁸⁶ In the case of Marya custom, any Təgrä that defied or failed to perform his obligations was condemned to be Dada, a slave. But he had the chance to regain his old Təgrä status through payment. In the case of Bet-ʾAsgädä, expulsion from the land as a penalty can be affirmed by looking at the documents of the 1940s when the lords of Bet-ʾAsgädä demanded the Təgrä that decline to pay tribute to leave their territories. However, in the 1940s since the Bet-ʾAsgädä were in their lowest level of authority, that was what they could do, but in precolonial era they might have applied severe penalties.

including by the ex-lords. Therefore, for the Təgrä the security given by the lords was fundamental for survival of their human lives and property.

On the other hand, in such stratified society, legal powers were mostly in the hands of the lords and they tend to not be contained by the rules they made. In the case of Bet- 'Asgädä, a lord was entitled to settle the dispute for any conflict occurred between his own Təgrä and punish for the one found to be guilty. Whenever, dispute arise between Təgrä of different lords, the two masters would settle the issue together or with the help of another negotiator from the ruling class.⁵⁸⁷ Hence, conflicts arise within the Təgrä themselves was a minor issue for the ruling class.⁵⁸⁸ But disagreement between two lords was supposed to be settled uniquely by a court of Šumaglā whose members had been selected and approved by both plaintiffs, but in reality when the strong rival lost his case, he would not committed for the fulfillment of the ruling and take the case on his hand to begin a feud that would demand high cost of life and property.⁵⁸⁹

For the most part of the aristocratic era, while the clan was still speaking Təgrña and practicing Christianity, legally were regulated according to the Ftha Nəgäst (ፍትሐ ነገስት).⁵⁹⁰ Later moved to the more autocratic judgments where the Kāntibay was judging according to his whim and might.⁵⁹¹ The Kāntibay's absolute power was somehow was limited in some seriously important matters by his council composed of chiefs and the Šākə of the Šākəs who were his (the Kāntibay) brothers who assisted him in decisions, imposition, allocation and collection of tributes.⁵⁹² Cases were first decided by the Šākə of the Šākəs and if the parties not contented then it needed be ratified by the Kāntibay. We can imagine in the absence of a written code, how the Šākə of the Šākəs had the opportunity to sway the ruling according his interests or in favor of a family or friends that could give birth to evil feelings and grudges among the families of the ruling class. The Ḥabab unlike their neighbors like the Marya and Mānsa'ə were with no written

⁵⁸⁷ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 169.

⁵⁸⁸ Members of the 'Ad-Täkles ruling class and other clans outside of the Bet- 'Asgädä I interviewed defied such claims and emphasized that the Təgrä were legally and morally respected by their masters. If any Təgrä seek legal support against another Təgrä or Šumaglā, he was fully supported and his case was treated legally to his satisfaction. But as the informant's response seemed more of reactive to all the claims of oppressive subordination by the ex Təgrä, with some reservations, I label it to be part of the general negation by the master class to the Təgrä's domination in the past.

⁵⁸⁹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 169.

⁵⁹⁰ Ftha Nəgäst (law of the kings) was the traditional Ethiopian legal code, written in Ge'ez originated from an Arabic book of law written in the 13th century by the Coptic scholar called Ibn al Assal.

⁵⁹¹ Antony D'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 16.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

book of law. But after their conversion in to Islam, they had the Calil⁵⁹³. It was probably printed either in Egypt or in Syria and was mainly an extraction from the Quran supplemented by some Holy men, but was used only in simple cases between their Təgrä in issues of hereditary inheritances, marriage issues, wedding dowries, commercial interactions, insults etc.⁵⁹⁴ In case of legal issues arise between a Təgrä and a Šäḳə, the case was ruled by the Kāntibay and his decisions were not regulated by any set of laws. The law in this book was applied only in settling cases between Təgrä but issues involving the Bet-ʾAsgädä were ruled in their old ways of the custom within themselves.

4.4. The Privileges of the Bet-ʾAsgädä

As a privileged class the men of the Bet-ʾAsgädä were not milking,⁵⁹⁵ not plowing⁵⁹⁶ and avoided other labor works that considered undignified works. The women of the ruling class would neither grind grain for food nor fetching water or wood. All the labor works were performed for them by their Təgrä. The Bet-ʾAsgädä preferred to suffer with lack of food than execute these presumed undignified works.⁵⁹⁷ If the Təgrä men and women responsible for milking and grinding services were not available, the Bet-ʾAsgädä preferred to boil and eat the grain and spend the night without drinking any drop of milk.⁵⁹⁸ In addition to the dues and services extracted from their Təgrä, the Bet-ʾAsgädä were enjoying a privileged standard of living that distinguished them from their subjects.⁵⁹⁹ These were including; the house they live, the commodities they use, the cloths they dress⁶⁰⁰, the leisure time they had etc. A good example was

⁵⁹³ It was a handbook or manual of Islamic jurisdiction.

⁵⁹⁴ Antony D'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 16.

⁵⁹⁵ According to Ġaʿəfär Saləh ʾOmär, the Bet-ʾAsgädä deprived themselves of milking for two reasons. The first was; mostly the cow steps on her dung and during milking she urinate and swings her stink tail, then daub to the white and clean clothes Sämadiṭ (ሰጣዲት) of the lord hence it was considered as a disgrace. The second factor was that the mostly cows deny nursing to their new born calf, and the owners used a technique that the man inflate the stomach of the cow by putting his mouth at the anus of the cow, due to the expansion of her body, her skin irritates her as a result became easy for milking or nursing her calf. Therefore, for the lords doing such works was a dishonoring their status.

⁵⁹⁶ In the ruling clan generally plowing was not customary, It had long been abandoned, but not all but some of the impoverished men from the Bet-ʾAsgädä used to carry out plowing.

⁵⁹⁷ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 17/10/2021, Kärän.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ D'Avray referring to the documents of early Italian governors in Sahəl and his empirical observations in early 1940s on the general conditions of the Bet-ʾAsgädä, he described them as indolent, wearing their white robes smartly with clean hands, spending their time idly drinking endless cups of sweet black coffee under the shades of trees, preoccupied with gossip and conspiracy checking if their Təgrä failed to perform their duties.

⁶⁰⁰ Turban is commonly dressed by all member of the clan, both Təgrä and Šumaglā. But it is uncommon to see a Šumaglā without it. Though, it does not purely signify to any social class, but in the society, a man without a turban

Alberto Pollera's brief description of the residential housing of the Təgrä and the lords in comparative terms. Although the 'Agnēt (አግነት) or the hut varies according to the number of the family members, both classes live in almost the same kinds of tents and in the same neighborhood, but there existed size and decorative variations.⁶⁰¹ Owing to the nomadic way of life, the sort of the shelters they used were transportable tents. The tents were made of gently curved, light-weight poles covered by overlays made from palm leaves. The 'Agnēt was situated inside the compound/ Zariba (ዛሪባ) made from the thorny branches of trees. The thorny fenced compound included the cattle inside to protect from robbery and wild animals during night.

Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin also detailed the distinction of housing between the two classes. The houses of the Bet-'Asgädä were larger in size and well decorated than those of their Təgrä.⁶⁰² He described two sorts of shelter inhabited by the lords. Təḵul (ትኵል) was an ordinary single room hat with conical shap. It was made from stone wall and stalk at the top. Həmar (ሐማር) was a multiple room shelter and made from wood and mat made from the palm tree. The size varies from 6-8 by 5 meters. It was built as a seasonal shelter from the hot weather of the lowland, hence not that high and open at its lower part for ventilation purposes.⁶⁰³ The indoor difference was that, the tents inhabited by the Təgrä were small and made to be easy movable to different places according to the availability of water and grass following their herds. To the contrary, those tents inhabited by the chiefs and nobles of Bet-'Asgädä were larger in size and well decorated inside with; "textiles, colorful mats, rugs, 'Angäreb (ዓገገሬብ) (a sort of bed made from wood) and varied utensils supposed to move twice a year; during the highland summer and coastal winter movements."⁶⁰⁴ The Təgrä dwelling or 'Agnēt were not only smaller in size but with no decorations or utensils comparable with that of luxuriant tents of the lords.

Unlike those of the Təgrä, the saddles of the camels used by the lords were well decorated with pendants and aquamarines. The decorated saddle was known as Korwät (ኮርወት).⁶⁰⁵ Wealthy and capable lords used to ride horses, but the Təgrä were not entitled to use pack animals. Beating and carrying the *Nägarit* was preserved for the Bet-'Asgädä. The Təgrä were not authorized to touch, beat and own it. The *Nägarit* was beaten during war and marriage

was supposed to be a Təgrä.

⁶⁰¹ Pollera Alberto, *Le Popolazioni Indigene*, cit. pp. 200–201.

⁶⁰² Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 17 October 2021, Kärän.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 17 October 2021, Kärän.

or death of a notable lord, but not of the subjects and impoverished Bet-'Asgädä.⁶⁰⁶ During war and raid, if the looted commodity was gold or sword it was taken by the Bet-'Asgädä but was given to the Təgrä if it was only food or drink.⁶⁰⁷

The Bet-'Asgädä lords were not privileged only while living, but specially honored also while deceased. Prior to the adoption of Islam, the homicide cases in the old Ad Teklies' customary laws were favoring the masters. If a Təgrä killed his equivalent, the lord of the killer paid Maria Theresa Thaler 600 to the lord of the dead Təgrä and the killer himself was transferred to replace the place of the deceased one.⁶⁰⁸ If a Təgrä killed another Təgrä of the same master, the killer had to pay the blood money of Maria Theresa Thaler 600 and a virgin girl in marriage to the deceased family. The most unfair valuation of the Təgrä in comparison to the master comes when a Šumaglā killed a Təgrä of another Šumaglā and when a Šumaglā killed his Təgrä. In the first case, the master would compensate to the master of the dead with Maria Theresa Thaler 600 and a Təgrä. In the second case, the killer Šumaglā was not made to pay any compensation to the deceased family. But if a Šumaglā of his equivalent, their issue was not arbitrated through material or monetary compensation but homicidal revenge.⁶⁰⁹ Hence, the rulings of the Bet-'Asgädä in general and the 'Ad-Täkles in particular were privileging the Šumaglā class and used the Təgrä a mere property or measured in cash to balance their payments and the Təgrä blood was not valued in an inhuman way.

Another privilege the Šumaglā used to enjoy in relation to human value and death was that; the obituary or announcement for the death of any member of the Bet-'Asgädä. It was conducted by a messenger known as Mäläḳät (መለኻት)⁶¹⁰, a person with special duty of spreading the news, moving from camp to another camp to inform the relatives and friends of the deceased person so as to carrying out a graceful funeral ceremony.⁶¹¹ The interment was suspended until all the people came and gathered from all the Sahəl to take part in the burial ceremony. During which the laborious service was offered by the Təgrä men and women. The Təgrä men were responsible to fetch wood and water and provided cattle for slaughter; the

⁶⁰⁶ Interview, Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Omär, 17 October 2021, Kärän.

⁶⁰⁷ Interview, Bäḳit Gubṭan Ğəm'ə, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁶⁰⁸ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 169-170.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ The Mäläḳät was a person with special duty of conducting the announcement of the death of any member of the Bet-'Asgädä family. As a reward, the custom entitled him to enjoy a special privilege of meat from from the neck of the slaughtered cattle at the funeral feast.

⁶¹¹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 168.

women were busy grinding and cooking food to entertain the participants.⁶¹² As a result the ceremony extends for longer time that makes use of the Təgrä labor and material services. In the Bet-’Asgädä there was a tradition of throwing stone ceremony on the tombs. For ordinary ordinary Šəmaglä both the Təgrä and the lords throw a stone on the cemetery for 40 days, but if the deceased Bet-’Asgädä was an influential, the throwing of the stone continues every day for a year long. Such thrown stones became mound.⁶¹³ To the contrary, the death of a Təgrä was not widely pronounced by Mäläḳät, but the news was limited to the neighborhood and made to be mourned only by the immediate family members and friends. It was customary to celebrate a funeral feast of the dead after seven days of the burial ceremony or mostly postponed to be performed after the cultivation season. Most of the expenses for the funeral and the feast were covered by the Təgrä of the departed Bet-’Asgädä. For the dead Təgrä, his family was responsible to offer the ceremonial meal.⁶¹⁴

The burial grounds for members of the two classes were identified easily. Unlike that of their Təgrä subjects, the burial grounds of the Šumaglä are still recognized as the sites are used to be named in their honor. For example, during the reign of Kāntibay Ḥasān (ከንቲባይ ሓሰን), as part of the continuous showdown between the Three Mäfläs, a fighting took place at Mo‘o (ሞዖ), a valley near Naqfa and the graveyards of those killed lords is still known as ‘Aqbär Šyām (አቕበር ሸዮም) meaning as the cemetery of the lords. However, those of the Təgrä’s tombs were lost and obscured.⁶¹⁵ The names of almost all important historic or strategic places and clan names are predominantly called after the individuals from the ruling class. For instance, the names of the three clans of Bet-’Asgädä and other groups called after the name of the lords, and the different place names called after Bḥaylay (ብሓይላይ) (see in chapter three), an almost extinct brother of ‘Asgädä are expressions of their privileged and dominant positions. Generally, the Bet-’Asgädä’s superiority and privileged rights are explained in different parts of the previous chapters. Therefore, in a nut shell, It can be said that the lords were in all better condition contrary to the explained inferior state of their Təgrä subjects and its description may sound repetition.

⁶¹² Interview, Šäḳə ‘Edris Ḥusān Moḥamād, 18 October 2021, Kärän.

⁶¹³ Interview, Näsradīn Moḥamād Näsradīn, 17 October 2021, Kärän.

⁶¹⁴ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p 168

⁶¹⁵ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእት ጣልያን), cit. p. 5.

4.5. Maintenance and Management of the Aristocratic System

As explained above, the Bet-’Asgädä’s lords, for their daily living were dependent on the provisions and services extracted from their Təgrä. Naturally, the economy was mobile and so the Təgrä villages, but not so far from the Dəgä of the chief. Before moving, the village from one place to another, it must have had an approval and authorization from the chief, though he shall not ever object the unavoidable important move.⁶¹⁶ Therefore to maintain the system and utilize the benefits in a better and appropriate manner, the lords devised administrative arrangements suitable to the circumstances on the ground. The unpublished document, Administration before the Italian Colonialism (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእት ጣልያን), presented a detailed description of the administration of the dwelling clusters of nomadic Təgrä communities of the Ḥabab.⁶¹⁷ One of the administrative mechanisms that guaranteed the uninterrupted continuity of the exploitation of the Təgrä was the division of the residential areas according to the variety of the cattle they breed. Such residential compartment was known as Mäkälal (መከላል).⁶¹⁸ The classification was grouping the herders of goats and sheep together in the same Mäkälal⁶¹⁹ in the low-lying areas and the herders of camel in other Mäkälal located in the highland.

The Mäkälal were administered by men from the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy clan. The ‘Ad-‘Amdoy are believed to have come to Sahel from Ḥamasen during the time of ’Asgädä, and their special duty was administration of the Mäkälals as representatives of the Bet-’Asgädä’s lords.⁶²⁰ Hence, were relatively privileged group. The ‘Ad-‘Amdoy administered the goat and sheep herding Təgrä spreading from Naro plan (ጎላጉል ናሮ) and ’Aflag (አፍላግ) to Qarura in the north.⁶²¹ One of the purposes of the arrangement of the Mäkälal camps according to the same sorts of cattle was for a common defense from plunders and attack by wild animals. The clusters of herders of sheep and goats conducted the seasonal migration to definite areas. Therefore, in each cluster a person from ‘Ad-‘Amdoy clan served as a chief on behalf of the lord, who was the supreme owner of the crowd.

The various families organized in each Mäkälal were from different Təgrä clans, thus

⁶¹⁶ Antony d’Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 110.

⁶¹⁷ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእት ጣልያን), cit. pp. 6-10.

⁶¹⁸ EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚ መግዛእት ጣልያን), cit. pp. 6-7.

⁶¹⁹ Mäkälal (መከላል) was a special kind of administrative system that was practiced only by the ‘Ad-Ḥabab (ሓቡብ), but was absent in ‘Ad-Tämaryam (ዓድ ተማርያም) and ‘Ad-Täkles (ዓድ ተክሌስ) territories.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

were not homogeneously organized. The name of each Mäkälal was called after the name of its chief from the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy clan.⁶²² The number of inhabitants varied from cluster to cluster, and the individual movement of the Təgrä was severely restricted. A Təgrä to leave his Mäkälal required having the permission from the person of the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy that was in charge of the cluster. The following were the Mäkälals administered under the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy (ዓድ ዓምዶይ) men;

S. No.	Name of Mäkälal (መከላል)	Settlement (ምስባኽ) ⁶²³	Migrate to (ምስጋም) ⁶²⁴	Lord (ጎይታ)
1.	Mäkälal Ğämal wäd Ḥamānur (መከላል ጀማል ወድ ሓመኑር)	‘Agät (ዓገት)	Gudə (ጉድ)	Ḥusen ‘Usəman Hədad (ሑሴን ዑስማን ህዳድ)
2.	Mäkälal Ḥumäd fə‘el wäd ‘Etel (መከላል ሑመድ ፍዔል ወድ ዕቴል)	Dələkə Gäläbsä‘ala (ድልክ ገለብሰዓላ)	Dobə‘at Qätan (ዶብዓት ቀጣን)	‘Ad-Gərenet (ዓድ ግሬነት)
3.	Mäkälal Maḥəmur Däga wäd ‘Etel (መከላል ማሕሙድ ደጋ ወድ ዕቴል)	Rəḥib Tāklayə (ርሒብ ተኸላይ)	Dobə‘at Qätan (ዶብዓት ቀጣን)	‘əderis Nawəd (እድሪስ ናውድ)
4.	Mäkälal ‘Ali wäd ‘Etel (መከላል ዓሊ ወድ ዕቴል)	‘Afmähaz (አፍመሓዝ)	Täbəḥə (ተብሕ)	‘əderis Nawəd (እድሪስ ናውድ)
5.	Mäkälal Sämra wäd ‘Etel (መከላል ሰምራ ወድ ዕቴል)	Mälə‘ətä Hadarät (መልዕተ ሃዳረት)	‘Aflagəməlib (አፍላግመሊብ)	‘Ali wäd Hədad (ዓሊ ወድ ህዳድ)

Table 4: This table is extracted from: EPLF, *Administration before Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን).

The administration of all the Mäkälals was not the domain of only the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy men, but there were many Mäkälals supervised by chiefs from different clans. Some of them were the following,⁶²⁵

Däbäkə (ደበክ):- this Mäkälal was administered by Saləḥ ‘Ibərəhim Fayəd (ሰልሕ ኢብራሂም ፋይድ) from ‘Ad-‘Amdes (ዓድ ዓምዶስ) also known as Tābägäsəna (ተበገስና). They settled around ‘Algena (አልጌና) and migrate to ‘Agden (አግዴን) also known as Ḥdaqə (ሕዳቕ), a place closer to ‘Agəras (አግራስ). Because the lord was Kāntibay ‘Osman (ከንቲባይ ዖስማን), the Mäkälal was not moving far from the Dəgä of the Kāntibay.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ This period signified when the herds moved to the eastern coastal area. The movement from the main settlement was conducted when the rain started in the plains and grass started growing.

⁶²⁴ This period of movement was happened when the rain season of the Mäkälal started. Thus the herds returned back from the eastern coastal plains to their main settlements.

⁶²⁵ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. pp. 8-9.

‘Ad-Dämbay (ዓድ ደምባይ):- this Mäkälal was administered by Dämbay wäd ‘Omär (ደምባይ ወድ ምር) from Şawra clan. This Mäkälal was breeding sheep settled around Bärīṭa (በረጣ) and migrate to ‘Anqär (ዓንቀር)/ ‘Agəra‘ə (አግራዕ). Kántibay ‘Osəman was the lord, and were known as ‘əlamät Kántibay (ዕለመት ከንቲባይ) meaning as the brand of the lord. It was to relegate them as mark of the Kántibay, equating them to the animals owned by their lord.

‘Ad-Ṭaləb (ዓድ ጥልብ):- this Mäkälal was administered by Maḥəməd Mähəməd ‘ədərīs (ማሕሙድ መሐመድ ጳድረስ) from Rgbat Qäyəḥ (ርግባት ቀይሕ). They settled in Bärīṭa and Fgen Qäyəḥ (ፍንን ቀይሕ). They herd both cattle and sheep. The sheep herders migrate to ‘Agra‘ə and the cattle herders migrate to Ṭähəra Däbi‘amar (ጠሕራ ደቢዓማር). The lords were from ‘Ad-Fkak (ዓድ ፍካክ).

‘Ad-Qäyə‘ə (ዓድ ቀይእ):- this Mäkälal was administered by Mähəməd ‘Abi Mähəməd (መሐመድ ዓቢ መሐመድ). They settled in ‘Afmähaz (አፍመሐዝ) and migrate to Tābh (ተብሕ).

‘Ad-‘Ablay (ዓድ ዓብላይ):- this Mäkälal was mainly from Dägdägä (ደግደገ) clan, they settled around Dəlk (ድልክ) and Gäläb ‘Asa (ገላብ ዓሳ), with seasonal migration to Dob‘at (ዶብዓት). Although they were numerically few but had their own Mäkälal and considered almost with ‘Ad-‘Amdoy. Their lord was from ‘Ad-Hbtyäs (ዓድ ህብትየስ) of Ḥabab.

The ‘Ad-‘Amdoy for their services seldom received some assistance including cloths and addictions from their lords and gifts from the Təgrä in the camp. When the Təgrä slaughtered a goat, they were required to offer the brisket to the head of the Mäkälal, mostly a man from ‘Ad-‘Amdoy.⁶²⁶ If a Təgrä failed to provide such obligation, he was fined to slaughter a goat for the head and supply him milk two times a day for an extended period of time.⁶²⁷ Therefore, the ‘Ad-‘Amdoy, as representatives of the chiefs of the Bet-‘Asgädä that look-over the daily activities of the Təgrä within their cluster had a precious life. Because the lords spent most of their time in their Dəgä, they were receiving the news about the condition of the camps from the report of their agents. Therefore, such physical distance allowed the men of ‘Ad-‘Amdoy and the Təgrä herders to develop strong bilateral relationships. Confident of being trusted and unchecked, the camp chiefs debased their office with dishonesty and started receiving bribes from their

⁶²⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

subordinates. Some of the reasons led the latter to pay the inducement were because; If a Təgrä bought a new camel and the supervisor reported the purchase to his lord or Kántibay, then the Təgrä would pay tax and together with his camel be available himself on-duty whenever necessary for the assignments coming from Kántibay. Therefore, to conceal from such wearisome obligations, the Təgrä preferred to pay the bribe.

Another reason for the payment of the bribe was, if a Təgrä boy got married, as a tradition he was entitled to receive some cattle as a dowry from his father-in-law. After his marriage, the bridegroom was considered as a matured man and responsible in the society. As a rule, such marriage was supposed to be known by the Bet-’Asgädä lord of the family, and the later had to be given some parts of the dowry cattle and other provisions. Yet, the wedded man and his established family as a new Təgrä subjects has to be assigned to a new lord and thus required to fulfill Təgrä obligations. Therefore, to mask the new developments within his family from the knowledge of his Bet-’Asgädä lord, and to avoid the hardships and exploitation, at least to make a delay, the Təgrä father preferred to pay the bribe to the supervisor in an effort to abstain from reporting.

The Kántibay of Ḥabab used to live and administer from his residence or the Dəgä at Mäbə’a (ጠብኣ), in ’Agra’ə, and later during the Italian colonial period he shifted his center to Naqfa. As the Dəgäs of the Kántibay were in the plateau, the Mäkälal of the camel herders were nearby to him, thus he had easy control. The various Dəgäs used to have been homes to people of more than one clan and used to be called by the name of the major clan. But there were few Dəgäs that almost homogeneously inhabited such as the following;

Dgäs of ’Asfäda clan at ’Agra’ə with seasonal migration to Mäbə’a were; Ḥdaqə, Däqam Ḥaṣa (ደቃጠ ሓዳ), Ḥazḥaz/ ’Aflwa (ሓዝሓዝ/ ኣፍልዋ), Bälbälät (በልበለት), Mädroret (ጠድሮሬት), ’Arädä (ዓረድ), a Dəgä located in the Naro plain.

Dgäs at Mä’at (ጠዓት) with seasonal migration up to ’Aflag Rəḥib (ኣፍላግ ረሒብ) were; Määdäf (ጠድፍ), ’ət’əsär (እትእሰር), Šurabat (ሹራባት), Gärgä (ገርገ), and Romay (ሮማይ).

Some of the Dəgäs comprised of various clans were;⁶²⁸

⁶²⁸ The mentioned clans were the predominant inhabitants, but the Dəgä were home to various clans with small number.

Badən (በድን); a Dgä located at 'Adobħa (አድብሐ) and mainly belonged to 'Ad-Šäḵə Məsəmar (ዓድ ሸኽ ምስማር) of 'Asfäda.

Dəgdəg (ድግድግ); located around Naqfa predominantly inhabited by people from 'Asfäda.

Qaməçäwä (ቃምጭዋ); the Dəgä belongs to 'Ad-qäy'ə of 'Almäda.

Təksä (ትክሰ); Dəgä belongs to 'Ad-Dərqä and some families from 'Asfäda.

'Anagəd (አናግድ); the Dgä of 'Ad-Šäḵə.

Kärkf (ክርክፍ); the Dgä of the Mikal clan.

Kərkəf (ክርክፍ); Dgä of 'Ad-Maləkə (ዓድ ማለክ) from 'Ad-Šäḵə that migrate to 'ilaša'əda (ዒላ ጸዕዳ) and Gagät (ጋገት).

Mädħat (መድሐት); Dgä of Bet Ma'əla, migrate to Qarura and the surrounding areas.

Täbaħə (ተበክ); Dgä of 'Ad-'Abäkär (ዓድ አበከር) of 'Ad-qäy'ə from 'Almäda clan, migrate to Qäbh (ቀብኮ) in 'Agra'ə.

Generally, as has been previously described, the camel and the sheep herders live in the highland and the low-lying areas respectively with definite destinations of seasonal migrations, however the cattle herders move wider areas than the two groups.⁶²⁹ The cattle herders roamed up to Fgen 'Adobana (ፍንገ ዓድባና) and Tokär (ቶከር) in the Sudan thus had no limited residence or Mäkälal. As every Təgrä living in the territory of the Ḥabab clan was obliged to be the subordinate to one of the lords, hence, even those of Təgrä living outside of the Mäkälal were assigned to someone from the Bet-'Asgädä lords.

The 'Ad-Tämaryam of Wadi-Labka also had special management of their Təgrä (ትግረ).⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእተ ጣልያን), *cit.* p. 10.

⁶³⁰ The document: EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), pp. 27-29. Affirmed that while the research was conducted (1983), the following clans were the residents of the Wadi-Labka area. However, some of the clans mentioned here were not parts of the study because for different reasons, the members of these clans were away from the area. Therefore, the informants constituted from;

1. 'Ad-Tämaryam.
2. Šumaglā, the kins of Bet-'Asgädä; Bet-'Adəkämä, Bet-Səmur, Bet-Däbray, Bet-'Ašħaqə (ቤት አሽሐቕ), Bet-Həçän (ቤት አጭን).
3. Šumaglā companions of Bet-'Asgädä; Zenə (ኬን), K^wazen (ኪዜን), Zawəl (ዛውል), Logo (ሎጎ), Šən'adägölä (ጽንዓደግለ), Säläwän (ሰለወን) all were originally Təgrəña migrated with the Bet-'Asgädä.
4. Smur 'Arəbul (ስሙር አርቡል), Bet-Zär'u (ቤት ዘርኡ), Guritat (ጉሪታት), Zagər (ዛግር), 'Almäda, Šawəra, Dəgdəg, Käbä, 'Ad-Mu'alim, Səməħano, Ḥarabso (ሐራብሶ), 'Asawərtə (ዓሰውርታ), Dob'at, 'Agliba 'Agbo (አግልባ አግቦ), Bet-Ma'əla, 'Abuləqasm, Nəbäb (ነብብ), Rgbat, 'Artega, Ḥdarəb, 'Asfäda, 'Aflända, 'Ad-Dəraqä, 'Ad-Šäḵə Ḥamd, 'Afruj (አፍሩጅ) etc.
5. The absentees in the research were Lamza (ለምዛ), Baš'ə (ባጽዕ), Səməħano (ስምሐኖ), Mikal, and 'Ad-Šäḵə Ḥaməd.
6. NB. The level of organization of the above groups was from Fära'ə/ 'Ad to qäbila levels.

As has been described in the previous chapter, the ‘Ad-Tämaryam claimed to be the first settlers in the region and rationalize their land-ownership and political lordship to this seniority of occupation. According to their explanation, for the reasons of defending raids from the hostile clans and wild animals, and for the convenience of raring herds suitable with the topography, they hold the political power, organized and subjected the existing clans and the late comer groups and families seeking protection under their rule for the purpose of communal defense.⁶³¹ Therefore, similar to the ‘Ad Habab, for the purpose of defense and ease of control, the ‘Ad-Tämaryam organized residence of their subjects according to the species of animals they breed and class as follows;

Residents of Zäga (ዘጋ); in this category ‘Asfäda, ‘Ad-Mu‘alim, ‘Ad-Şawəra, ‘Ad-Drqä, ‘Abulqasm (አቡልቃስም) and ‘Ad-Şäḳə Ḥaməd (ዓድ ሸሽ ሓምድ) clans were living together herding and breeding camels.

Dägä ‘Afa‘abät; in this dwelling, descendants of ‘Asgädä and their families live together with their Käntibay.

Residents of ‘Akaba (አካባ); this group were owners of cows assembled from different clans in different time.

Residents of ‘Agə‘əra; this group were owners of goats and sheep gathered from various clans in different periods of time.

The movement of the residents of these clusters was possible as long as they shift their breeding species. Therefore, the inhabitants of ‘Akaba might move to ‘Agə‘əra and vice versa if they change their activity from Sheep breeding to cows or vice versa.⁶³² Residents of ‘Akaba (አካባ) and ‘Agə‘əra (አግዕራ) were groupings from different qäbila and Fära‘ə/‘Ad with different origin and history of coming to their respective clusters. Throughout their existence, the clusters were set under the jurisdiction of the ‘Ad-Tämaryam. The lords called their subjects Təgrä or with a special appellation as Hamäḡay (ሃሙጃይ). However, all the residents were not under ‘Ad-Tämaryam lords, but there were numerous autonomous clans. For example, the Be-Şumaglä⁶³³ clans of Bet-Zärə‘u (ቤት ዘርኡ) and Bet-Zagər (ቤት ዛግር) were free, and few Təgrä families under

⁶³¹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ለብካ ትግረ), *cit.* p. 25.

⁶³² *Ibid*, pp. 25-27.

⁶³³ The Bet-Şumaglä (ቤት ሹማግለ) clan were kins of the Bet-‘Asgädä, coming to Sahel together and formed many clans including Bet-‘Adkämä, Bet-Səmur, Bet-Däbray, Bet-‘Aşəhaq, Bet-Həçän and some other clans coming from Ḥamasen accompanying the core family of Bet-‘Asgädä Bet-‘Asgädä.

Habab were outside of the control of 'Ad-Tämaryam lords. The residents of Zäga were independent and not paying tribute to 'Ad-Tämaryam lords. 'Ad-Şawra, 'Ad-Mu'alim, 'Ad-Şäḳə Ḥaməd and 'Ad-Dərḳä were autonomously administered under their own Şäḳəs. 'Abuləqasm clan was dependents of 'Ad-Şawra or 'Ad-Mu'alim. The majority of 'Asfäda were under the Habab, and some families under 'Ad-Tämaryam lords.

Like their social groups in the other side of Sahəl, the Təgrä/ Hamäḡay of 'Ad-Tämaryam in Wadi-Labka had obscured their own original ancient clan names; hence until their emancipation in the 1940s, they used to be known by the clan name of their lords, the 'Ad-Tämaryam. For example, all the Təgrä residing and breeding goats and sheep at 'Agə'əra were called Mələç (ምልጅ).⁶³⁴ Basically Mələç was the name of the clusters organizing the Təgrä from different origins under the rule of a certain lord from 'Ad-Tämaryam. Each lord or the owner of the Mələç had 50-100 Təgrä families under his rule.⁶³⁵ He collected and enjoyed the revenues, corvée and other services from his subjects and the cluster was known in his name which signified his ownership. Such naming gradually became the clan identity of the subjects. Thus, in such manner the shift of clan identity of the subjects in to that of the lord's took place. The various Mələç at 'Agə'əra were the following;⁶³⁶

Mələç Ḥaməd Şəkur (ምልጅ ሓምድ ሽኩር); the Təgrä were mainly from 'Abuləqasm and Rgbat clans and seasonally migrated to Gadm Ḥalib (ጋድም ሓሊብ) and Gämsaräym (ገምሳረይም). Mələç Mähämäd (ምልጅ መሓመድ); in this cluster the subjects were mainly from Rgbat clan and seasonally migrated to 'Aräbay (ዓረባይ) and Gämsaräym (ገምሳረይም).

Mələç B'əmnät (ምልጅ ብእምነት); in this camp the Təgrä were from Zagər, Rgbat, 'Adkämä, Saho etc. and seasonally migrated to Trəq (ትርቕ) and Mäşhot (መጽሐት).

Mələç 'Ad-'Aşḥaq (ምልጅ ዓድ አሽሐቕ); the Təgrä were from Tələ'a (ትለአ), Ḥalänga (ሓለንጋ) clans etc and migrated to Qogät-Gärsilä (ቆገት-ገርሲለ) and Šärif (ሸረፍ).

Mələç Ḥilwəy (ምልጅ ሕልውይ); similar to the Mələç 'Ad-'Aşḥaq, in this Mələç the Təgrä were from Tələ'a, Ḥalänga clans etc. and migrated to Qogät-Gärəsilä (ቆገት-ገርሲለ) and Šärif (ሸረፍ).

Mələç Yäbat (ምልጅ የበት); in this camp the Təgrä were 'Almäda, Stəbu (ስትቡ) etc and their migration was to Qogät-Gärəsilä and Šärif (ሸረፍ).

Other camps were; Mələç Ğawḡə (ምልጅ ጃውጅ), Mələç Maybetot (ምልጅ ማይቤቶት), Mələç

⁶³⁴ Mələç (ምልጅ) is a Təgrä word meaning flame/flare of fire. It has historical origin in naming the clusters of the Təgrä in this name, but in this case, it was an administrative system similar to the Mäkälal of the Habab clan.

⁶³⁵ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labəka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. pp. 29-30.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

Ġmäl (ምልጭ ጅመል), Mäləç Qruz (ቅሩዝ) etc. The Təgrä assembled in these Mäləç were from different clans subjected and paid tribute to the lords of Ḥabab and migrated to 'Inə (ዒን) and 'Afhkam (አፍሀካም).

Each Mäləç had individuals that were relatively wealthier, wiser and adroit who keep open their houses for guests. The guests were mainly the lords and the Kāntibay himself during their seasonal or occasional tours. The individuals were obliged to offer honorable reception and provide food, carpet and other services. If the number of the company was more, he demanded extra support from the residents of the Mäləç.⁶³⁷ The camps had steadily increased in number parallel to the increase of the subjects' population. Out of all the largest Mäləç was B'əmnät's camp and later it divided into Mäləç Ḥələwəy and Mäləç Yäbat. Again Mäləç Ḥaməd Šəkur (ምልጭ ሓምድ ሸኩር) and Mäləç Mähämäd Šəkur (ምልጭ መሓምድ ሸኩር) emerged from Yäbat (የባት) etc. In such manner the Mäləç increased in number and this was claimed to be the result of the blessing from Šäḵə 'Alə'amin wäd 'Umär (ሸሻ አልአሚን ወድ ዑመር). The story was told this way; a lord from 'Ad-Fəkak/ 'Ad-Tämaryam went to Šäḵə 'Alə'amin (ሸሻ አልአሚን) seeking blessings and the latter demanded that he would bless him if he could provide him a heifer cow every year, then the lord agreed and the Šäḵə gave his blessings said that; “may your Mäləç grow to seven Mäləçs.” Afterwards, the Mäləç increased in number.⁶³⁸ Therefore, as presented above, both 'Ad-Tämaryam and 'Ad-Ḥabab implemented similar ways of management of their Təgrä, in a way suitable for extraction of dues and services from their subjects.

4.6. Gender Relations

In the reconstruction of the aristocratic order of the Bet-'Asgädä, reviewing the status and role of women is relevant. In the available sources, because gender issue was not given more importance, the women and their role remained an unspecified issue. However, so as to have a better societal picture of the aristocratic order, it is important to reconstruct the position and role of women through hypothesizing and deciphering the available documents. As a matter of fact, the socio-cultural makeup of the communities was of patriarchal and Islamic in character. Hence, in such kind of societies the role of women is mostly confined to domestic activities. In such condition, the women hardly possess any power of saying or decision making, but destined to be restricted under the male domination.

⁶³⁷ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 30.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., pp. 30-31.

Women were almost with neither a role to play in the social life and political issues nor to enjoy any tangible rights. For instance, the custom of inheritance in the 'Ad-Täkles clan favored the men particularly the eldest son. The rule entitled the eldest son to inherit properties including land and stock double the size of the share received by each of his younger brothers plus any available surpluses. Not only this but his first birth rights allowed him taking all the swords, spears, shields, and saddles and carpets left behind his father.⁶³⁹ But when it comes to the women, the same as in other clans they were not entitled with the right of inheritance from their father. Before, the conversion to Islam, the Bet-'Asgädä in general and the 'Ad-Täkles in particular divorce was conducted in a way that lowering the women's part. Then, the man had the right to break up the matrimony at any time he wished and he was only allowing her to take away her belongings that she brought during her wedding.⁶⁴⁰ After conversion in to Islamic, the marriage and divorces are according to the Sharia law. If a woman divorced her husband, she had no right to take any tangible assets with her, but submitted all her jewels and properties to her husband. This law was known as qlu'ə (ቅሎዕ). But if her husband divorced her she has the right to take her ornaments and the dowry she brought with her (given to her by her father) during the marriage and this procedure is known as Gäsimet (ገሲጦቻ).⁶⁴¹ In such rule, she stays under her husband for 90 days before the final divorce.

The male dominated social organization restricted women only to the house works, but in the case of the Bet-'Asgädä it was further reinforced by Islam. Although the faith might not have been that strong in the area, the Sharia ordered the women not to talk in public, cover themselves with veils and stay at home that restricted from social interaction. Consequently, the women's subordinated position took a customary form. The using of women and girls for the men's sexual satisfaction seems to have been part of the tradition as part of the regular dues and services in the aristocratic order. A particular substantiation for this act was the documentary evidence of the Italian officer's personal observation described above. The documents revealed that the Təgrä told the officer that before the coming of the Italians, the beautiful girls and women were more likely to have been made to entertain the sexual pleasures of the visiting lords.⁶⁴²

Property ownership was in the hands of the husbands, and the women were also abstained from public interaction in the land management, clan politics or property issues. Hence, women

⁶³⁹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 170.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Interview, 'Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans, 18 October /2021, Kärän.

⁶⁴² Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 39.

were made neither socially active nor economically property owners in the community. Owing to the nomadic nature of the economy, the herding of the livestock was the men's domain. The women, on their part remained at home in the camps with responsibility of taking care of the children, cleaning, preparing food and processing the dairy products including; butter, cheese etc. To diversify their dishes and to supplement the pastoral economy, the Bet-'Asgädä used to import agricultural products and material commodities necessary in their daily life. In doing so they satisfied their needs through barter exchanges including; exotic clothes, grain; maize, swords, firearms, lances and saddler. Pack animals like horses, mules and donkeys for the lords. Luxurious clothes including muslin for the turbines, linen, white robes, silks etc for the Šumaglā men and women. The Bet-'Asgädä were able to purchase these commodities mainly by selling their animals, but also from the income they generate or bartered the dairy products including; butter, cheese and the wool of their sheep and blankets extracted and woven respectively by the Təgrä women. Hence, the Təgrä women were playing as significant economic contributors in the luxurious lives of the lords.

As tradition, the Šumaglā men and women despised of the domestic and labor works. They assumed it as an undignified work, just as if it was degrading their noble image. Thus, the Təgrä women were compelled to do all the home works for which the aristocratic ladies considered against their honor including; wood and water fetching, cooking, grinding grains for daily consumption, milking, preparation of butter and cheese including for export etc. Generally, while the men and women of the Bet-'Asgädä wearing their relatively white and clean robes relaxed at ease and spent their time saying their prayer and gossiping, the Təgrä (ትግረ) girls and women on the other hand were in a continuous physical and mental manipulation which was equivalent or worse than that of their men.⁶⁴³ Therefore, the Təgrä (ትግረ) women seemed to live in an exhausting servile labor works to satisfy the demands of the aristocratic lords. Studying the overall inferior status of the women during the era of subjection, one can not anticipate a tangible role in the struggle for the emancipation in the 1940s, but the reality will be revealed in the subsequent chapters.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BET-'ASGÄDÄ ARISTOCRACY IN RELATION TO EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE REGION

Introduction

Generally aristocratic order, despite the hardships on the subjected communities it was an administratively convenient social system. A society with an aristocratic system was a self-regulated entity that demands fewer resources for control and maintenance of administration. Owing to their organizational, administrative and military superiority, the occupying forces just recognized the preexisting superior position of the aristocratic elites and ascertain the seasonal revenues from the subjects. Consequently, caste social relationship of the ruling class and the subjects was essentially maintained. The aristocrats most of the time undoubtedly satisfied with the new order as they enjoyed the middleman position in lieu of their superiors. So that they assisted the incoming forces as far as the continuity of their interests were secured. In the process, the foreign powers ascertained their control on the newly occupied lands through the loyalty of the chiefs or the aristocratic elites. However, the degree of influence varied according to the length of time they stayed, the level of intervention, influence and the policy they followed upon the conquered territories. Therefore, this chapter is attempting to identify which foreign occupier had a more lasting influence on the general life of the community and towards the lessening of the aristocratic oppression.

Sahəl, the main habitat of the Bet-'Asgädä was encircled by the commercial caravan routes extending from Swakin rounding the foothills of the Sahəl plateau and passing through Tokär, Qarura, Käsäla and Kärän and joined with those roads connecting the central plateau and the Labka-Massawa routes. However those caravans that traveled via these routes sometimes were becoming victims of looting and forced to pay dues by the Bet-'Asgädä with slight possibility of protection from the regional powers.⁶⁴⁴ Therefore, the Bet-'Asgädä were semi-autonomous entity and the foreign intrusion was sporadic prior to Egyptian's full control. The regional powers in Hərgigo, until early 19th century and Həmasen throughout the time used to

⁶⁴⁴ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 15-23.

come to the clan's territory for irregular tributary collection.⁶⁴⁵ When the regional powers got weaker, the Bet-'Asgädä on their part not only used to plunder and extract tax from the caravans passing along their territory to and from the Sudan but also from the coastal ports and salt mining sites.⁶⁴⁶ However, the Egyptians before they ensured full control of the Sahäl, in their attempt to enforce legitimacy and interests, they used to offer protection against the Bet-'Asgädä. This shows that the Bet-'Asgädä were in no way under complete subjection of regional powers but with sporadic intervention and subjection, depended on the seasonal weakness and strength of the powers. The Ottomans for instance used to govern the coastal area through their Nayb of Hərgigo, with slight influence and taxation from the Bet-'Asgädä. However starting from the mid 19th century, their position seemed to have been changed. The Egyptians substituted the Ottomans and had relative control on the 'Asgädä territory that resulted in reducing the autonomy of the clan chiefs in to subordination. Therefore, beginning from the 19th century, the different occupying and colonizing powers subordinated the aristocratic chiefs and used them to stabilize their control. That was as part of the regional developments of the time including; the Islamic expansion, the opening and the rising commercial significance of the Red Sea and the resultant increase in the interests of the powers to intervene that gradually led to colonial conquests. The Islamic expansion in the area has also increased the expectation among the Təgrä. They hoped that Islam through its teachings of religious brotherhood and sense of equality among its believers would liberate them from exploitation and humiliation.

Through time, the lords altered their role from semi-autonomous units to a mere representatives and dependent actors, governing their subjects on behalf of the occupying forces. Thus, such developments had brought changes in the characteristic features of the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä. Hence, this part of the thesis will give emphasis to the involvement of these powers and their effects. Therefore, it will be presented in three parts mainly; the Ottoman Empire's period, the late nineteenth century that involving the Egyptian and Abyssinian periods and the revival of Islam and its role on the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä. The outcome is expected to demonstrate whether these historical trajectories had a mitigating role towards emancipation or worsening effect on the Təgrä condition under the well established aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

5.1. The Ottoman Empire

The agents of the Ottomans, the Naybs of Sämhar traced their origin from Bäläw, one of the ancient Beja remnants in eastern Sudan and migrated to the Massawa areas in the fifteenth century. The family evolved in to prominence with the coming of the Ottoman Turks in 1557. The Ottomans delegated the authority to the chief of the family to serve as Nayb or deputy of their empire with absolute liberty to act in the affairs of the people inhabiting the coastal areas surrounding Massawa.⁶⁴⁷ Such empowerment had enabled the family to have the confidence and power to expand its influence far and wide. The zenith of the Naybs was in the early to mid decades of the 18th century associated with three contemporary events; the deterioration of the Funj in the Sudan, the decline of the Abyssinian influence in the central and northern plateau due to the Zämänä mäsaft (ዘመነ መሰፍን)⁶⁴⁸, and the diminishing interests of the Ottomans in the region.⁶⁴⁹ These factors created the power vacuum that allowed the Nayb to grow in strength and extend its influence and dominance into the adjacent regions of eastern lowlands, northern highlands and sporadically as far as central plateau and western lowlands of Eritrea.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Nayb controlled almost all of the nomadic and agro-pastoral Təgrä speaking areas, and their power stretched to Sämhar plain, Sahəl plateau and the northern coastal areas.⁶⁵⁰ Massawa, the hub and the gate of international commerce and other local market areas in the Sämhar plain were under their control.⁶⁵¹ They collected revenues from the communities under their spheres of influence. The Bet-’Asgädä, therefore used to pay dues in kind according to the needs of the Nayb.⁶⁵² Customary gifts were also used to be offered on the occasion of investiture of new Käsentibay; the chief provided presents of a hundred camels, a hundred cattle and the same number of woolen blankets.⁶⁵³ Not only this, final verdicts on legal issues were decided by the Nayb, from which he gained big

⁶⁴⁷ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 4.

⁶⁴⁸ This was a time extending for a century (1769-1955) also known as the “Era of Princes” when the authority of the king in Gondär was weakened and the regional chiefs empowered consequently anarchy was prevailed. The anarchy was ended in 1855 after Theodros II subdued the various regional princes and declared king of Abyssinia.

⁶⁴⁹ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. pp. 33-50.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ The commercial centers in the Semhar plains were; ‘Aylet, ‘Asus, Gämhot ,,,,.

⁶⁵² See: d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, p. 78. According to the accounts of W. Munzinger, a newly elected Käsentibay of Ḥabab in order the Nayb to confirm his authority was obliged to pay 100 camels, 100 cows, 100 nanny-goats, and 100 woolen garments. In return the Käsentibay of Ḥabab received a robe of honor and bracelet from the Nayb.

⁶⁵³ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 24.

amount of income, both in cash and in kind.⁶⁵⁴ Therefore, during the heyday of the Naybs, undoubtedly the Bet-ʿAsgädä used to be under complete subordination of the Naybs. They deeply involved in the narrow clan affairs of the communities under their jurisdiction. In doing this they appointed chiefs, administered justice, and through matrimonial relationships played their part in the expansion of Islam. In the expansion of Islam, they applied the strong relationships they had with the holy families of ʿAd-Šäḳə, ʿAd-Muʿalim and ʿAd-Därqä. Hence, their influence was multifaceted; religious, political, economic as well as cultural networks.⁶⁵⁵ But generally, the Habab as the wealthiest and most populous of the eastern coastal clans and inhabiting relatively secluded geography, they were the least affected clan during the Ottoman Turks and the subsequent foreign conquerors.

A significant intervention of the Ottomans in the affairs of the Ḥabab clan, particularly to their Təgrä offshoots in the Sämhar plain was witnessed in the early years of the 19th century. In 1810, due to the decline of trade in the Red Sea region, the Nayb Idris wold Osman failed to collect enough tribute, and then he was unable to pay the salary to his soldiers, as a result the soldiers protested against the viceroy and he fled to Mecca, the seat of the *Sherif*.⁶⁵⁶ In the same year the armed Ottoman forces came from Jazan to rescue the Nayb’s authority and reestablish order. In realization of this new move they sought to extract revenue so as to cover the Nayb’s costs. The proposed revenue was to have been collected from the inhabitants of the neighboring areas. Therefore, the Təgrä along the coast were there to shoulder the charge, but due to the nomadic way of life, the habitat arrangement of the Təgrä and the Šumaglā found to be inconvenient for tribute collection.

To that end the Turks commanded the Ḥabab lords to arrange their Təgrä into fixed settlements or villages.⁶⁵⁷ The incident brought the Ottoman Turks for the highest level of intervention in the daily life of the Təgrä area. For administrative expediency, the Turks appointed notables known as Mešayks (plural of šakə) which was accountable for the Kämtibay in each village’s affairs and revenue collection.⁶⁵⁸ The notable was responsible for his village, and sometimes can have two or more villages under his responsibility from which he was

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Antony d’Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*; The dispatches, 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, p. 19.

⁶⁵⁷ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 40.

⁶⁵⁸ Antony d’Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 89.

expected to collect tax.⁶⁵⁹ On the death of the notable, the Təgrä were passing to his eldest son or brother. In the absence of either of them the authority was transferred to any of his closest relative.⁶⁶⁰ Therefore, gradually the office took a hereditary nature.

The administrative system established as an *ad hoc* solution became permanent arrangement. The imposition of the notable up on the Təgrä became fixed institution that empowered the ruling class. The Təgrä's mobility to another habitat became inadmissible, but made to pay tribute to his notable according to what his overlord required. For example, in the later era of the Ottoman administration particularly during the reign of the new governor, Wuhabi Pasha, the Ḥabab were made to pay in cash based on the assessment of the number of the inhabitants and their herd. Based on such arrangement, the Ḥabab clan paid three thousand Maria Theresa Thaler. The 'Ad-Tämaryam and other neighboring small clans of the coastal plain all together were required to pay a thousand Maria Theresa Thaler.⁶⁶¹ The payment of taxes described from each clans of the Bet-'Asgädä was extracted from the Təgrä subjects. As a rule of the day, the notable took his part and then forwarded the collected revenue to the Käsentibay, the latter in his turn cut his portion and sent on to the Nayb.⁶⁶²

The Nayb himself kept his tenth of the collected sum and forwarded the balance to into the treasury at Ḥörgigo.⁶⁶³ In the first year of imposition of the above tax, the Three Mäfläs and other Semhar clans refused to pay and escaped to the mountains, however a year after the Nayb Hassan Adem made them to pay through heavy military intervention.⁶⁶⁴ Refusal or delay of paying was the norm by the Bet-'Asgädä clans thus the Nayb and later the Egyptians usually sent armed corps accompanying the tax collectors to executed the payment mostly through sequestering the cattle until the chief handed over the tribute. According to the document; Təgrä of Wadi-Labka (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), during both Turkish and Egyptian eras, there was no any significant economic transformation in the communities of the coastal plains particularly in the Wadi-Labka area.⁶⁶⁵ This document was produced through interviews of the residents of the area back in 1983, and the informants added that new market place in Massawa was opened and new

⁶⁵⁹ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 40.

⁶⁶⁰ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 89.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁶² The system of forwarding the revenue was not uniformly conducted. There was a time when the Ḥabab Käsentibay bypassed the Šumaglā and directly involved in collecting the revenue from the Təgrä. He sent his soldiers to the villages and made the proceeds to be brought in to him.

⁶⁶³ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. p. 49.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁶⁵ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 12.

administrative centers were established in 'Aylet and 'Ad-Šuma. These villages made to be settlements of the scattered communities governed under Sheikhs and chiefs. In their governance, the Ottomans employed the divide and rule system on the Wadi-Labka settlers. For example, they frequently changed the chiefs of *Fära'ə* of 'Ad-Mu'alim and created conflict among the chiefs.⁶⁶⁶ In the community of the area, a bitter memory of the Turks is still active. The Turks used to order pack camels from the local people for transport and they killed or discarded to those exhausted packs on the woods with no compensation. Therefore, though there is no detailed statistical data on the issue, the people claimed that a number of camels lost in vain.⁶⁶⁷ Therefore, during the Ottoman occupational period, the administrative arrangement and taxation method was a bit heavy and solely on the shoulder of the Təgrä. However, such arrangement was not set up in a way that compromised the preexisting privileges of the lords and Šumaglā and with no much evident alleviation on the burdens of the Təgrä subjects.

5.2. The Late 19th Century Developments

During the late 19th century, the present day Eritrea in general and the area of the Bet-'Asgädä in particular accommodated a variety of domination mainly the Egyptian, Abyssinian, Mahdya influences etc. Each of which had left their respective footprints on the general socio-cultural and political economy of the society under living under the yoke of aristocratic system. Especially the Egyptian and Abyssinian incursions had lasting consequence. While the former's was chiefly on the religious part the latter was of aggressive raids and killings that resulted for a lasting hatred and a consequential effect that pushed the peripheral Təgrä speaking Orthodox Christian's in the north to abandon their faith and adopt Islam.⁶⁶⁸ Therefore, in this heading the two historical experiences of the Egyptian and Abyssinian eras in their relation to the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä will be discussed.

5.2.1 The Egyptian Era

As a province of the decaying Ottoman Empire, Egypt under the ambitious Mohamed Ali Pasha ventured southward invasion and occupied the Sudan in 1820. The Egyptian expansion was of multiple ambitions; opening new sources of slaves and soldiers, control of gold mining sites in

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. p. 86.

the Nubia, occupying the source of the Nile River and conversion of the Abyssinian and present day Eritrean Christians into Islam etc.⁶⁶⁹ The warring decades for the control of the western parts of Abyssinian Empire was a failure. However, they occupied the lowlands of Barka, Bogos, the Northern Highlands and the Semhar coastal areas under the succeeding viceroys of Mohamed Ali.

The long years of resistance of the Bilen and the Təgrä speaking Marya, Mänsa'ə and the Bet-'Asgädä against conversion gave up to the pressure coming from the 'Ad-Šäḵə and the Naybs supported by the Egyptian forces. Hence, the Islamic goal of the Egyptians was successfully completed by 1850. The predominantly pastoral livelihood of the societies in and the political decentralization of the Abyssinian state was favorable for the Egyptians to spread Islam in the previously Orthodox Christian groups of Bet-'Asgädä, Marya, Mänsa'ə, Bilen.⁶⁷⁰ The various religious families were responsible for the teachings of the faith for every clan; 'Ad-Mu'alim were for Ad Temariam and 'Ad-Derki were active in the Ḥabab.⁶⁷¹ However, so as to extend their footing to the hinterland their coastal take-over especially of the famous and strategic port of Massawa was imperative and realized only after they leased it from the Turks in 1865 and established the town as an administrative center. The coming of the Egyptians terminated the power and influence of the Nayb. The new occupational force installed direct administration in Massawa that disqualified the *Mushir* of Mecca and the Bäläw ruling family in Hrgigo.⁶⁷² The Egyptian administration in its two decades of conquest, despite its repeated endeavors of expansion to the interior for the control of the source of the Nile River, the most visible effect was the expansion of Islam in the northern highlands and the 'Ansäba area. To materialize their expansionist goals they sent two military expeditions to the plateau and lost in both battles of Gundät and Gura'ə in November 1875 and March 1876 respectively. The Egyptians set up garrison at Kufit in the western lowlands and occupied Kärän in 1875.⁶⁷³ Munzinger, a Swiss man was hired to be the viceroy of the Egyptian government. He with the title of *Pasha* was responsible for the administration of the territories extending from Massawa to Kassala in the eastern Sudan including the northern highlands that were organized under a single

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 83-84.

⁶⁷⁰ Miran, Jonathan, "Power without Pashas: the anatomy of Na'ib autonomy in Ottoman Eritrea (17th-19th c.)," Eritrean Studies Review 5, No. 1 (2007): 33-88.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. p. 51.

⁶⁷³ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

administration or province (*Mudiria*).⁶⁷⁴ The Egyptians introduced a new reform on the administration associated with the revenue collection. He introduced a modernized form of tax collection through a strict and proper census of the flocks the Ḥabab and the coastal clans owned and the system was updated in every three years.⁶⁷⁵ Munzinger in his explanation on the administration, taxation and role of the Egyptians in the aristocratic system in general and the reduction of the lords' authority on their Təgrä in particular stated that;

“The Bet-’Asgädä belongs to the province of Massawa; they have somewhat independent legal structures, and their chief is called Kántibay, from whom however the Tämaryam and the Täkles have made themselves independent. The tribute from the Bet-’Asgädä amounts to ten thousand Maria Theresa Dollars, that from the Tämaryam three thousand and that from the Täkles twelve hundred. The tribute would be very light if it were distributed fairly and if the nobility did not also lay claim to dues; however, subjection to the Egyptian Government, which naturally levels things out, brings democratic ideas into the land, since the vassals have little to hope for or to fear from the nobility any more.”⁶⁷⁶

In Munzinger's perspective both slavery and aristocratic social arrangements were outmoded systems. Consequently as part of his administrative reforms, he drafted a proclamation that negated the system. However, his policies were not realized because he was killed in the Danakil area in November 1875.⁶⁷⁷ In his announcement, he dismissed whatever happened before his coming, but from that time on he declared neither raids, robs, and killings nor call any one 'my slave....' Furthermore, he allowed slaves to buy their freedom; stating 'any slave, male or female, who wished to be freed, shall be free on payment of ten Maria Teresa Thaler.'⁶⁷⁸ His administrative measures were both humanitarian and administrative in character. By applying that he had the plan to increase revenue and to restore the Ottoman province of Ḥabäšə to the Egyptian administration. The announcement had potential for revolt from the affected lords which would lead them to seek protection from and alliance with Alula of Təgray. The Ḥabab lords survived with no much effect from the administrative measures. It was because the governor's attention was primarily targeting the other parts of his province, whereby Kántibay

⁶⁷⁴ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. p. 51.

⁶⁷⁵ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 82.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁷⁷ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, cit. pp. 107-108.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Hamed got the opportunity to maintain the aristocratic relationship with his Təgrä and boosted his economy through the customary barter and clandestine commerce.⁶⁷⁹

As mentioned in the previous parts, the whole of revenue was collected from the Təgrä subjects. The Šumaglā, the holy men and clans that served with special professions and services were exempted from the payment. In administration of the occupied territories, the Egyptians appointed salaried *Nazirs* with the duty to collect dues from respective lineages, and such measures weakened the power of the sub-clan and lineage segments and left to be under the Kāntibay.⁶⁸⁰ Moreover, the Egyptian presence had two major visible effects; they checked the Abyssinian raids and encouraged the expansion of Islam in their domain provinces.⁶⁸¹ It was during the Egyptian period the religious clans and orders actively worked and won in converting the remaining Orthodox Christian lords in Sahəl and Sänhit to Islam. The Egyptians penetrated the Ḥabab region more than their predecessors; the Abyssinian and Turkish forces. For example, Munzinger offered the investiture when Ḥaməd the eldest son of Kāntibay Ḥasān inherited the Nāgarit in 1875-1876. Following the death of Munzinger in the Afar desert, Ḥaməd continued his submission to Rashid Pasha, the successor.⁶⁸² As the Egyptians had strong patronage for Islam with firm presence in the Ḥabab territory and the coastal area, they deeply intervened in the affairs of the clan, more than the previous forces. During Kāntibay Ḥaməd, the region experienced a dramatic transformations, thus he needed to be a flexible leader capable of surviving the turbulent waves of changes. Having accepted the Egyptian dominion, Ḥaməd was able to continue to profit from his surrounding resources with less effects. He raided the neighboring communities, extracted higher percentage of revenues from the commercial traffic between Massawa, slave traders at Marsa Tāklay and Marsa Bāräsa that caused delays of the supply in their respective destinations in the interior and offended the interested parties in his territories.

Looking retrospectively, what Kāntibay Ḥaməd did was the same as his forefathers had done during early days in Sahəl. Hbtyäs, the first Kāntibay went to king Iyasu seeking protection from the neighboring powers in Ḥamasen that were beyond his capability to defend. Then the

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid, p. 36.

⁶⁸² During the coronation ceremony of Kāntibay Ḥaməd took place in the new palace in Massawa, and the Pasha offered the Kāntibay with formal gifts. This occasion could be considered the highest stage of the Bet-’Asgädä’s alignment of tutelage towards the new power and co-religion Egyptians than the withdrawing Abyssinian Christian power.

Muslim powers along the coast were not strong enough to offer protection. But during the reign of Ḥaməd, the situation was to the reverse, Islam was growing and adopted three decades before he came to power, the Abyssinian powers weakened and withdrew but the Muslim powers of the coastal area grew in strength and influence. However, until the full control of Eritrea by the Italians, the occupational forces of Təgray were active in the central plateau and made sporadic raids to both sides of the lowlands and the northern highlands.

5.2.2. Raiders from Təgray

As mentioned above, Hbtyäs made submission to the Abyssinian king and got the title of Kántibay. ‘Ezar, the grandson of Hbtyäs was the last Kántibay that appeared in Gondär to restore the submission to the Nəgus and reaffirmed his rank of Kántibay. ‘Ezar also secured an additional title of Baḥəri Nəgasi ‘lord of the sea’ and the latter title continued to be used by the succeeding Kántibays.⁶⁸³ Therefore, ‘Ezar became the last Kántibay of Bet-’Asgädä to visit the Gondreran king for investiture, and the succeeding chiefs concluded that no protection was granted from the king, thus declined to give submission and ceased to offer customary gifts and the relation was terminated.⁶⁸⁴ In the subsequent time the bilateral relation was characterized by raids and animosity than friendly contacts.

The sporadic efforts by the Abyssinian chiefs to reassert access to the coastal area had been curtailed with the death of Wubä. However, relatively they had little influence than the Egyptians and the Naybs on the affairs of the Təgrä-Šumaglā relationships. The withdrawal of Ethiopian power’s bid had left the Muslim powers of Turkish and later Egyptians to have utmost control in the region and to put a lasting effects on the Bet-’Asgädä communities.⁶⁸⁵ With the encouragement of the Egyptians and the Nayb, the ‘Ad-Šäḳə brought the cause of Islam in the lords of Bet-’Asgädä and used the faith as a bargaining element on the tax distressed Təgrä. The weighty levied Təgrä started to express their discontent against their still Orthodox Christian lords. The status-quo was essentially became fertile ground for the ‘Ad-Šäḳə to intervene effectively by approaching the Təgrä as a principal allies. Greatly fascinated by the miracle accredited to Šäḳə el-Amin, head of the clan, the Muslim Təgrä seeking the protection of the holy clan seceded in mass from the Bet-’Asgädä. In return the ‘Ad-Šäḳə took up the Təgrä cause

⁶⁸³ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 52-53.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

in to their hands. Consequently, in honor of his holiness a great number of Təgrä serfs took gifts to Šākə el-Amin not only to obtain his blessings to their families and animals, but to have his protection from the subjection of the Bet-ʿAsgädä.⁶⁸⁶ Such endeavor of getting once liberty through alliance with the holy clan was dashed with the mass conversion of the ruling class of Bet-ʿAsgädä in to Islam and the holy clan themselves failed to provide the expected virtue for they became new lords that could be assumed as betrayal to the Təgrä hopes.

It seemed that during the times of Alula of Təgray, the highest level of Abyssinian influence had reached in the coastal plains and northern highlands as distant spheres of raids. In late 1870s from his camp in Ḥamasen, Alula subjected three of the highland provinces; people of Ḥalḥal, Bogos and the Bet-ʿAsgädä terrains for a brief period of time and forced the people to pay taxes and brought offerings.⁶⁸⁷ Alula with thousands of army marched from his base in the central plateau advanced to ʿAnsäba, Naro and Fälkät that is closer to Naqfa and looted thousands of livestock and other commodities. During which the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords remained unresponsive to the massive strength of the invading forces.⁶⁸⁸ This could be considered as a failure for their contractual duty of protecting the Təgrä from any harm in return for the dues and services they paid. Therefore, until the coming of the Mahdists from the Sudan and the Italians to the area, despite the nominal Egyptian presence, the lowland population including the northern highlands was tributaries of Alula and frequently raided by his armies.⁶⁸⁹ During which, while the Italians were already in Massawa and initiated their first contact with the Ḥabab, and Alula demanded Kāntibay Ḥaməd to bring an equivalent to the dues used to be given to the Naybs of Massawa.⁶⁹⁰

In the memory of the residents of the coastal plains and the Wadi-Labka area, the Abyssinian powers are remembered for killing of people, plundering of animals, looting of jewelry and other precious commodities.⁶⁹¹ The Ethiopian viceroys had a lasting effect in the ʿAd-Täkles clan, which was the second strong of the Bet-ʿAsgädä clans next to Habab.⁶⁹² Like any other clans they were tributaries of Nayb of Massawa and Munzinger of the Egyptians in

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁷ Haggai Erlich, “A Contemporary Biography of Ras Alula: A Geʿez Manuscript from Manawe, Tamben,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 39, No.1 (1976): pp. 1-46.

⁶⁸⁸ EPLF, *Administration before the Italian Colonialism* (ምምሕዳር፣ ቅድሚያ መግዛእቲ ጣልያን), cit. p. 1.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 44.

⁶⁹¹ EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 13.

⁶⁹² British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, pp 28-29.

smooth way, however the coming of Alula of Təgray unhinged the link and his harsh governance and high taxes compelled to the more than half of the clan to flee to the north and joined the Ḥabab cousins, consequently weakened the strength of the ‘Ad-Täkles.⁶⁹³ Therefore, the Abyssinian influence was deleterious with minimal effect on the aristocratic relationships of the Bet-’Asgädä. As has been said earlier, the Ḥabab understood the suzerain of the Ethiopian Nəgus was not in a position to offer any protection, broken the ancient link. The relation further worsened after the conversion of the clan to Islam and repeated raids and killings. Hence, there exists no much story to tell on the Ethiopian role on the Təgrä-Šumaglā relationships of the Bet-’Asgädä.

Most probably in dedication to the peace and security the Italians had brought by relieving the Bet-’Asgädä community from the continuous raids by the Abyssinians and the Dervishes, the following poem was said to Martini. His trip to Naqfa had long been announced and delayed several times. A local poet believing that F. Martini was no longer coming, gave the *Residente* the following poem which was later given to Martini that;

*Bene arrivato, Generale.
 La terra, è venuto il tuo capo.
 Tu hai fatto del bene e ognuno sta tranquillo nella sua casa.
 I poveri vivono col lavoro e I ricchi con la loro proprietà.
 Hai comandato ai Dervisci e agli Abissini che sono in gran numero, con la
 forza del tuo fucile, della tua tattica e coi denari.
 Ora hai ragione se ti occupi dei tuoi dipendenti.
 Tu non sei solo, pure il tuo governo è coraggioso.
 La pace l’hai fatta in tutta le genti: se anche non vieni che importa?
 Per ciò che hai fatto noi siamo in dovere di lodarti.*

In my translation the poem could mean as below.

Well arrived, General.
 The earth, its leader has come.
 You have done good and every one is at ease in his home.
 The poor live with work and the rich with their property.
 You have commanded the Dervishes and the Abyssinians who are in great
 numbers, with the strength of your rifle, your tactics and money.
 Now you are right if you take care of your employees.
 You are not alone, your government is also courageous.
 You have made peace in all peoples: even if you don’t come, what does it

⁶⁹³ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p 161.

matter?

For what you have done we are obliged to praise you.⁶⁹⁴

As a matter of fact F. Martini never fought against the Dervishes or the Abyssinian forces. But it was said in gratitude of the government for bringing peace and security. When this poem was composed people of the colony already enjoyed eight years of peace. Therefore, we can read the suffering the community had during the Abyssinian raids and how they enjoyed the tranquility under the Italian role.

5.2.3 Islam and Təgrä Hopes for Emancipation

Increasing Islamic involvement in the Bet-ʿAsgädä territory was one among the many developments that took place in early 19th century. The main carriers of the faith to the clan were the ʿAd-Šäḵə.⁶⁹⁵ The Təgrä under the Bet-ʿAsgädä were already adherents of the faith since long ago, however the lords were still retained the forefather’s Orthodox Christianity.⁶⁹⁶ The ʿAd-Šäḵə played their part of the contemporary religious movements aimed at expansion and renewal of Islam in the eastern lowlands of Sämhör, Sahəl and western lowlands of Bärkä. In their oral tradition, the ʿAd-Šäḵə claimed descent from Imam Ali Abu Talb of Hjaz. According to their oral history, they crossed the Red Sea to the Sudan. However, before coming to Eritrea, they wandered in the Sudan for religious services.⁶⁹⁷ Around 1800 AD the clan scattered to their current territories; bordering Ḥabab in the north and ʿAd-Täkles in the south.⁶⁹⁸ They were more familiar and prominent for their religious duties both in Sahəl and Sämhör Təgrä areas. In the Islamic hierarchy they were next to the al Mirgani family.⁶⁹⁹ As part of its role of religious dissemination, the holly clan was responsible for the production of holy men that became influential figures in Muslim communities of the Təgrä speaking inhabitants of the region. Šäḵə Muhammad b. ʿAli b. al-Amin of ʿEmbärämi was one of them. He is considered as a holy person, hence annual pilgrimage or *ziyara* is conducted by Muslims of the Təgrä and Saho

⁶⁹⁴ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV, cit. P. 112.

⁶⁹⁵ Through close contact with the local Təgrä, the ʿAd-Šäḵə lost their tongue and their racial texture through intermarriage, though only they took the women of other tribe particularly that of Bet-ʿAsgädä. In the later era, the clan split in to numerous houses and spread to the Sämhör plain, to north as far as Tokar in the Sudan and to the west in the Bärkä valley. However, the descendants of the eldest son of the common father live closer to the Ḥabab clan in the Naqfa plateau.

⁶⁹⁶ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p 200.

⁶⁹⁷ EPLF, *The Origin of Sahəl People*, (ሞብቆል ህዝቢ ሳሕል), cit. p. 25.

⁶⁹⁸ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 19.

⁶⁹⁹ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV, cit. p. 104.

communities seeking his blessings.⁷⁰⁰

The holy clan under the guidance of Šäḵə al-Amin won over converting the Ḥabab in the middle of the 19th century. The ‘Ad-Täkles too converted mainly by the teachings of Said Mohammed Osman with the help of the holy clan.⁷⁰¹ Considering the contemporary religious and political developments, for the Bet-’Asgädä maintaining the Orthodox Christianity seemed to have had much challenges. The Bet-’Asgädä were under continuous pressure from the Nayəbs of Massawa to abandon Christianity and adopt Islam. The Naybs used both threats and promises to persuade the Bet-’Asgädä.⁷⁰² Hence considering all factors, the Bet-’Asgädä became an easy swayable for conversion to Islam. In doing so, the ‘Ad-Šäḵə took the lion’s share with the encouragement from the Nayb and the Egyptian. In addition to the pressures coming from the Egyptians, ‘Ad-Šäḵə and the Naybs, for many reasons the Bet-’Asgädä were not in a position to retain their ancestral faith. The unsettled and mobile nature of the economy of the clan was incompatible with the demands of Christianity’s settled livelihood. The terrain was convenient for production of camels, and the Bet-’Asgädä were rich in those stocks, but both milk and meat of the camel are considered by Christianity as an unclean, so was difficult for Bet-’Asgädä to observe. The ’Asgädä clans inhabited in an area totally surrounded by Mohammedans, particularly given almost all of the Təgrä subjects were Muslims and with whom they had continuous contacts and share similar customs.⁷⁰³ The international developments also pushed the clan towards accepting Islam including; the withdrawal of Ethiopian influence due to the anarchic Zämänä mäsafənt or reign of princes in Ethiopian history and the subsequent Ottoman and Egyptian occupation of the greater Red Sea region had put the Bet-’Asgädä Christianity to a vulnerable position. According to the Naqfa Document 10 analysis, that the class arrangement of the Christian lords and the Muslim Təgrä survived for around two hundred years because of the balanced influence of the Ethiopian Christian and the Muslim powers in the region. But in the later years the pulling out of Ethiopian influence gave Islam the chance to have the upper hand.⁷⁰⁴

Owning to the above facts, for the Bet-’Asgädä clans preserving Christianity was not an easy task, but was a matter of time and convenience.⁷⁰⁵ Remaining an island of Christian

⁷⁰⁰ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. pp. 33-50.

⁷⁰¹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 243.

⁷⁰² Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 80.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Antony d’Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. p. 17.

⁷⁰⁵ In deciphering the conversion of the Bet-’Asgädä, the Christian names terminated and Muslim names appeared on the sons of Giang, the 10th Kántibay. However, as Muslim and Christian names appeared in brothers, the pattern

minority was against their interest. Finally, Šākə al-Amin's contemporary, Kāntibay Hdad I led the across-the-board conversion of the Šumaglā of Ḥabab.⁷⁰⁶ The move to Islam by the ruling class had political representation where Šākə al-Amin married the daughter of the Kāntibay and other Bet-'Asgädä women taken by the 'Ad-Šākə men to establish an alliance with the holly clan in their effort to contain the threat coming from the Təgrä.⁷⁰⁷ However, in an attempt to see the coming of the 'Ad-Šākə and the Islamization of the Bet-'Asgädä and its impact on the existing aristocratic order, it is essential to see the subsequent sociopolitical changes in the aristocratic society. The conversion of the ruling cast and the revitalization of Islam among the already Muslim Təgrä had much effects including; changes on the expansion of Arab language, introduction of religious education and subsequent increase of literacy levels and the formation of Islamic specialists etc.⁷⁰⁸ The important thing to our subject is to discover the extent of Islam played towards lessening or worsening the customary tradition of the Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system. To this effect, assessing the effect is imperative to have a thorough investigation on the holy family of the 'Ad-Šākə's relation with the ruling cast and the level of the Təgrä's allegiance to the clan assuming it as a reliever from the oppression of the ruling clans.

Historically, Islam had more fundamental effect on the aristocratic groups than in semi egalitarian clans for it reversed the existing hierarchy and denied of any class division among its believers. Therefore, the revitalized Muslim Təgrä and the newly converted lords emphasized more on the immediate benefits of the faith in terms of rationalizing the power relations.⁷⁰⁹ For the oppressed Təgrä the expectation was the fulfillment of the Quranic messages that considered humans as equal beings, and any believer could rise to the higher office within Islam etc. Hence,

of conversion might not been uniform or in mass or they might use Christian names in memory of their Christian ancestors.

⁷⁰⁶ According to d'Avray's assessment of the existing Italian documents, there is no any consistence in the narrative of the conversion of the Bet-'Asgädä in to Islam. The Nakfa Documents said Hdad I's sons made the final conversion. Another documents claimed that Hdad and his brothers led the move before him. Thus, as a matter of fact there could not have been a sudden and wholly conversion but an increasingly growing move to the new faith. The Nakfa Document stated that in the genealogical tree of the family up until Hdad I show the maintenance of Christianity. Thereafter, following the transition in to Islam, the first son of Kāntibay Hdad was Mohamed, a Muslim name and his second son was Ghiorgis, a Christian name, probably to remember their ancestral names. Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin and Gä'əfär Saləh 'Omär, two of my informants, of 'Ad-Täkles origin in Kärän stated that the Bet-'Asgädä started the conversion in to Islam since their early days in Sahel. For example, Mäfläs had two sons, Hbtyäs and Täkles from the second wife, but from his first wife he had two sons; Idris and Shiker. But the later two Muslims were not ascended into power so are not well known. Therefore, the 19th century conversion represented only to the Kāntibay.

⁷⁰⁷ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 62-63.

⁷⁰⁸ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. p. 49.

⁷⁰⁹ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

the Islamic rejection of social hierarchy and its advocacy for prevailing universal egalitarian order gave hope of ending their subordination. Such optimism encouraged the Təgrä to resist the Christian lords, however to the contrary the latter were flexible enough to be good players of the game. Understanding that retaining Christianity was against their interests and to cool down the potential uprising from the subordinated Təgrä and unable to endure the pressure from both the religious families and Egyptian overlords, the Bet-’Asgädä adopted Islam as a conciliatory mechanism.⁷¹⁰

Relevantly, for the Bet-’Asgädä it was indispensable to go beyond the adoption of the faith of ‘Ad-Šäḳə and develop a marriage based family relations. The ‘Ad-Šäḳə do not marry their daughters to the Bet-’Asgädä but they marry the latter’s women. Owing to the Bet-’Asgädä’s Christian origin, for the holy family to send their women to the Bet-’Asgädä would be derogation, but bring Habab into them was considered as sanctify them.⁷¹¹ By doing so, the Bet-’Asgädä knew that they would enjoy protection of the Ottomans and Egyptians against possible Ethiopian raids and was a relief for the Bet-’Asgädä from all rounded threats and uncomfortable circumstances of the time.⁷¹² And it was for this reason that, the activists of the 1940s Təgrä emancipation movement manipulated the late conversion of Bet-’Asgädä and accused them as if they were not a true Muslims, thus morally not fit to continue as overlords of the true Muslim Təgrä communities.

For the oppressed Təgrä the expectation from the ‘Ad-Šäḳə and the conversion of the Bet-’Asgädä was enjoying the Islamic rejection of social hierarchy instead prevailing universal egalitarian order. The ‘Ad-Šäḳə owing to their Arab origin, tracing back to *Ashraf* in Mecca won the prominence and respect among the Muslim communities. The fame of its holiness and the resulting influence had attracted many small and weaker communities seeking protection. As a result many of the groups of people preferred to be subjected under the religious clan were from the Təgrä of Bet-’Asgädä.⁷¹³ Encouraged by the ‘Ad-Šäḳə, the Təgrä became so restive against the Bet-’Asgädä lords. The growing power and influence of the Muslim powers along the coast, the demands from the Təgrä and the holy family pressured the Bet-’Asgädä beyond their

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁷¹¹ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV, cit. p. 104.

⁷¹² The Bet-’Asgädä conversion occurred after ten generations from the founding father. Before their conversion, they maintained fraternal relations with their kins in Ḥamasen through intermarriage but when they converted in to Islam, the existing commonalities and interests lost and the relations too was ceased at once.

⁷¹³ Nadel, *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, cit. p. 19.

resistance; therefore they had no option but to accept Islam. Therefore, the 'Ad-Šäḳə initially seen as the rescuers and carriers of moral obligation towards liberation of the Təgrä found to be lords with Təgrä subjects voluntarily subordinated. Consequently, the number of the 'Ad-Šäḳə clan increased and the sub-clans and families spread widely throughout the northern part of country.⁷¹⁴ Hence, the early 19th century prominence of the 'Ad-Šäḳə could be considered as the highest time when the Təgrä put their trust and hope of freedom, but their expectation was doomed and the 'Ad-Šäḳə found to be new masters equivalent to the Bet-'Asgädä.

Therefore, the shift of Bet-'Asgädä into Islam had counter effects on the Təgrä status. Moving to Islam helped the lords to forge a special relation, intermarriage based alliance with the holy clan. Consequently, the Təgrä lost the special protection they expected from the 'Ad-Šäḳə.⁷¹⁵ Thanks to their religious role which believed by the community to possess supernatural powers, they held a highly respected status; people of the holy clan became the arbitrators of disputes between the Kántibay and the Šumaglā and between the Šumaglā themselves.⁷¹⁶ The clan's importance was far and wide in the settlement of conflicts between Təgrä clans.⁷¹⁷ The prayer and the adjudicator positions made them to be the most privileged group. They gain gifts of cattle from both the Təgrä and Šumaglā. Furthermore, the latter as part of their usual valuable offerings, during their wills it was normal to transfer the whole of Təgrä families as a gift to the 'Ad-Šäḳə so as to have their prayers and secure eternal life after death. Many Təgrä families were voluntarily moved to the holy clan. The Təgrä were happy of their transfer because they changed only their lords, but they were allowed to retain their lands.

However, the shift of the Təgrä to the 'Ad-Šäḳə had brought disagreements among the ruling class. The move of the Təgrä to the holy clan was against the interests of the Šumaglā and insisted the Kántibay to play his part in stopping the transfer. However, he denied and his indifference annoyed the affected lords for it weakened their livelihood. Many of them complained but they knew that going against the holy clan was dangerous, and they could not gain the support from the Kántibay, who was not interested to disappoint the 'Ad-Šäḳə. Their

⁷¹⁴ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, p 245. This document stated that, the 'Ad-Šäḳə's rise to power and wealth was opposed by two powers; the Bet-'Asgädä and other Šumaglā were not happy for their Təgrä were taken by the holy clan. The influence of the Mirghani, a religious family based in Kassala was also another force vying the clan. Internal disputes and quarrels within the clan was also hampered the growth and strength of the clan.

⁷¹⁵ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. pp. 62-64.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

efforts remained ineffective and led many of them in to poverty.⁷¹⁸ Practically the Təgrä too gained nothing, but continued the customary tradition under new masters who disguised themselves under the mask of holiness.

Possession of a Nägarit was the main determinant factor for a chief to be called Kántibay. The 'Ad-Täkles lost the title at the unsuccessful skirmish of wäd Gaw. In that fight the 'Ad-Täkles attempted to regain the Nägarit but defeated by their cousins, the Ḥabab and still it is retained in the hands of the latter. Then after in the Ḥabab, the Kántibay was nominated through election of notables representing the ruling families, but the election was mostly concluded with no agreement of the election results that dragged contesting families into clashes where the strongest seized the title. Such power based conflicts grew with the division of the families and exponentially after the conversion of the ruling class in to Islam.⁷¹⁹ For the Bet-'Asgädä, conversion to Islam was not only losing most of their Təgrä and subsequently poverty but the new faith had created power struggle within the ruling family. The crisis was mainly competition in attaining the rank of Kántibay.⁷²⁰ The Islamic law allowed the lords to have more wives consequently it complicated the issue of succession due to more births from different wives.⁷²¹ This led for greater increase of male children in comparison to the Christian era. Unlike the traditional father to son transfer of authority, in the new faith, the title of Kántibay was shifting from cousin to cousin and from nephew to uncle.⁷²² Therefore, Islam had brought fundamental shifts in the power politics of the ruling families. In the later period, the Italians Government conferred the office of the head of a clan, not by inheritance.⁷²³ This has lessened the existing contention with in families vying for power.

In the later period of the 19th century, with the coming of the Italian colonial administration, the preexisting political connection of the religious clans and orders with the

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 62-64.

⁷¹⁹ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. pp.13-14.

⁷²⁰ The crisis and conflict in holding the chieftainship of Kántibay in the Islamic era was more visible from the children of Hdad wäd Fkak, the last Christian to the Italian Period. The issue of succession was remedied through arms or support from a government. The easiest procedure of election with in the family from father to eldest son in old days was changed to be more complicated. The Kántibay are from the branch of wäd Fkak to see their real history; Kántibay Naud had three sons; Fkak, Idris and Hbtyäs, each are clan chiefs of the Ḥabab three divisions. Fiacac was the eldest, and was elected Kántibay, on his death his brother Idris took his position because the Kántibay's sons were young. Hdad, the eldest son of Fkak reclaimed the title. The son of the then Kántibay Idris defended that he had the right because his father was Kántibay, but reached a consensus that he compromised his claim on condition that the Kántibay divided with them the revenue of the clan.

⁷²¹ Antony d'Avray et al, *The Nakfa Document*, cit. p. 20.

⁷²² Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 55.

⁷²³ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, vol. IV, cit. pp. 133-134.

regional empires was broken.⁷²⁴ As a new and powerful colonial power center, the Italian administration rearranged the social and cultural formations of the society.⁷²⁵ The 'Ad-Šäḵə's influential role declined in favor of the Khatmiyya. The shift of favor was associated with the incompatibility of the sympathy and support of the 'Ad-Šäḵə gave to the Mahdist invasion that contradicts the Italian interests.⁷²⁶ The 'Ad-Šäḵə had been allied with the Mahdists that angered the Italians. Consequently, the latter undermined the authority and role of the 'Ad-Šäḵə instead promoted the Khatmiyya. The then Italian governor of the colony, Ferdinando Martini executed two measures that indirectly punished the holy clan; he put Sahəl and Sämhar under different *commissariati*, and organized the 'Ad-Šäḵə as a single clan and made them pay tribute. This was disastrous decision that ended the immunity they used to enjoy earlier during the Ottoman and Egyptian periods.⁷²⁷ Sahəl and Sämhar regions were the main areas of influence of 'Ad-Šäḵə, hence such policies weakened the 'Ad-Šäḵə's role, instead empowered their competitors, the Khatmiyya order.⁷²⁸ The Mirghani family were in good terms and supportive of the Italian colonial policies. As a result, the Italian colonial administrators recognized the representative of the Mirghani family as the main Muslim authorities in the colony.⁷²⁹

The Khatmiyya's overwhelming dominance of the Muslim communities both in urban and rural areas was reinforced by its capacity to integrate the established Islamic formations like notable and holy families into the higher echelon of social networks with much influence in the community.⁷³⁰ Because the Khatmiyya order authorities handled various local Islamic institutions including Quranic schools assisted the order to hold a special place in performing religious duties, offering Arabic language and preparing youngsters for ranks within the order. Such rise in prominence of the religious order in the region enabled it to put the execution of the traditional

⁷²⁴ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ During the early days of Italian colonial period, the influential Islamic movements of Khatmiyya and 'Ad-Šäḵə as part of their competition vied on the issue of Mahdia. Considering the Mahdia and Italians were enemies, while the Khatmiyya opposed the movement, the 'Ad-Šäḵə supported it. Therefore the 'Ad-Šäḵə lost the new governments' backing.

⁷²⁷ In the fiscal year of 1899-1900, the *commissariato* of Massawa proposed the amount of money to be extracted from the various clans under its administration. The proposal disqualified the 'Ad-Šäḵə's quality of the holy men as a reason for exemption and accused of having paid a derisible sum as tribute for long. Therefore the administration decided the increase to be heavier with expectation of the clan to make an outcry but insisted to pay for it had the means to do so. This shows that the immunity of the holy clans was already enormously eroded.

⁷²⁸ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. pp. 44-45.

⁷²⁹ Silvia Bruzzi, *The Role of Muslim Mentors in Eritrea: Religion, Health and Politics*, "Storicamente", 8 (2012), no. 7. P. 2.

⁷³⁰ Venosa Joseph, *Serfs*, cit. p. 71.

customary laws like settlement of debts, feuds, inheritances and other practices under the supervision of the leaders of the order.⁷³¹ In realization of such authority, they put *qadis* and *khalifas* in a position to look after issues. That much degree of intervention in the daily affairs of the community allowed Khatmiyya backed religious courts to be central elements of the civil authority, resulted in the continuation of the existing traditional social divisions which was essential in securing their own position as the main Islamic authority in the region.⁷³² Therefore, the Khatmiyya religious order was again not found to solve the Təgrä cause for it was acting similar to the ‘Ad-Šäḳə that uphold the hierarchical social order.

Despite the Quranic philosophy of social equality, the religious families forged a symbiotic relation with the ruling class that worked to maintain the existing class order as it was relevant to the three interest groups; the lords, the Egyptians and the religious orders or holy families.⁷³³ While the Təgrä were in such vicious circle, the Italians came as new administration and brought changes that to be discussed in the next heading. Therefore, Islam and its carriers, the religious orders and Egyptians, despite their teachings proved to be against the expectation of moral support for the liberation of the Təgrä. They worked on the continuation of the preexisting aristocratic social order for that way was importantly serving their interests as a result dashed the hope of the Təgrä emancipator expectations. However, as Islam had corresponding relation with trade it might have increased the exposure of the Təgrä to the external world. Therefore, if such international dimension of Islam had immediate effect on the Təgrä in creating global connections or showing other alternative avenues towards freedom will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

In this chapter we have seen that the region under discussion had been the main focus of different regional and international powers for an extended period of time. For economic interests and religious expansion purposes the Ottoman Turks governed the coastal areas of the Red Sea through their delegated offices of the Nayb. The Egyptians also came to the western lowlands and the Red Sea coastal areas by succeeding the Ottoman Turks. For Egyptians, the Geo-strategic significance of the present day Eritrea was to control the main source of the Nile River. Due to the determined fight of the Abyssinians and the Eritreans in the plateau, it remained unsuccessful; but they performed well with their second goal of Islamic expansion. In

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Ibid.

the process of attaining their goals, these powers had deeply influenced the region and transformed it culturally. Looking to the roles both powers played on the aristocratic order of Bet-'Asgädä; the Ottoman Turks and Egyptians had a lasting effect mainly in the cultural segment of the society. They won converting the ruling class in to Islam, but left no tangible transformation on the lives of the subjects. The Italians on their part brought more fundamental reforms that shocked the power basis of the ruling class and the whole aristocratic system. However, in assessing the role of the ruling class's in relation to the foreign forces we found similarities in comparison to the Eastern European feudal experiences. In the latter experiences, when strong states emerged like the Russian Empire, the local feudal lords were serving as representatives of the state in areas of justice, tax collection and provision of conscripts to the royal armies.

CHAPTER SIX

ITALIAN COLONIAL ERA AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE BET-’ ASGÄDÄ ARISTOCRATIC ORDER

Introduction

Despite the early 1890 legal establishment of Eritrea as a colony, the course of colonization dated back to the same year of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 when an Italian company bought a piece of land in ‘Asäb.⁷³⁴ Prior to the coming of the Italians, the present day Eritrea was administratively fragmented under competing local power elites representing the regional authorities and it was only in 1890 that all united to form Eritrea, under the Italian colonial rule.⁷³⁵ Communities used to have political and lineage links with the regional powers was terminated and made to be connected under a new colonial system that restructured the preexisting socio-cultural forms.⁷³⁶ From the very beginning, one of the successful policies the Italians devised and employed effectively was focused on ethnicity, religion and social stratification.⁷³⁷ There was no need for the Italians to test a new sociopolitical reorganization. Despite the pacification of chiefs that were considered real and potential threat, in order to have sustainable political control in the colony, the Italians realized that upholding and transforming the existing chiefs in to salaried agents and essentially maintained the social hierarchy. The lords were imperative for the Italians in controlling and establishing administration in the rural and pastoral communities, ignoring their importance or undermining their status was a potential risk of uncontrollable confusion. Therefore, because the fixed territorial administration was not convenient for administration of the pastoral communities, the Italians adopted the clan as the fundamental social unit in the Təgrä speaking communities and the lords as their representatives which was in similar way to that of their predecessors; the ottomans and Egyptians.⁷³⁸ Therefore,

⁷³⁴ Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997), p.13.

⁷³⁵ Abdulkader Mohammad, “Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952” *Lisbon: 5th European Conference on African Studies*, (2013), pp. 1376-1408.

⁷³⁶ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

⁷³⁷ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar. “Rivalry, Antagonism and War in the Nation & State-Building Process: The H Factor in the Relations Between Eritrea and Ethiopia.” *The 1998–2000 War between Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 2009, pp.31-32.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

the existence of a stratified society with its legitimate lords worked well to the Italian indirect rule.

The Italians in their administration policies followed both direct and indirect rule. The level of penetration and influence of the Italians was more in the plateau areas than the lowlands.⁷³⁹ However, their overall policies have trembled the foundation of the aristocratic order and paved the way towards its demise. Similar to what they did in the highlands, in the lowlands too throughout its rule, the colonial administration retained the power and function of the traditional chiefs intact mainly working in solving civil disputes, collecting tributes, delivering orders and report back. The most noticeable authorities invested up on the chiefs were the first two tasks. In the aristocratic communities, the chiefs were allowed to charge dues from their subjects and continue their customary rights that they had used to enjoying prior to the coming of the Italians.⁷⁴⁰ Under the Italian rule, legally speaking the clan chief had little power, Article 31 of the *Ordinamento Giudiziario* provided the clan chief authority to try civil cases between people of his clan as long as they were followers of the same religion as himself.⁷⁴¹ But he had no authority of punishment, no written records and no clerk, but practically the *commissario* of the province confirmed the verdicts of penalty and detention by the chief without the knowledge of the proceeding in person, that allowed the chief to judge all civil cases among people of his clan even outside of his religion and members of other clans living in his region.⁷⁴² Therefore, the chiefs were not trained to fit the modern administrative system and no additional function invested on them.⁷⁴³ In this way the Italian colonial government had preserved the rural class hierarchy and social organization that favoring the interests of the ruling classes. But as we shall see below, the administration had introduced fundamental transformations that became basis for the decline of the system.

6.1. The Italian Protectorate and the Ḥabab Defection

As any other political assemblages, in the late 1880s the Bet-ʿAsgädä were in difficulty of decision on to whose sovereign should they seek protection. Three powers: the Mahdists and the

⁷³⁹ Tekeste Negash emphasized this argument with the swift increase of the highland population, the expansion of industrialization, and the foundation urban centers with substantial number of Italians that opened the opportunity for labor and improved the living standard of the highlanders.

⁷⁴⁰ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 63-64.

⁷⁴¹ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, pp. 11-12.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

⁷⁴³ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 63-64.

Anglo-Egyptian from the Sudan, Alula from Ethiopia and the Italians from the sea were on the menu of the Ḥabab's table of choices. As the powers were competing for the occupation of territories and seeking allegiance, accepting either of them had advantages and risks for Ḥabab. Hitherto, Kāntibay Ḥaməd followed the traditional political decisions of his predecessors. A century ago, weary of the raids from Ḥamasen, Hbtyäs seek the protection of the king in Gonder, later when Ethiopian influence withdrew southward; the Kāntibay Hdad accepted Egyptian protection and soon abandoned his faith and embraced Islam as a tactic of preventing the Təgrä revolt at the encouragement of the Egyptians, Nayb and the Holy clan. The threat from all directions was still there, therefore, the Kāntibay had to reconsider his allegiance in accordance to the new power arrangements in the region.

6.1.1 The Ḥabab Accepted Italian Protectorate

The uneasiness to penetrate the hinterland and the subsequent defeat of the Italians by the Ethiopian forces in their attempt to ascend the highland had made them shifted to their next plan, that is expansion to the northwest, particularly to the Habab area in the Sahel.⁷⁴⁴ The coming of the Italians seemed in more appropriate time for the Kāntibay. Therefore, in 1885 Kāntibay Ḥaməd decided to make a treaty with the Italians, the relatively powerful and with potential for effective protection of his territory and interests from the menace of the other two contending powers.⁷⁴⁵ The treaty had brought enmity on Ḥabab as it had infuriated Alula, the Mahdists and the British.⁷⁴⁶ However, his approval for the Italians would have been inevitable because the Italians soon occupied the territory up to Mereb River in the south, thus including the Ḥabab territories and in 1890 declared their first colony of Eritrea.

The decline of the animal wealth of the Habab might also had a pushing factor towards the new relationship with the Italians. According to the *Il Diario Eritreo* of Ferdinando Martini, who served as first civilian governor of the colony (1897-1907), the animal wealth of the Bet-ʿAsgädä especially the Ḥabab was highly decimated by the animal disease that widely destroyed the cattle population throughout of the present day Eritrea and Ethiopia. The disease destroyed around eighty percent of their herds.⁷⁴⁷ Martini decided the tremendous amount of reduction on

⁷⁴⁴ Tekeste Negash, *The Federal Experience*, cit. p. 13.

⁷⁴⁵ Antony d'Avray et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 4.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁴⁷ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D'Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell'Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vol. III, 1946, pp. 63-64.

the tax that was imposed on the clan by Major Folchi, the *Commissario* of the Kärän division in 1893. In his words Martini said; “I reduced their (Ḥabab) debt on the tax for the financial year of 1901-1902 from 18000 to 6000 lire; and I established that for the year to come instead of 60000 they will in return to pay 36000 lire.”⁷⁴⁸ He mentioned the increased amount have been a disproportionate to their wealth even during ordinary condition.

Assessed the scenario, Kāntibay Ḥaməd Ḥasan together with his elder brother and 29 Ṣumaglā advisors went to Massawa⁷⁴⁹ and signed an agreement on “relations of commerce and friendship” on May 31 and June 5, 1887. The agreement was conferred by the declaration with signature of the Kāntibay in the name of the Ḥabab people and the country that he willingly and formally is under absolute dependence and protection of the Italian government.⁷⁵⁰ The notables’ support and agreement of the document was affirmed by their seals declaring that they too personally accepted the obligations detailed below. The introductory part and the main body of the document indicated that the deal was to the expectation and interest of the Italians. In the document Kāntibay Ḥaməd vowed to bind himself and adhere with due respect to the following nine terms described in Document 2 of the Nakfa Documents: - first; to carry out every order of his superior Italian authority equally for the protection of commercial interests as for all matters requiring co-operation or participation which may be asked of him by the same.

Second; as he offered in previous occasion, he now again place all the Ḥabab country at the disposal of the Royal Government for military or other purposes necessary be it temporary or long term basis. Italian soldiers and officials shall be welcomed everywhere and it will be up to him for supplying them with guides, escorts, camels, oxen for fair payment. Third; whenever there is a special demand for them, he binds himself to supply to this superior Italian Authority all the cattle that directly or indirectly they may have need of, as also camels, whether for purchase or for temporary hiring, together with the necessary drivers, all at rational rates to be determined by special accords. Fourth; in regard to the war with Ethiopia, Kāntibay Ḥaməd declared that he has taken due note of the manifesto published by the Superior command and that he shall fully comply with its conditions. He held himself responsible for the faithful execution of all its articles by the Ḥabab, declaring that from now on any dissident who leaves for Ethiopia is a common enemy. As a guarantee of these understandings assumed by him, He left his own

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ For the earliest ten years of Italians in Eritrea, Massawa was the headquarter of the Minister of War which was responsible for the administration of the colony.

⁷⁵⁰ Antony d’Avray et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. pp. 3-4.

son Maḥmud as a hostage and representative. Fifth; in times of war with Ethiopia or with any other enemy of Italy calls for Ḥabab active cooperation over and above the provision of means of transport, cattle, camels, escort and guides, he declared himself ready to carry out with his people whatever demanded by the government, and he value the trust that the Government itself will wish to the extent and in the manner believed by it most suitable to supply him arms, munitions and even its soldiers for the defense of Ḥabab country.

Sixth; Kāntibay Ḥaməd shall always give and he shall require his people to offer sufficient protection to all the travelers who pass, or who come to Ḥabab territory with the suggestion of the Italian Authority; he shall defend in a special way the caravans of merchants and traders from Massawa who come among the Ḥabab; he held himself in charge for the security of their persons and of their merchandise on Ḥabab country, ready to compensate the value of goods in case of unfounded loss caused by the Ḥabab, he shall facilitate for those concerned the formation of caravans doing his best so as to procure for them the camels they needed and that the rates for hiring of the same are rational.

Seventh; he vowed to stop charging a tenth or an estimation of any kind on goods on their arrival or departure and he declared himself satisfied with the tax which the government allowed that he may collect on every camel load in compensation for the duties and the costs falling to be made by him to secure the regular flow of the caravans. This fee should not surpass the sum of one Maria Theresa Thaler for each camel load which goes cross his country, and the fee limited to a half Maria Theresa Thaler per camel load whenever the load is of durra or cereals. Eights; the Kāntibay agreed that the tax collection may possibly be restricted to one place only; most probably at Marsa Tāklay, however, whenever it is convenient for the merchants, he shall establish additional stations where his agent shall facilitate and dispatch of the caravans without delay or without deviation. The government will promote trade in the anchorage of Tāklay in the manner which it believes most useful and set up a body of police and a resident wherever it is needed. Ninth; he declared himself pleased to the government for the approved 500 Maria Theresa Thaler. He also pleased for the government's kindness in recognizing him and all his family as its subjects. And in not making difficulty that in the event of his death the order of succession shall be according to the usage, that is from father to son, and he also undertook for his heirs and this obligations contained in this agreement shall be duly maintained and respected

by all successors.⁷⁵¹ The bilateral agreement put the Ḥabab under absolute Italian protectorate in which the clan never experienced before. But the Kāntibay had enough reason to accept the dominion of the Italians.

For long time he used to charge high rate of taxes on the port of Tāklay and on the caravan crossing his territory to Ḥamasen and Kassala. Consequently, it caused great discontent among the merchants in Massawa, and enraged the Mahdists in Kassala and Alula in Ḥamasen for his commercial mishaps. They both frequently warned him to decrease the fee and called him to summon before ensuing worst consequences. Emir Mohammed Osman Abu Korgia ordered him to quit his activities and to come to Kassala. Alula in his part urged the Italians to stop conducting any commercial interaction with the Ḥabab accusing the Kāntibay for acting as if he were an autonomously sovereign actor. Therefore, it seemed that the Kāntibay entered in to agreement with the Italians because he had been under pressure and frequent threats from both regional powers and complaints of Massawa merchants. Based on the agreed upon low rates of taxes that supposed to be imposed, General Saletta anticipated it would encourage for more trade that yield sufficient revenues to justify the Kāntibay's generous salary.⁷⁵²

However, despite all the threats he faced and the signatory of the document, Kāntibay Ḥaməd was still not trusted and feared by the Italians for he might refrain from committing himself to the agreement and turn instead to Alula or the Mahdists in the Sudan.⁷⁵³ Therefore, according to the Nakfa Documents, Saletta advised the Minister of war in Rome that it was not advisable to mention the issue of slavery with the Kāntibay, which was delicate enough to frenzy Ḥaməd to withdraw from the agreement and move to the other powers.⁷⁵⁴ Thus, the Italians left it to be engaged later. In this case the Italians followed a kind of appeasement policy that not intended to touch issues affecting his immediate interests. For Italians the overall objective of the negotiation was winning Kāntibay's help and collaboration in the coming war with Ethiopia and to bring the trade transactions between Arabia and the central plateau to Massawa.⁷⁵⁵ The Kāntibay's urgency to be succeeded by his son, Maḥmud was not confirmed by the Italians. This would have been an opportunity for the Italians to intervene deeply in the internal affairs of the clan, but was justified by Saletta that the father to son succession was a Christian tradition, and

⁷⁵¹ Antony d'Avray et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. pp. 4-6.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁵³ Such fear was realized when the Kāntibay defected with around 15000 people crossing to the Sudan.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that such rule does not appear to be part of the law and tradition of Muslims. But, to the contrary of Saletta's belief, Kāntibay Ḥaməd came to power as a successor of his father. Generally, considering the hatred the Kāntibay had on the Ethiopian forces, the Italians had the confidence that he would remain faithful to his agreements, to the common advantage of both Italians and himself.

Soon after, circumstances changed led for the great event, the Ḥabab Defection that jeopardized the agreement with lasting demographic implications in the Ḥabab community.⁷⁵⁶ The extent of the defection was involving 15,000 of the Ḥabab population.⁷⁵⁷ The migration of the members of the clan became talking point between the Italians and the British officers especially pushed for the identification of the territorial belongings of both sides. Moreover, according to the *Il Diario Eritreo* by Ferdinando Martini, in his new destination the ex-Kāntibay Mahmud was offering refuge to the booty of the gangs that disrupted the caravan trade activities passing via Eien and Labka.⁷⁵⁸ The same document reported that the *Residente*, Lieutenant Crispi was reporting that the region was infested by gangs and robbers headed by the relatives of the Kāntibay.⁷⁵⁹ In response the Italians reinforced the *Residente* with sufficient regiments patrolling the susceptible areas.⁷⁶⁰ The defection caused for the Ḥabab to be divided further into two

⁷⁵⁶ Initially the Kāntibay was not conscious of the Italian intentions, but he did the agreement as a tactic of countering the danger from Alula and the Mahdya. Later on, when the Italians began to materialize their policies through heavy taxation and forced conscription of men for its colonial expansionist wars in Ethiopia and Libya, and the high demand of camels etc. He openly opposed such policies and his attempt of remedying through negotiation was ignored by the Italians. Then lost hope of policy changes, in January 1895 in unprecedented manner to the Italians, the Kāntibay defected together with 15,000 of his people to the northeastern Sudan, around Swakin. As a result, later it became a watershed in the history of the Ḥabab. They divided in their choices in to two groups; those willing to return back to Eritrea and those opted to remain in the Sudan, almost half of the community preferred to remain there under British rule, thence, the Ḥabab divided in to two groups; both in Eritrea and Sudan with their respective Kāntibay with their own Negarit. (Branches of the Ḥabab and the Beni-Amer ruling classes in the Sudan are legal citizens, acquired much influence in the economy and politics of the country. As the most legitimated tribes, they served as umbrella to the members of small clans in Eritrea when they cross the border and seek refugee or pastoral mobility. If these refugees claim they belong to either of the clans with face value dues to the chief for his confirmation, they secured membership to the community and mostly citizenship of the Sudan. This fact was expressed by the members of 'Ad-Tākles aristocratic clan during my fieldwork in Kārān. Thus despite the formal emancipation of the Təgrā clans in the 1940s, the Ḥabab (Bet-'Asgädā) still managed to maintain the indirect continuity of their superior position.

⁷⁵⁷ The developments of the Defection are briefly explained in *The Nakfa Document* ranging from Document 36 to 54. The document exaggeratedly described the size of the event as; almost without its equivalent in colonial history or in history in general, save that illustrated in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament

⁷⁵⁸ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D'Africa*, A Cura Del Ministero Dell'Africa Italiana: Florence, Vallecchi Editore, Vo. II, 1946, p. 274.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 275, 336.

⁷⁶⁰ According to F. Martini in his *Il Diario Eritreo*, p 205, Kāntibay Mahmud made several applications to return to his homeland. Several negotiations were held with the *Residente* of Sahel and Martini authorized Kāntibay Mahmud and his family return but with conditions that he gave Abubaker Gale, the gang leader that committed murders and raids consequently for long time disturbed the peace of the region. His condition required their return to Kārān for

sections; the Ḥabab of Eritrea and that of the Sudan. Both subdivisions have their own Kāntibay with far reaching wealth and substantial influence in the inter-clan and national politics across borders. However, the description of the process of defection, the subsequent general condition and sufferings of the Təgrä in the British-Sudan is not in the scope of this research. The breadth and historical significance of the defection requires an independent research.

6.2. The Growing Intervention of the Italian rule and the Ḥabab Aristocracy

The above agreement put the Ḥabab country under absolute control of the Italian colonial government, and the latter seemed to consider the Kāntibay as a trusted friend. However, through the Persico Mission, the Italians soon began to intervene in the administration of traditional aristocratic orders. On 12 May, 1890, Tenente Persico was appointed to be the *Residente*⁷⁶¹ of Ḥabab and instructed to go and live among them at ‘Anaghit, Dəgä of the Kāntibay Hdad.⁷⁶² The objective of the mission was; to keep watching the clan if they were forming closer relations with the Dervishes, to make sure that the Kāntibay was administering his country well, studying the nature of the contacts of the Ḥabab and the people in the coastal plains, to settle the discords among the Šumaglā that was created during the power transition from Ḥaməd to Hdad and to learn himself all that happens in the Ḥabab country.⁷⁶³ Unlike the old times of the Turkish and Egyptian era, under the new administration the relationship of the Bet-’Asgädä with the suzerain was no longer one of aristocratic obligations, but to the contrary, a direct rule never before experienced.⁷⁶⁴ Such close supervision and intervention of the administration in the aristocratic order was ascertained by the reports of Persico to his superiors in the following terms;

“.....I reminded, severely, the Kāntibay in what manner he should maintain the promises he made to Your Honor [he was writing to the Royal Commissioner at Kärän]. I called together the Šäķəs and I reminded them that it is completely forbidden to collect arbitrary tribute, whatever may be the reasons, from their dependents, and I made this known also to the Təgrä.”⁷⁶⁵

trial according to their crimes.

⁷⁶¹ *Residente* was an equivalent of a district governor.

⁷⁶² In July 1890, General Orero, the governor of the colony removed Ḥaməd and replaced him by his brother Hdad II, as Kāntibay of Ḥabab.

⁷⁶³ Antony d’Avray et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 25.

⁷⁶⁴ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 177.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

This initial measure taken by Persico was fundamental in its kind that shocked the centuries old customary practices. In their early days, the Italians disdained not only the dues and services the lords obtain from their Təgrä, but the idleness, rumormonger and conspiring character of the masters and soon started to inhibit some of the more offensive privileges one after the other. Nevertheless, for Italians the aristocratic system was not a new phenomenon, feudal society with privileged caste was part of European history which they had good knowledge of it. Hence, they let the aristocratic relationship intact; thereby the customary tributary relationship of services and dues between the two classes was maintained.⁷⁶⁶ The intolerable sexual privileges of the Šumaglā were immediately to be discarded. This happened when Italian officers in the early days of their administration visited the region to inquire the dues and services of the Təgrä, they discovered abhorrent acts that were intolerable with the European laws and ethical standards.

The two morally unacceptable privileges that were unacceptable by the Italians and ultimately abolished were: the right of the master when visiting his Təgrä village, to both the bed and the wife of his subject, or to any girl that attracted his desire. Actually this happened mostly when the husbands were far away from their camp to look after their herds. The other privilege disapproved by the Italians was a Šumaglā during his visit if the husband Təgrä was present, the former could demand a bowl of milk, if there was no milk to be offered, the lord could insult and beat the Təgrä. The lord insisted on even if the family had no enough milk nurturing the children. Alberto Pollera's account based on the report of Vittorio Fioccardi, the regional commissioner of Kärän in early Italian period disclosed the statement received from a group of Təgrä during his administrative tour of the area in the following terms;

“Ever since our country has been under the administration of the Italian Government, we have enjoyed greater peace of mind in our homes. Our nobles limit their demands and leave our wives alone, which they did not do before. Before, they would make us get out of bed and take our place to enjoy a form of hospitality not written in the book. If we did not give them an *amor* (=bowl) of milk, they would spitefully insult us or refuse it, without thinking that in order to give them that milk our wives and children had had to make do without food.”⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁶ Antony d'Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 39.

⁷⁶⁷ Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell' Eritrea*, cit. pp. 197-198.

Although the above statement on the privileges of the lords seems too exaggerated, but possibly such occurrences could have been common if the Šumaglā visited while the Təgrä men were off from home with their stock. As a matter of fact such abhorrent acts were no more practiced and the Italian Colonial Administration abolished by far most of the various privileges mentioned in the previous chapter, and the few remaining rights overtime reduced steadily and were limited to the lords in the higher echelon only.⁷⁶⁸ The Italians not only diminished the customary dues and services but developed a sense of distaste on the unproductive and lazy Šumaglā lifestyle. However, despite these fundamental changes, the administration retained the aristocratic relationship and limited the dues and services to the main privileged body of the ruling class. The Italian policy-reforms on the aristocratic system made the ordinary Šumaglā to lose their customary benefits. This has relatively relived the Təgrä from their earlier heavier obligations.

Following the Italian defeat at the battle of Adwa (March 1896), the political developments in Rome brought Ferdinando Martini as the first Civilian Governor to Eritrea (1897 -1907). Tekeste Negash described the coming of Ferdinando Martini to Eritrea as significant in the Italian colonial history.⁷⁶⁹ Then the policy of colonial settlement in Eritrea was nullified and the governor designed a new policy of using the colony as a source of raw materials for Italian industries back home. To do this the main mandates of the governor were: securing peaceful relation with Ethiopia and political stability in the colony.⁷⁷⁰ Therefore, during his administrative tenure, the aristocratic system in the Northern Highlands was somehow the concern of Martini, hence he made a tour and studied the burden on the Təgrä and left his foot print on the issue.

Despite the tax reduction on the Ḥabab, Ferdinando Martini's greatest disturbing encounter in the Bet-'Asgädä clan was the aristocratic rule. He described the unsolved aristocratic suppression to be the main source of problem for the 12,000 people of the clan, of which the 2,000, the ruling class doing nothing but living at the expense of the remaining 10,000 horribly suppressed Təgrä. According to Martini, attempting to change the *status quo* would be dangerous and needed continuous work, but cautiously.⁷⁷¹ However, the maintenance of the privileged authority of the higher lords or the clan chiefs, sub clan chiefs and the Kāntibay was

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 198-199.

⁷⁶⁹ Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism*, cit. p. 4.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, Vol. III, cit. pp. 63-64.

administrative necessity to the Italians.⁷⁷² The chiefs served as middlemen in the governance, revenue collection, recruitment of soldiers and laborers in the colonial machinery. But the absence of such intermediaries would lead to organizational problems including; loss of communal formation of their own, consequently would have been the source of unavoidable dilemma to the social stability, thereby disintegration and possibly total disorder. Until the final defeat in April 1941, the Italians introduced many reforms in the aristocratic dues of the Bet-’Asgädä aristocratic order, but never decided to abandon the system at all. The details of the changes will be enlightened in the subsequent body of this chapter.

6.3. The Effects of Italian Colonial Modernization Practices

Before the coming of the Italians, because the Bet-’Asgädä country was under chronic raids and surrounded by aristocratic clans, the potential outlets that would let the Təgrä free from the aristocratic bondage including; large scale or small scale dissertation, organized unrest, outright refusal to pay dues and offer services or negotiation on terms of services etc. that worked in other feudal experiences seemed never attempted by the Bet-’Asgädä Təgrä. This was because the Təgrä clans were already split into many branches of the Šumaglā clans, thus lack unity and strength. The Təgrä were also not only under physical repression and control, but also dependent of the Šumaglā for defense as they might have been felt insecure of the possible raids by neighboring clans and petty states of the Funj and Təgray. The other greatest misfortune was the absence of interest groups like churches or other neutral elements to advocate the lessening of obligations. The Italian Colonial Government as a modern, well equipped and organized mobilization of men and resources was the first in its kind to substitute the protective responsibility of the Šumaglā to their Təgrä and took over of the clan territories and declared government ownership that deprived the Šumaglā source of power and pride. The Italians administration pushed on increasing administrative and economic integration of the colony that facilitated human and good’s mobility.⁷⁷³ The restricted Təgrä were one of the beneficiaries of this policy. Therefore, this sub unit will explore if the coming of Italians normally changed the relations of production as it introduced new laws and introduced alternative means of production.

The British administrative officer and writer, Trevaskis had weigh up the administrative and educational policies implemented by the Italian colonial government as cynical and selfish,

⁷⁷² Alberto Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 185.

⁷⁷³ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar. “Rivalry, Antagonism and War in the Nation & State-Building Process. p. 34.

but also admitted to the modernity they introduced and the reigning of peace and stability.⁷⁷⁴ However, with regard to their intent to the emancipation of the Təgrä he concluded that; ‘*we can understand that the Italians were let alone to solve the serf demands they were not ever ready to see the Eritrean as a humans.*’⁷⁷⁵ Despite the mistreatment and limitation of schooling and less promotion in administrative and military positions, this statement seemed an exaggerated explanation of the Italian colonial administration. As a matter of fact, the Italians introduced schooling for the children of the notables that terminated at fourth grade, and the goal of the schooling was to produce young natives that speak moderate Italian language, familiar with the four mathematical operations, well aware of the principles of hygiene and knowledge of at least the basic Italian history and the names of those of Italian patriots that made Italy great.⁷⁷⁶

As discussed earlier, administratively the Italians followed different policies in the western lowlands and the northern highlands in comparison to the plateau areas. In the aristocratic areas, they uphold the customary social division and allied themselves with the ruling class.⁷⁷⁷ The Italian favor of the ruling class was because the aristocratic system was well ordered and convenient for governance, revenue collection and conscription was simplified, hence maintaining the position of the lords was vital. However, the nomadic economy of the lowlands might have been not preferable in comparison to the sedentary way of life of the plateau that was more suitable to their colonial economic policies and goals. In the face of the Italian indifference in reversing the aristocratic system, the Təgrä were continuously requesting for the improvement of their condition from the late 1890s. Lieutenant Marazzani, *Residente* of Sahəl reported that during the census in the ‘Ad-Tämaryam he encountered with the demand of the Təgrä for the change of chiefs mainly from their own clan according to their ancient customs. The Bet-’Asgädä lords on their part opposed the appeal by the Təgrä. This provoked for continuous meeting of the Təgrä in the presence of two representatives of the *Residente*.⁷⁷⁸ The *Residente* showed sympathy on the Təgrä and forwarded his opinion to his superiors, but it seemed so early for introducing reforms on such long standing tradition.

⁷⁷⁴ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. pp. 10-11.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 43-44.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁷⁷⁷ United Nations, Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies), *Former Italian Colonies: Four Power Commission Reports: IA Part 1 Eritrea*, p. 38.

⁷⁷⁸ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, Vol. III, cit. p. 249.

Another report delivered to F. Martini was from Captain Fioccardi, Commissioner of Kärän. He stated that in the Kärän region, the chiefs were committing abuses on the Təgrä during distribution and collection of the tax.⁷⁷⁹ The Təgrä also demanded that the Government collect it directly, thus freeing them from the oppression and injustices of the chiefs.⁷⁸⁰ The document reiterated that doing so in the region including the Ḥabab would bring a whole of social revolution. Declaring the Təgrä owners of the land and cultivate it independent of the Bet-ʾAsgädä would not be possible.⁷⁸¹ It seems that the reason for the Italians unwillingness for affirmatively responding the demands of the Təgrä was threat of uncontrollable social revolution.

For Marazzani reversing the Ḥabab social organization was assumed a threat of disintegration, and he recommended for more study on the remedy; perhaps to assign only one leader to each fraction and made him responsible in charge of the collection of tax and reduces the number of Šäḵəs.⁷⁸² Ferdinando Martini, as governor during his tour in the Naqfa area, personally observed the exploitation and the total dependence of the Bet-ʾAsgädä on their Təgrä. He also learned the urgency of the Təgrä for their freedom and determined to solve such abuses; however he despaired and described the situation as insoluble.⁷⁸³ He was frustrated by the social arrangement and opined that such demand could explode to an undesired social upheaval. Thus, he concluded that he would study it and need caution. Martini finally recommended for the maintenance of the aristocratic order with minimum reforms on the general condition of the Təgrä. F. Martini assumed the archaic system as an irremediable and anticipated that any social change would take decades to come.⁷⁸⁴

In 20 December 1903, F. Martini's diary being in Naqfa stated that: the Ḥabab question was unsolved yet and he intended to settle it before his return to ʾAsmära. In that same day he called the Kántibay and three Šäḵəs. Three of them reported that the three ʾAsgädä complained that the Təgrä do not gave them enough to live, they failed to observe the ancient custom. Martini also called some Təgrä representing each of the fraction and they in turn complained that the ʾAsgädä had taken much and they had nothing left to live on.⁷⁸⁵ And they urged him to do something, solution. After two days another twelve Təgrä delegates from various fractions lay

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 288.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid.

⁷⁸² Ibid., p. 585.

⁷⁸³ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, Vol. IV, cit. p. 111.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

down their complaints before him. They stated that, the lords treated them like slaves, they took away too much of what they have, and exaggeratedly accused their lord to have ate them alive. In the course of his investigation, Martini ascertained that it was possible that the Təgrä were made to pay more than the amount they should and that was due to the greed of the tax collectors.⁷⁸⁶

In relief of the Təgrä plights and to prevent the abuses that they had during the collection of the tax, Martini while in Naqfa proposed two reforms: the first was the collection of the tax to be done directly by the government and the second reform was creation of a bay, however under this reform the Təgrä would not choose his own master. Hence, the 'Asgädä selects on which he wanted to depend from. However, such privilege was to be granted only to those who brought their cattle to the Residence, of which a census would be made.⁷⁸⁷ Martini stated that, these reforms were aimed to reconcile the condition of the 'Asgädä as much as possible by giving them the opportunity to make a living that considers the situation of the Təgrä. He described that these reforms were the result of study and inspired by the criteria of justice. He understood that his declaration would not be in satisfaction of both the 'Asgädä and the Təgrä. He added that in the given condition, it was no possible to take away the rights of the 'Asgädä and grant the Təgrä of their full demands. Martini thought that granting the Təgrä their rights would bring revolution and ruin the life of 'Asgädä, and the lords would accuse the government a subversive.⁷⁸⁸ Therefore, the proposed reforms were not fundamental that jeopardize the privileges of the lords, and their realization on ground is not certain as the Italians needed the presence of the lords in their middlemen role.

Therefore, despite the initiatives decided towards easing the lives of the Təgrä, Martini or his administration was not looking for fundamental changes that improve the conditions of the Təgrä. Although untangling the Təgrä cause was more of a human rights concern, but it seems that for Italian colonial government solving such social issues was far from their immediate concerns. As a matter of fact the aristocratic system was not only in the Bet-'Asgädä but in almost the whole of western lowlands, therefore attempting to improve the lives of the Təgrä at the cost of the privileged lords would be touching the Pandora's Box. The fear of such disorderly

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 117. Martini emphasized for the over taxation of the Təgrä was that, by then for the government collected was in lire, is often payed by the taxpayer in MT Thaler. Therefore, the problem was in the exchange and the intermediary 'Asgädä commission earnings.

⁷⁸⁷ Martini Ferdinando, *Il Diario Eritreo*, Vol. IV, cit. p. 121.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

social revolution was the reason behind the indecision and curbing Təgrä rights. Such far fetched assumption was also mainly because the interests of the colonial government and the lords were congruent that made the lords as agents of indirect rule.⁷⁸⁹ Other Italian scholars and administrators; Conti Rossini and Alberto Pollera had also witnessed the unfair exploitation of the Təgrä at the hands of the land owning nobility.⁷⁹⁰

In the labor works introduced by the Italians, the Eritreans were paid relatively low wages; particularly beginning from the late 1920s fascism was undermining the Eritreans' human dignity and rights through its racist policies. During which, the preexisting liberal outlook was changed and became more reactionary that assumed the Italian citizens as principal whereas the Eritreans as secondary or supplementary.⁷⁹¹ Trevaskis furthered his description of the Italian administrative behavior on Eritreans; he illustrated that Eritreans were expected to produce cheap raw materials for Italian factories, work in the Italian enterprises as a cheap laborer and serve in the Italian colonial army as low paid soldiers.⁷⁹² Therefore, as we can see below, despite their discriminating policies, the Italians undeniably had introduced limited improvements in the lives of the Təgrä through declared reforms and indirect policy results.

The Italian Colonial Administration throughout its existence (1890-1941) had brought fundamental socioeconomic and political changes through its administrative machinery. The administration opened broader economic activities that demanded employees far beyond the available labor in the colony.⁷⁹³ The massive recruitment of the Eritrean youths in the colonial army created the labor gap in construction and agriculture sectors. As a result the human shortage was filled by the migrants from Təgray.⁷⁹⁴ With regard to the effects of the Italians on the aristocratic order, the transformation it brought was not only direct through decrees and announcements discussed above but also through indirect policy outcomes. The Italians were the bearers of modernization in the colony, one of which was through militarization of the rural, both agrarian and nomadic communities. The serious militarization of the colony was begun in 1908, following the resignation Martini. From then on Eritrean role was decided to be the source of

⁷⁸⁹ United Nations, Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies), *Former Italian Colonies*, p. 38.

⁷⁹⁰ Conti Rossini associated the exploitative nature of the lords as a 'human octopus'. On the other hand Alberto Pollera described the extreme dependence and exploitation of the lords that, 'the lords made the subjected Təgrä a mere slaves and because they lived out of the livestock wealth of their Təgrä, they abandoned farming and became blood suckers of their Təgrä.'

⁷⁹¹ G. K. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. p. 29.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar. "Rivalry, Antagonism and War in the Nation & State-Building Process, p.35.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

colonial army, mainly for the consolidation of Italian colonial rules in Somalia and Libya in 1908 to 1910 and 1912 to 1932 respectively.⁷⁹⁵ during the 1911 Italian war in Libya, the existing nine battalions were made to be twelve in 1913 and soon grew in to fifteen battalions.⁷⁹⁶ The third phase of militarization of Eritrean men took place from 1932 to 1941. It was during the Italian preparation for the invasion Ethiopia.⁷⁹⁷ The colonial militarization had binary objectives; conquest for its imperial expansion towards Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia and accumulation of wealth through exploitation of resources and cheap labor force.

In the process of achieving its colonial objectives, in 1935 the Italians managed to recruit about forty percent of the total productive force of 150,000 male populations of the 600,000 total population of the colony.⁷⁹⁸ Out of which over 60,000 Eritrean soldiers campaigned in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941 and employed in strengthening the East African Italian Empire.⁷⁹⁹ After the pacification of the Libyan resistance,⁸⁰⁰ the Italians reduced Eritrean soldiers there and focused more on Ethiopia and until 1938 it is believed that around 70,000 Eritreans joined the colonial army. In some agrarian areas of the plateau, such magnitude of mobilization had tapped the productive force as a result devastated the two third of rural production.⁸⁰¹ In 1914 Salvago-Raggi, the then Governor of Eritrea reported that the massive recruitment of Eritreans in to the Libyan campaign led for economic crisis arising from the labor shortage not only in the rural peasantry but the wages for manual labor increased almost double and many firms filed for closure, some canceled their contracts or bankrupted.⁸⁰²

Considering militarization as one of the basic elements of transformations of the rural work force in colonial Eritrea, Temesgen Tesfamariam labeled two basic objectives of the sector; first, regimentation of the rural labor force under restricted setting, thereby it disconnected them from their traditional social base, customary mode of production and hierarchical social relationships.⁸⁰³ For the pastoral Təgrä recruitment in the Italian colonial military and urbanization were special opportunity as means of liberation from traditional dues and

⁷⁹⁵ Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, cit. p. 4.

⁷⁹⁶ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, "From Warriors to Urban Dwellers: Ascari and the Military Factor in the Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 175 (2004): 533-574.

⁷⁹⁷ Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, cit. p. 4.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁰⁰ According to Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. In 1925 around 4377 Eritrean men were stationed in Libya. This number was greater than the Eritrean soldiers stationed in Eritrea. However, after the suppression of the Libyan resistance, the Italian focus was diverted to Ethiopia and most of the Eritreans were taken back to Eritrea.

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*

obligations.⁸⁰⁴ For most of the candidates the pushing factors from home were including scarcity of arable land in the villages and lack of employment in the urban areas. Consequently, the Italians in their invasion of Ethiopia had mobilized with conservative estimation of more than 100,000 Eritreans into its military service. Through which, the Italians exhausted the available youngsters and avoided any possibility of individual or group level armed resistance.

Economically, abandoned their previous livelihood, the warriors became dependent on government salary to support their families that greatly widened the monetary system. For their services, as a reward were promoted in titles and granted pensions on which they rely as a supplementary income to settle in the urban areas.⁸⁰⁵ Second, the warriors' role was not limited only to military, but the state organized them in to infrastructural works such as road and railway constructions that helped to the exploitation of the colonial resources.⁸⁰⁶ This opened an opportunity that enabled them to acquire careers that after demobilization they depended upon to live mostly in urban areas disconnected from their rural economy and social obligations.

For Eritreans in the colonial army, salaries were determined by the ranks and years of service and rewarded promotions with increment of payments, privileges and a possible opportunity of positions in the local colonial offices.⁸⁰⁷ The Italian colonial government conscripted a large number of Təgrä, and the military service lifted them out from their smaller and restricted locality to the broader world view.⁸⁰⁸ Moreover, those *Ascaris* were not only considered as representatives of modernization by the common people and state, but in the post-war time, the demobilized *Ascaris* were offered with urban housing, civil employment and pensions as rewards for their services.⁸⁰⁹ Therefore, during the Italian colonial era, militarization was one of the avenues towards emancipation from the preexisting aristocratic dominance and subjugation.⁸¹⁰ Militarization as expression of modern state intervention, revised the archaic customary social relationships, mode of living and emotional makeup. When members of the pastoral communities with aristocratic background join the alternatives of employments provided

⁸⁰³ Temesgen Tesfamariam, "Militias, Warriors and Workers: Capturing Peasants and the Making of a Strong State and a Weak Society in Eritrea" (Doctoral Dissertation, Makerere University, 2018), 2013/HD03/3174X, pp. 14-15.

⁸⁰⁴ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

⁸⁰⁵ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. p. 62.

⁸⁰⁶ Temesgen Tesfamariam, *Militias, Warriors and Workers*, cit. pp. 14-15.

⁸⁰⁷ Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, cit. p. 48.

⁸⁰⁸ Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 29-52.

⁸⁰⁹ Temesgen Tesfamariam, *Militias, Warriors and Workers*, cit. p. 20.

⁸¹⁰ In this case although it could be difficult to rationalize with statistical data, but as we can see in the next chapter, the leading figures of the Təgrä resistance were mostly ex-*ascaris* or workers in the civilian sector of the colonial offices. Therefore, militarization was one of the outlets from the aristocratic subjection.

by the colonial state, they tend to reject the old ways of social, moral and political relationships and construct a new one that adequately fulfill their needs and uphold their dignified life. Such mobility and exposure to the outside world also shown the Təgrä that other men including people on the other side of the country were not or less oppressed than they do. So the colonialism with all its problems has opened wide avenues of awareness and outlets from the unfair exploitation. The Article 31 of the declaration of 1908, known as *Regolamento di disciplina per I militari indigeni del Regio Corpo di truppe Coloni d'Eritrea* was issued by the colonial government based on the old military tradition. This proclamation allowed the colonial soldiers to be joined by their families in times of military campaigns and the establishment of *campi-famiglia* (family camps) that were new districts exclusively inhabited by the ascari families in the newly emerging urban centers.⁸¹¹ Such policy had significant impact in the growth of urban areas and it might have been suitable means of outlet for the complete withdrawal of the Təgrä from the traditional links back home.

In a nutshell, when peasants joined the state, they aspire to achieve some features of modernity that could help them to attain social mobility. In the case of Bet- 'Asgädä subjects, conscription and urban settlement were representations of transformation through state intervention during Italian colonial era. Veteran warriors with similar past tend to build a distinctive social group in the urban areas that engaged in different fields of work including in factories, plantations⁸¹², and as shopkeepers, tailors, clerks, lawyers etc. In reality, the earliest urban settlers were active or veteran members of the colonial services.⁸¹³ Such opportunities had transformed the Təgrä from subjects in to salaried workers with better socioeconomic position. To the contrary, members of the ruling class tied by the customary rules that considered the available job opportunities as undignified positions thus failed to utilize the available opportunities and remain unchanged. In their assessment on the role of Italian period on the status of the two classes, a memorandum presented in 1947 by the representatives of the Təgrä

⁸¹¹ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, "From Warriors to Urban Dwellers, pp. 533-574.

⁸¹² To satisfy the domestic and export commercial demands, the Italians introduced plantation schemes in different parts of the country by diverting the seasonal rivers and constructing dams of various sizes. In 1920s tobacco, fruits and cotton plantations was set up in Barka lowlands. For example, the Tobacco plantation had the capacity of employing 1000 permanent workers and 6000 seasonal workers. Other cotton plantations were implemented in the eastern lowlands of Sämhar and Sahəl. These enterprises carried new experiences to the pastoral life through creating regular and seasonal employment opportunities where the Təgrä could secure additional income, share ideas and increase their awareness on how to get rid of the aristocratic order. The overall role the employment opportunities in these firms resurged the Təgrä to disintegrate the traditional aristocratic socioeconomic systems in the lowlands of Eritrea.

⁸¹³ Temesgen Tesfamariam, *Militias, Warriors and Workers*, cit. pp. 22-23.

communities in Kärän affirmed that; “comparing the two classes, it is evident that the ruling class are declining in their socioeconomic position, whereas the oppressed Təgrä are transforming themselves from cattle herding and farming to handicraft and other professions including; trade, governmental and private trading enterprises.⁸¹⁴ The majority of the workers in these areas of activities are from the Təgrä.”⁸¹⁵ In most cases these groups do not cutoff their relations with their original habitats and the communities they belonged, feel the pains and challenges of their clan members and take initiative for remedy by considering themselves as representatives of the deprived groups. This was realized in the emancipation process of the 1940s that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Alas, the protective role of the Šumaglä was replaced by the colonial state.⁸¹⁶ Although the lords defended their Təgrä from local raids, but the well organized raids particularly from Ethiopia, particularly the raids led by Wube and Alula were beyond their capability.⁸¹⁷ But under the Italian rule, International borders delimited and no more periodic raids coming from Ethiopia, at the same time imposition of Italian colonial rule has restricted the free movement of the Bet-’Asgädä to be limited within the boundaries of the newly established Italian Eritrea.⁸¹⁸ The traditional office of the ruling class was becoming an outdated and the subjects became beneficiaries of the security provided by the government; with this regard Boari reported that; “*property is now respected and the shepherd looks after his flocks with more love, secure from the raids which broke up his existence and led to more destruction than disease ever caused.*”⁸¹⁹ In substantiation of the security provision by the colonial government, Residente Persico in his report to his superior in Massawa, Governor General Gondalfi on the situation of Bet-’Asgädä, and in reaction to the appeal by Kántibay Hdad against himself and the possible dangers from the Mahdists of the Sudan, stated that;

“.....nothing adverse will happen in the tribe, since all the Təgrä are completely

⁸¹⁴ United Nations, Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies), Former Italian Colonies: Four Power Commission Reports: IA Part 1 Eritrea. In Zemhret Yohannes, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea: 1882-1941*, Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2010. p. 115.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid.

⁸¹⁶ Jordan Gebremedhin, *National, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea*, p. 51.

⁸¹⁷ The displacement of the majority of the ‘Ad-Täkles to the Ḥabab area due to Alula’s raids was one example of the weaknesses of the lords to challenge the powerful raids. Ferdinando Martini’s description in his *Il Diario Eritreo: I Grandi Italiani D’Africa*, Volume IV, p 110, a certain hill in the upland of Naqfa that Alula used to camp while he raided the Ḥabab was another justification for the weaknesses of the lords to defend their subjects.

⁸¹⁸ Miran, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, cit. pp. 39-43.

⁸¹⁹ Antony d’Avray, *Lords of the Red Sea*, cit. p. 181.

faithful to the Italian Government, which gives protection and security to their persons and possessions, defending them from the threat of enemies and the raids of chiefs; and the party which is dissatisfied with the Kāntibay and his friends is very strong and has not the slightest intention of encountering the rigour of the *Signor* Governor, still less of passing under the *Dervishes* who cannot give any confidence, except that they will disturb their possessions and cattle.”⁸²⁰

The colonial government not only provided security, but laid favorable condition for the nomads to improve their economy. Thanks to the modern medication, the deadly outbreak of livestock disease halted and the animal population including camels, sheep and goats recovered and multiplied fast.⁸²¹ The product of such animals; the milk and the butter sold in urban centers like Massawa with good price that was paid in cash, which before used to be bartered for sorghum or cotton.⁸²² The large scale renting of camels for adequate price had considerable effect in the economy of the nomads. Many young men hired in Massawa as labor works on the government projects and services went back to their families with their savings.⁸²³ The economic advantages the nomads of Bet-’Asgädä and the Sämhar plain enjoyed from the opportunities the government provided were a lifesaver, for the communities were dependent on their livestock production that were unreliable creatures that were almost on the verge of extinction by the previous epidemic.⁸²⁴ The ‘Ad-Täkles and ‘Ad-Tämaryam on their part had progressed more rapidly and narrowed the existing space between the two classes. The subjects improved their economic base due to their proximity to the commercial centers of Kärän and Massawa, and to their greater number of involvement in the native military services and labor works in the public projects.⁸²⁵

From early 1930s up to 1941, associated with its expansionist plan, the fascist government economically transformed Eritrea. The number of Europeans, particularly Italian

⁸²⁰ D’Avray Antony et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. p. 39.

⁸²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ The positive thing about the contribution of the Italians was not only in protection from the raids and medication from the pandemic but the imposed tax was so much little comparing with their predecessors. For example it is displayed in *The Nakfa Documents* (pp 59-60) that the ex-*Mudiria* of Massawa under Munzinger of Egypt was made to pay fr. 195479.75, but during the early days of the Italian colonial government was fr.71383.00 which was 15028 Dollars less than the previous. The stipends paid to the Nayəb, the Kāntibay of Ḥabab and other clans was almost doubled. Thanks to his role in the expansion of the colony and his provision of camels the Kāntibay of Ḥabab was valued more than the Nayb. It is well known that during the Italian period revenue was not a burden to the people and the Italians claimed that the coolly was run economically through the subsidy from Italy.

⁸²⁵ Alberto Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell’ Eritrea*, cit. p. 202.

population increased from 5000 before 1930 to 70,000 in 1941.⁸²⁶ Correspondingly, urbanization of Eritreans from both farming villages and pastoral lowlands took place, and the infrastructural works on houses, bridges and roads, air ports, railways, expansion of ports, commercial agriculture and advanced human and animal health care system introduced widely.⁸²⁷ These all modernization transformations had practically greater effect in changing the lives of the peasant and pastoral communities. Looking to the effects on the pastoral economy in the northern highlands, as in any other parts of the country, the introduction of modern veterinary services helped to increase the number of livestock in the Bet-'Asgädä too. In early days of the Italian period, rinderpest had almost decimated the animal population of the country. But in 1904, the Italians put the pandemic under full control and the number of the livestock show steady growth. For example, in 1905 the overall animal wealth of the country was 1,075,000 and despite the increasing number of exports of livestock and domestic consumption, four decades later in 1944 the number grew threefold and had come to be 3,322,000.⁸²⁸ Such animal booming had improved the socioeconomic position of the Təgrä. It also put the continuity of customary social division in to question and increased their demand for emancipation.⁸²⁹

In the case of Bet-'Asgädä, as explained in chapter three, the cumulative of all the Three Mäfläs' livestock riches in 1934 was 448,392, i.e. ten years ahead of the later survey of 1944. Hence, they shared relatively high proportion of the nationwide stocks. Looking to this great wealth, the Bet-'Asgädä were massively prosperous. But the majority of the wealth was owned by the Təgrä, because numerically they were the majority and enjoyed the free grazing rights. The dues to have been paid were fixed and not relative to the number of the stocks, so they had the advantage of raring more livestock. To the contrary, the hollowly dignified lords made less use of the new medical innovations than their subjects; hence they were not ready to utilize the new ideas to increase their overall prosperity.⁸³⁰ The accumulation of such wealth boosted the Təgrä economy and confidence to fight their cause.⁸³¹ Therefore, it was in such so abnormal

⁸²⁶ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 59-61.

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

⁸²⁸ Jordan Gebremedhin, *National, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 51-52.

⁸²⁹ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar. "Rivalry, Antagonism and War in the Nation & State-Building Process, p.33.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ 'Ibrahim Sulṭan stated that during their struggle for emancipation of the Təgrä and the political struggle of the Muslim League party in the 1940s mainly representing the Təgrä cause; financially they were supported by the contribution of animals from the Təgrä then sold in the various markets in the western lowland towns, Asmara and Kassala.

condition that the Italians sought hard to uphold the traditional authority of the chiefs.

As described above, through formal decrees and informal policy outcomes of the various modernity measures delivered by the colonial system, the archaic burden was gradually mitigating. The traditional privileges of ordinary Šumaglā were curtailed and the recipients of aristocratic dues and services were limited to the main chiefs, hence, the burden of the subjects was tremendously lessened. As any other residents of the colony's, the mobilization of the Təgrä men in to the colonial conscription or infrastructural projects had the possibility to attain some technical know how and the opportunity for urban that disconnected them from the social bonds of their lords. By the end of the contract with the colonial state, most of the mobilized men settled in the urban centers, and if they opted to return to their villages, they already exposed to the modern world with better awareness of rights and broader perspective of world view, thus they no longer willing to be abided by the already weakened traditional ties even they widened the consciousness to the remaining cohorts.

The introduction of market economy that opened widely to the Təgrä to sell their labor and dairy products in the emerging urban centers allowed them to have cash and economic substitutes that boost their confidence. To the contrary, the Šumaglā caste were not willing to do a labor works, traditionally considered it against their dignity, and mostly own fewer livestock to sell, hence they became less beneficiaries than their subjects. With the introduction of modern agricultural techniques, seeds and the encouragement from the government for settled life, gradually farming became the primary means of living for people of the coastal areas.⁸³² In administration of the sedentary communities, dignitaries and magistrates were setup and served as channels of communication with the government. Parallel to such economic transformations, the people relieved of the periodic invasions and looting and started living in a relative peace. The informal transformation attained during Italian colonial era had boasted the level of confidence of the Təgrä that the practicability of their complete emancipation was closer in the future.

6.4. Formal Reforms of the Italians

The coming of the Italians provided relief to many groups of people. For example the 'Ad-Täkles were victims of massive taxation and unbearable governance of Alula of Ethiopia that forced

⁸³² EPLF, *Təgrä of Wadi-Labka* (ዋዲ-ላብካ ትግረ), cit. p. 18.

them to abandon their settlement in Habäro and moved northward to seek refuge in their cousins' land. So the Italians were almost rescuers that relieved them from the burden and later allowed to return back to their home and reestablish their life again. However, the class relationship was still intact, and in the early years of Italians in Eritrea, the Təgrä frequented the colonial governors to protest against the aristocratic exploitation and seeking protection from their exploitative long-established oppressors.⁸³³ As we have seen above, before such request from the Təgrä, the Italians had already brought to an end to the more intolerable ones. Abolishing altogether and free the subjects would weaken the already facile and convenient administration system of traditional political and social structures of the clans. To this effect, the colonial government had attempted several times to standardize and reduce the various dues and services extracted from the Təgrä.

Looking to the Bongiovanni's⁸³⁴ report as one of the measures of the reform stated that, he brought all the sheikhs and the Bet-'Asgädä that were appointed as chiefs to govern the 53 organized villages in their effort to transform in to agrarian economy and informed them that their duties were each to administer the village with love and not to bleed the Təgrä with unjust demands for money or cattle, that there is only one tribute; that imposed by the government.⁸³⁵ He further warned them not to go as the old custom into any village and describing himself as chief and extract what was not due.⁸³⁶ He further urged them to dedicate themselves to cultivation and engage in the salt trade and put themselves on the road of justice and of work that had a promising prospect for the betterment of their life. These reforms somehow reduced the burden, but conducted in a way that systematically upholds the authority of the aristocratic lords, because maintaining the hierarchical social order was administratively relevant to the Italians.⁸³⁷ The Italians preferred for gradual modifications than disastrous overnight change.

As discussed above the Italian government was not willing for any fundamental reforms in the aristocratic order. The main reasons were; first, the emancipation demand and resistance of the Təgrä was passive and unorganized; second and the most important factor was that though the aristocratic order was an outdated arrangement and partly not congruent with the

⁸³³ Jordan Gebremedhin, *National, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea*, cit. p. 51.

⁸³⁴ Bongiovanni was *Residente* of the Ḥabab area following the death of Persico at the battle of 'Amba 'Alage (አምባ አላጂ) in December 1895 by the armies of Mnälik (ምነሊክ) of Ethiopia. Bongiovanni took part in the delimitation of the frontiers with the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

⁸³⁵ D'Avray Antony et al., *The Nakfa Documents*, cit. pp. 110-111.

⁸³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸³⁷ G.K.K. Trevaskis, *A Colony in Transition*, cit. pp. 13-14.

administrative policies of the Italians, but it was relevant with some basic reforms. For this reason, in 1900s during the administration of F. Martini the following 4 customary services were revoked.⁸³⁸ First, *Wotə Ṭāḥayə* (ዎት ጸሓይ); this was a milk cow provided by a Təgrä to his lord during the dry season. Second, *Wotə Mäkan* (ዎት ጠካን); was an obligation forcing the Təgrä to equally divide the barren livestock between himself and the lord. Third, *Nagalät Ḥaläg* (ናጋለት ሓለግ); this was the right of the lord to force the Təgrä to offer him a goat for slaughter, wherever he was caught with syphilis. Fourth, *Meskegen* (ጠስከገን); was a customary right of the 'Asgädä to seek money from his Təgrä whenever he encounter him.⁸³⁹ These reforms represented a minor in proportion and the most simple in the value of the duties in comparison to the more than 13 obligations described in the previous chapter that the administration allowed continuing as they were. But the main core elements of relationship that supported the existence of the system were not eradicated.

In 1924-1925 Jacopo Gasparini,⁸⁴⁰ the then Governor, conducted an extensive visit throughout the Kärän province, particularly to the Naqfa plateau. The tour was possibly to have been the last of its kind by a governor of the colony.⁸⁴¹ Concerned by the extreme demands of the Təgrä, by the end of his exploration, he declared a number of announcements to each of the Three Mäfläs clans specifying the amount and kind of dues that should be paid by the Təgrä.⁸⁴² Two of these declarations were the following:

⁸³⁸ *Zemhret Yohannes, 'ityawi mägzäti 'ab 'ertra: 1882-1941 (Italian Colonialism in Eritrea: 1882-1941), Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2010., p 209.* It is described in the material provision part of Chapter Four.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁸⁴⁰ J. Gasparini was born in 1879 in Italy and died in 1941 in Asmara. He was governor of Eritrea, diplomat in Yemen and regent in Somalia. As governor, he is known for his introduction of some reforms that lessened the burdens of the subjects described below.

⁸⁴¹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, p. 243.

⁸⁴² Fuad Makki and Alemseged Tesfay stated that the reforms by governor Gasparini were in response to the protest of the 'Almäda in the 1920s against the heavy exaction imposed on them by the Bet-'Asgädä lords.

GOVERNMENT OF ERITREA
CHEREN AND COASTAL DISTRICT
PROCLAMATION FOR AD TEMARIAM TRIBE
TRANSLATION OF PROCLAMATION OF 1924

1. *The sub-sheikhs of h'ssas are allowed to take 3 litre from each of the heads of the families of tigre tribe, who owns from six to nineteen cows and six lire from those who own 20 cows or more. It should be clearly understood that each camel equals two cows and every 10 sheep or goats equal one cow. The total of animals; cows, camels, sheep and goats which is owned by the head of the family should be counted and paid as shown above. From the amounts collected in this way, the sub sheikhs of h'ssas give the notables of their h'ssas.*
2. *In the event of Bairam the sub-sheikh of a h'ssa has to take not more than 3 sheep by turn from the heads of Təgrä families under his "h'ssa".*
3. *Sub-sheikhs of h'ssas can take only one camel from the heads of Tigre families during the immigration if they are not in possession of the sufficient camels for their needs.*
4. *Sub-sheikhs of h'ssas can take yearly a profit from the milk- one sheep from the heads of the families who possess more than 100 sheep.*

It should be clearly understood that the sub-sheikh of the h'ssa has got no right to take more than one sheep only a year for his own use from the heads of the families (by turn) who are under his h'ssa. A sheep to make use of its milk for his ownself.

The sheikhs of the tribes only are allowed to take yearly (by turn) from the heads of the families sheep to make use of its milk as much as their families who are their brothers from their fathers (living males) and all their children.

5. *The sheikhs of the tribes are due for hospitality by all the tribe, sheikh of hiss by all the h'ssa and sheikh of sub h'ssa by all sub h'ssa.*

KEREN/AAP

Doc. 6.1 *The translation by the B.M.A. of the 1924 proclamation introduced by Dr. Gasparini on the 'Ad-Tämaryam clan.*

GOVERNMENT OF ERITREA
KEREN & COASTAL DISTRICT
PROCLAMATION TO HABAB TRIBE

In the meeting held on 7th March 1924 in Diggi Habab in the place called Maba and in the presence of H.E. the Wali, Sheikhs and Notables of Beit Mala and Rashaida, the Kantibai of Habab on behalf of all 'Asgädä had abdicated all the rights due to Beit-Asgadi by Tigri. Beit-Asgadi have contented themselves with the following gifts which have to be accorded to them by the Təgrä:-

- 1. Sub-sheikhs of hissas are allowed to take one lira as a gift (hadia) from each head of the Tigre families and nine lira from those who possess from 12 cows to 24 cows. If these heads possess more than 24 cows, the sub-sheikhs are allowed to take 12 lira from them. It should be understood that each camel equal to 2 cows and every 10 goats or ewes equal one cow. From the amounts thus collected, the sub-sheikhs should give gifts to 'Asgädä in their hissass.*
- 2. In the event of Bairam, sheikh of tribe, sheikh of hissa and sub-sheikh have to take not more than 5 goats from heads of Təgrä families in their hissass. These heads of Təgrä families are written down in a list (each in a hissa) and are divided into groups: each group consists of 5 sections. Each section has to give 5 goats. This is carried out yearly by turn eg. The 1st section has to give his 5 goats in the first year and the second in the 2nd year and so on up to the 5th section.*
- 3. Sub-sheikhs may take a camel from the heads of Təgrä families during their migration provided that they are not in possession of sufficient camels to meet their requirements.*
- 4. Sheikh of tribe, sheikh of hissa and sub-sheikh can take yearly one cow and one goat (for milk) from the head of Təgrä families provided that these heads possess more than 24 cows or 100 goats. It should be understood that sheikh of hissa and sub-sheikh are not allowed to take more than one cow and one goat (for milk) yearly from the heads of the Təgrä families (by turn) who are in their hissass. Only the sheikh of tribe has the right to take cows and sheep (for milk) yearly from the heads of Təgrä families (by turn) who are in their hissass. Only the sheikh of tribe has the right to take cows and sheep (for milk) yearly from the heads of Təgrä families (by turn) who are in his hissa. These cows and sheep may be as many as the number of the living members of his family and all his offspring provided that these members are males.*
- 5. Hospitality is due to sheikh of tribe by all tribe and to sheikh of hissa by all hissa and to sub-sheikh under hissa by those under hissa.*
- 6. The Moftiz, if it seems fit to him, may grant permission to a Omda to have a gift if he (the Omda) wishes to get married.*
- 7. All Bet-'Asgädä will reserve to themselves the habit of tongue and "manka" (other parts of slaughtered animal). Note:- Kantibai Osman says that tongue and manka does not obtain with Habab)*

All the sub-sheikhs and a large number of Bet-'Asgädä and Təgrä have attended the meeting and have accepted the decisions made by the Sheikh of tribe.

H.E. the Wali has consented these conditions and has ordered that this measure should take effect.

Doc. 6.2. The translation by the B.M.A. of the 1924 proclamation introduced by Dr. Gasparini on the Habab.

NB. Both proclamation documents are adopted as they were with no any transliteration into Aetopica.

However the document expressed its skepticism for the materialization of the decree and stated that, there was no any proof ascertaining whether or not the Təgrä were aware of the declaration that reduced the amount of dues and services they were supposed to pay under the new reform. Contrary to the above misgiving statement that undermining the awareness of the Təgrä of the reforms decreed by Jacopo Gasparini, J. Gebremedhin affirmed that, some Təgrä leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with the reforms and approached the government for additional reforms that curtail the authority of the lords, and when the government failed to fulfill their demands, they rebuffed to offer their traditional duties to the chiefs.⁸⁴³ Though undocumented, it is believed that many of the influential Təgrä that opposed the unjust association of the Italians and Šumaglā were sent to the prison centers in Naḳura⁸⁴⁴ and ‘Asāb.⁸⁴⁵ The Italians had mutual interest with privileged aristocratic lords, hence the maintenance of the power and rights of the clan chiefs was essential so as not to disturb the stable status quo and the reforms made were with very cautious in a way that do not erode the order.

As an example, looking to the list of modifications declared by Gasparini to be implemented in the ‘Ad-Täkles clan; the “*Mädəhanit*”⁸⁴⁶ was offered in the form of butter collected from the Təgrä. It was valued in relation to the number of livestock the Təgrä owned; roughly one liter of butter per family to the respective chief calculated in terms of Maria Theresa Thalers. Under the new announcement, the amount of butter to be presented to the “*capo sotto frazione*” was specified that Təgrä family with 6 to 12 cows had to pay 6 lire, families owning 12 to 24 cows had to pay 9 lire and for those of families owning more than 24 cows was decided to pay 12 lire. For their convenience of assessing the value of taxation, they equated one camel equivalent to 2 cows, and ten goats or sheep comparable to one cow.⁸⁴⁷ During the *Ed al Adha*, the “*capo frazione*” and the “*capo sotto frazione*” might collect up to five goats from each Təgrä family under their respective domains. The chief of the clan, the *capo frazione* and the *capo sotto*

⁸⁴³ Jordan Gebremedhin, *National, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea*, cit. p. 51.

⁸⁴⁴ Naḳura is one of the many Dahlak Islands, used as a prison center during Italian colonial era. The prison center is best known for its role in pacifying the resistance through inhumanely treatments and liquidation of the Eritrean notables assumed not loyal to the Italian colonial rule and potential for resistance.

⁸⁴⁵ *Zemhret Yohannes, 'iṭalyawi mägza'ati 'ab 'ertra: 1882-1941 (Italian Colonialism in Eritrea: 1882-1941)*, cit. p. 212.

⁸⁴⁶ According to Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, RDC, Asmara. 13/12/1941. Gasparini on his meeting with the ‘Ad-Tämaryam on 10th of March 1924 declared different from that of ‘Ad-Täkles that the payment of *Mädəhanit* and other dues to be limited to the *capo sotto frazione* only relieved the Təgrä from paying to their immediate lord.

⁸⁴⁷ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 243.

frazione could take one cow and one goat for milk annually from each Təgrä that owned more than 24 cows and 100 goats. As a privilege for the clan chief, he could take milk cows and goats from every Təgrä family that satisfies the consumption of the living male members in his family.⁸⁴⁸

Every Təgrä was obligated to provide “hospitality” to his “*capo sotto frazione*” “*capo frazione*” and “*capo tribù*” when they came to the camps as part of their tour for revenue collection or other purposes. With the approval of the *Commisario*, the chief could collect donation from his Təgrä families as an assistance to wed his son or daughter. The Italians also made reforms on the duty of the Təgrä to provide with milk twice a day as hospitality to his lord. In this part, the amendment reduced only the time/days of stay of the lord in his Təgrä camp as a guest.⁸⁴⁹ The other reform was that; when the Təgrä slaughtered any animal, he must offer the tongue and the haunch to his Bet-’Asgädä lord. A subsequent reform was introduced that ordering the tributary payments be settled in cash money rather than in kind.⁸⁵⁰ This was mainly intended to integrate the Təgrä communities in to money economy than solving their basic questions.

In spite of the above reforms that kept the traditional rights of the aristocratic class, a second new sort of taxation known as *Hidärit* (ሒደሪት) was introduced.⁸⁵¹ It was a tax collected by an agent of the government from every sell of livestock by a Təgrä. The reforms relatively standardized the duties of the Təgrä in to particular amounts of dues and services that reflected the legitimacy of the aristocratic position of the ruling class. But it failed to give the Təgrä any tangible rights; rather it was an admission for the continuation of the aristocratic relationships and a disguised recognition of the Bet-’Asgädä as the overlords of the Təgrä and ascertained its administrative necessity to the colonial government. The reform measures show that, with nominal socioeconomic changes in the Təgrä class, it politically empowered the chiefs. In strengthening this argument, ’Ibrahim Sulṭan illustrated the social hierarchy in relation to the low level of the Təgrä;

“We, the Təgrä were slaves of the slaves! We Təgrä were slaves of the Bet-

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ *Zemhret Yohannes, ’iṭalyawi mägza’ati ’ab ’ertra: 1882-1941(Italian Colonialism in Eritrea:1882-1941), cit. p. 211.*

⁸⁵⁰ Fauad Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 37-38.

⁸⁵¹ *Zemhret Yohannes, ’iṭalyawi mägza’ati ’ab ’ertra: 1882-1941(Italian Colonialism in Eritrea:1882-1941), cit. p. 205.*

'Asgädä, Bet-'Asgädä were slaves of the Šäḵəs, and the Šäḵəs themselves were slaves of the Italians. We Təgrä hold the fourth category. We never had the right to own land, but the Šumaglä of Bet-'Asgädä were the owners, so the Təgrä were underdog.”⁸⁵²

Land ownership was another area of transformation introduced by the Italians. The prior clan territories were declared as state properties (*terre demaniali*); this had ended the centuries old traditional clan ownership of the land in all areas.⁸⁵³ Encouraged by the indirect support they enjoyed from the Italians⁸⁵⁴, the Bet-'Asgädä insisted on their claim of the ownership of the land and begun threatening their Təgrä to dislodge off their land in reaction to the protest. However, like in the other provinces in the plateau, land ownership was already declared a state property. Despite the ruling, the lords seemed not recognized the reality on ground. Their assertion was mainly founded on the unwillingness to work the land by themselves, but to live only by the dues they collected from the Təgrä that cultivate and graze the land.⁸⁵⁵

Looking to some policies of the Italians, it seemed that they had the will to mitigate the burden of the Təgrä. In the case of the Ḥabab, to reduce the oppression of the Təgrä, the Italian government reduced the number of the officially known “*sotto capi frazione*” and “*capi frazione*.” This policy was aimed to diminish the number of chiefs that exploit the Təgrä subjects thus lessen the amount the Təgrä expected to pay. In the later period, the Italians so concerned of the plight, to the extent that, they took decision that disallow the “*capo frazione*” to collect government taxes. Hence, the Kántibay became the exclusive tax collector, and each taxpayer in the Ḥabab was made to forward his tribute to him.⁸⁵⁶ The measures taken by the government left the “*capi frazione*” to be almost ordinary men, without power or official task.

The Italian colonialism had expedited the Təgrä-Šumaglä conflict by creating the proper conditions that were suitable for the Təgrä resistance to a lasting emancipation.⁸⁵⁷ The modern transformations introduced by the Italians boasted the confidence and awareness of the Təgrä,

⁸⁵² Ibrahim Sultan, Interview, 1982, Cairo.

⁸⁵³ Irma Taddia, “On Some Unpublished Materials Regarding Eritrean Social History: The Trevaskis Papers in the Bodleian Library,” *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 4, No.2, 1997 (New Series), Michigan State University Press, pp 7-18.

⁸⁵⁴ According to the document; Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, RDC, Asmara. 13/12/1941. The land which the Italian government declared to be clan land i.e. not *demeniale* was regarded by the Šumaglä as owned in freehold by the individual Šumaglä.

⁸⁵⁵ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 243.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁸⁵⁷ Jordan Gebremedhin, National, *Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea*, cit. p. 50.

and the official edicts unloaded the many burdens, thus eroded the social and economic position of the lords. The final administrative measure taken by the Italians in their endeavor to restore the political influence of the economically weakened chiefs happened in 1934. Then, the colonial government began paying salary to the influential chiefs so as to transform their traditional authority into a dependable office and be in charge of the subjects. The fascist government gave deaf ears to the plight and demands of the Təgrä, and until it was defeated, the condition was with no possibility for any essentially additional reform.⁸⁵⁸ However, despite the reform dilemma, it was not detrimental relative to the consciousness and aspiration of the Təgrä, and thanks to the modern techniques introduced, the new job opportunities available including militarization and reform declarations by the Italians, the Təgrä were looking for their freedom so closer. Therefore, the late 1930s was a time line in the history of the Təgrä that had increased the optimism towards freedom and can be considered as a turning point for their denial and protest in the succeeding British Military Administration.

Unable to attain their freedom and get rid of the customary dues and services, the Təgrä were not appeased by the so far achieved fundamental reforms. Despite the struggles of the Təgrä throughout the Italian period, they were not destined for complete emancipation but conferred with some changes. As a result, during the defeat of the Italians, the Təgrä were still with the vestiges of obligations to pay tax to the lord from every sell of the livestock, and payments during marriage, funeral ceremonies, commemoration of the dead, feasts, harvest etc.⁸⁵⁹ Hence, in the entire years of Italian period, the livelihood of the Təgrä was still not changed greatly, thus continued their resistance. It is reasonable to conclude with the statement by Zemhret Yohannes on the role of Italian colonialism in relation to the aristocratic order in the lowlands and northern highlands of Eritrea. It was apparent that, social changes occurred that might down the ruling class irreversibly.⁸⁶⁰ Though the Italians introduced socioeconomic reforms mainly to sustain their interests, the effects were not intended to bring affirmative results in the society, that were undesired in the eyes of the Italians. But the reforms had increasingly wrinkled the ruling class' economic and then political bases together with their outmoded system and determined into an unavoidable class death.⁸⁶¹ Therefore, even if the system could not

⁸⁵⁸ Fauad Makki, *Subaltern Agency*, cit. pp. 37-38.

⁸⁵⁹ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale*, cit. p. 70.

⁸⁶⁰ Zemhret Yohannes, *'iṭalyawi mägzaṭi 'ab 'ertra: 1882-1941 (Italian Colonialism in Eritrea: 1882-1941)*, cit. p. 215.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

decline during the Italian period, but developments indicated that the inevitable collapse was on the way.

Historically, the Italian colonial period is considered as the founding period of modern Eritrea. Hence, the era was a time when the society with cultural, economic and historical diversity made to have a common identity and colonial experience. Therefore, the Italian period was a watershed in the history of Eritrea but due to the political and security problems in the last eight decades, the role of Italians is not well studied. In this regard Prof. Uldelul Chelati stated that, the Italian colonial period in Eritrea is not well studied, hence he recommended for;

“...an in-depth and articulated analysis of the real impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean societies and to what extent it has been able to effectively change their power structures, social relations, labor organization, local identities etc. in other words, we still need to break down the impact of Italian colonialism on rural, nomadic and semi-nomadic populations and the even further, along ethnic, religious and gender lines.”⁸⁶²

As we have seen above, particularly during the Italian colonial period we found similar scenarios in the aristocratic system of the northern highlands. The Italian colonial administration as the first strong state experience in Eritrea, the aristocratic system was found to be administratively convenient for the colonial administration. The lords served as representatives to the colonial administration as tax collectors and colonial agents in extracting conscripts and administration of justice, hence the Italians were not interested to introduce any fundamental changes that destroying the system and emancipate the Təgrä. Therefore, the Italians were relatively intervened the most than the preceding forces and had a transformational effect that deeply affected the aristocratic order. This much Italian involvement was fundamentally important to the Təgrä that; allowed the freedom of movement, relatively mitigated the burden, and likewise gave hope for further possibilities of lessening or freedom obligation.

⁸⁶² Uoldelul Chelati Dirar. “Trespassing Boundaries, The challenges for Eritrean historiography.” in *Themes in modern African history and culture*, ed. Irma Taddia and Lars Berge (Padua:Libreriauniversitaria.it, 2013), 243-256.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BRITISH MILITARY ADMINISTRATION AND THE FALL OF BET-'ASGÄDÄ ARISTOCRACY

Introduction

During the Italian period, the colonial capitalist intervention had revised the existing traditional socioeconomic fabrics of the society. The three decades of the twentieth century (1900s to 1930s) witnessed the growing consciousness of the Təgrä on the possible solutions to their centuries' of subjection, consequently sharpened their confrontation against the class.⁸⁶³ As a reflection of that phenomenon, some fundamental transitions were registered in the relationships of the Təgrä and Šumaglā. These changes were the outcomes of either reforms declared by the government or acquired by the Təgrä through evolutionary process thanks to their involvement in the various opportunities provided by the Colonial Government that essentially transformed their social base. But, viewing the cumulative effect of the capitalist transformations registered and declarations conducted towards the aristocratic order during the 60 years of Italian colonial rule had considerably mitigated the burden on the Təgrä subjects.

In an attempt to solve such challenge, in mid 1930s the Italians substituted the office of the chiefs with a salaried colonial position. However, in 1941 the Italians lost the WW II and Britain occupied Eritrea as a caretaker until the end of the war and further decision by the international community. The new authority suspended the salaried office and the struggle of the Təgrä for their emancipation resumed anew to yield the desired target within that decade. In this final chapter; the fierce refusal of the Təgrä to pay the customary dues, the serious resistance by individual Təgrä leaders toward their freedom, the unsuccessful attempts by the aristocratic class to retain their position through different means, and the administrative role of the British Military Administration in the emancipation process will be the main body of discussion. Due to their geographic proximity to the town of Kärän, their agrarian economy, and the most capitalist exposed society of the Bet-'Asgädä, the 'Ad-Täkles Təgrä were relatively the most conscious,

⁸⁶³ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. p. 50.

and their struggle was crucial than any other clans. Therefore, for better understanding the scope of this chapter will be concentrated on that clan.

7.1. The Early days of British Period

On 10th of June 1940, Italy joined Germany and declared war on the allied forces. As a result its forces in Eritrea attacked the British army in the Sudan, and after fierce battle particularly in Kärän, the British forces under the command of General, later Sir William Platt entered Asmara on April 1, 1941. Tired of the racial policies of fascist government, the Eritrean people cheerfully welcomed the British forces.⁸⁶⁴ Despite the small scale of the war, it had created uncertainties and human sufferings. Asmara and other major towns were swamped by civilians and deserted Italian soldiers and Eritrean villages were flooded by starved, hopeless and armed Eritrean soldiers that were dispersed from the disintegrated *Africa Orientale Italiana* into their respective home towns. As the Italian civil authority collapsed, dire shortage of supplies ensued and for the occupying power it was early to install a civilian administration, thus the danger of general disorder and food crisis were eclipsing the country.⁸⁶⁵ As in any other African colonial experience, the Italian colonial government favored the highlands for its agricultural interests than the pastoral communities in the lowland; hence relatively the highland society was more studied and intervened than the pastoral lowlanders.⁸⁶⁶ The influence of Italian capital in Eritrea was not uniformly distributed. It differed from region to region and the western lowlands and the northern highlands were heavily influenced as the highlands do.⁸⁶⁷ Hence, considering the concentration of towns and industries in the highland and the natural dependence of the highlanders on these elements, in the post war era the economic crisis in the lowlands was not comparable to that of the highland.

At the early days of British occupation, most Italians were deluded by the fascist propaganda and assumed the victory as a temporary. Many Eritreans too believed the Italians would win the war and were still loyal to the Italians; hence the British had problems of winning over the Eritreans to its cause.⁸⁶⁸ In the first year of the British Military Administration, the duty of the Civil Affairs Office looked as if it was not easy, because the Italians had left numerous

⁸⁶⁴ Interview, Ibrahim Sultan, 1982, Cairo.

⁸⁶⁵ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition*, cit. p. 18.

⁸⁶⁶ Taddia Irma, *On Some Unpublished Materials*, cit. pp. 7-18.

⁸⁶⁷ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Nationalism, Peasant Politics*, cit. p. 64.

⁸⁶⁸ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. pp. 18-19

unsettled disputes, some of which pending for years and the frequent denial by the litigants to acknowledge the rulings as final worsened the task.⁸⁶⁹ The British Governors commanded little knowledge of Eritrean custom, however their rulings were final.⁸⁷⁰ Therefore the rejection of the rulings through such procedure was logical. But, gradually the attitude of the Eritrean people improved, consequently the trouble of the office decreased greatly. On the other hand, the policy effects, transformation of traditional power bases and territorial alterations that took place under the Italian period brought alarming effects on the Eritreans. For this reason, the disadvantaged were anticipating the change for; justice to be served and grudges be revenged. So, in no time the British Administration was overwhelmed with fundamental requests. Trevaskis described the situation in the following terms: the administration was busy with; “petitions demanding the recovery of land, the reversal of judgment, the deposition or punishment of chiefs and officials. In a few cases Eritreans took the law into their own hands.”⁸⁷¹

The defeat of the Italians that upheld the aristocratic system intact had prompted the Təgrä to push their struggle for emancipation.⁸⁷² Therefore, the issue of emancipation of the Təgrä of Bet-’Asgädä was part of the petitions presented in the early days of the British Military Administration. For example, in December 1941 the Senior Political Officer of Kärän Division reported that, during his visit to Rora Ḥabab, he was encountered by over 40 Təgrä cultivators protesting against the exaction of the Bet-’Asgädä and against the demands of the Kāntibay for the payment of one suck of barley per plot as “Magasa.” He faced by over 80 Təgrä of ‘Ad-Täkles in ‘Anəsäba protesting against exaction of the “Magasa” to the Nazər of the clan and other dues from the cultivation and cattle they owned. Many of the 80 Təgrä were threatened for eviction if they denied paying the dues.⁸⁷³ But more than the dues on the cattle, the land dispute was the burning issue that was left unsettled by the Italians and continued to be so in the B.MA.

Technically and legally the British Administration’s authority was emanated from the international laws that mandating to administer the enemy occupied territory until the war ended. The authority was a temporary in nature and its duration depends on the results of the war and

⁸⁶⁹ Stephen H. Longrigg, *British Military Administration in Eritrea*; Annual Report by the Chief Administrator on the British Military Administration of Eritrea, Report V. (January to December 1943), Asmara, 1943, pp. 29-30

⁸⁷⁰ John Markakis, *National and class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 6

⁸⁷¹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. p. 19.

⁸⁷² Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 69.

⁸⁷³ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/12/1941, RDC.

the subsequent peace treaties.⁸⁷⁴ In relation to the petitions and demands presented from the Eritrean people, the British were legally not authorized to introduce any change as they were restricted by the Hague Convention of 1907. The convention prevented the occupying force of war time to alter the existing institutions and laws, except in cases of military importance, humanity, and conscience.⁸⁷⁵ In addition to the constraints of The Hague Convention, the difficulty of enrolling sufficient British staff and a range of political sensitivities made it difficult for any fundamental changes.⁸⁷⁶ Trevaskis described the role of the B.M.A in Eritrea that; “*Eritrea was not a British Colony. We were caretakers and our job was to hand it over as we had found it. Nothing more, nothing less.*”⁸⁷⁷ An administrative convenience was one of the rationales for the British to introduce some measures. Accordingly, in the early days of occupation, the British launched amendments on the policy and practices of the Italians that disputed the values they fought for.⁸⁷⁸

The Italian administrative personnel overseeing the Eritrean affairs were the main impediment for any reform because joining hands on reform was against their interests. This was because the Italians were in privileged position, serving as commissioners and governors in the new British administration.⁸⁷⁹ Trevaskis also praised the British for having groundbreaking effects in Eritrea and criticized the Italians for lack of care in their subjects. During the fifty years of rule, the Italian district governors were very distant from the Eritreans and only few conducted frequent touring of their realms or had very little understanding of Eritrean tradition and ways of living.⁸⁸⁰ It is not logical to wholly adopt the assessment given by Trevaskis. Given he was British officer, it was not expected to provide the Italian heritage in an affirmative terms. The British had upheld the existing tradition that empowered chiefs and notables with traditional ranks and honor that enabled the administration to revive the old custom that was greatly valued by the people.⁸⁸¹ Trevaskis’ critics of the Italian Administrative faults also shared by Longrigg,

⁸⁷⁴ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. p. 24

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 29

⁸⁷⁷ G.k.k Trevaskis, *The Deluge: A Personal View of the End of Empire*, cit. p. 144.

⁸⁷⁸ Trevaskis in his work; *Eritrea, A Colony in Transition*, page 30 justified for the changes that needed in urgency. The first major was posed by the Racial Law of the fascists and a body of supplementary legislations created to implement racial segregation, that award social and economic privileges on Italian citizens, and steadily uphold the principle of ‘white superiority’. Therefore, there was every justification for the immediate termination of this offensive law.

⁸⁷⁹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. pp. 29-30.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁸¹ Stephen H. Longrigg, *British Military Administration, Eritrea: Annual Report*, cit. pp. 29-30.

during the B.M.A; “meetings of chiefs were held in all divisions. This means of consulting the chiefs and inviting their views, neglected in Italian times, has given good results: the chiefs are more conscious of their responsibilities, and the Administration is kept informed about native opinion.”⁸⁸² To prove his accusation, Trevaskis disclosed that; less than a dozen of Italian officers were able to study any Eritrean dialect.⁸⁸³ And he supplemented his apparently biased assertion that in the new administration things were to the reverse of the predecessors.⁸⁸⁴

7.2. The Renewed Struggle of the Təgrä

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the undisturbed and peaceful condition of the Təgrä and Šumaglā relationship was suddenly troubled with the coming of the Italian colonial government that introduced fresh thoughts. The Italians retained and vested power to the Šumaglā to collect government taxes, serve as judges and regents representing the government. They exercised power on their domains. Like in the old times, still it was out of question for the Təgrä to talk and argue equivalent to the lord and the worst scenario was the duties performed by the Təgrä like fetching wood and water, packing camels for the transportation service of the lord etc. were still performed. In a nutshell, the Təgrä were not a free beings especially the burden and the core of the revolt against the Šumaglā was severe in the ‘Ad-Täkles, Bet-’Asgädä.⁸⁸⁵ The struggle by the Təgrä of ‘Ad-Täkles became a model to the remaining Təgrä in other aristocratic clans of the western lowlands. As we shall see below, the cumulative effect of the Italian period increased the awareness of the Təgrä. The new ideas and material transformations helped them to contemplate the sufferings they experienced for long, and realized that the Bet-’Asgädä lords were unfairly oppressive.⁸⁸⁶

With particular emphasis on the ‘Ad-Täkles, the maturity of the ‘Ad-Täkles consciousness resulted not only by the weight of the payments and services they incur, but also due to their contact with the outside world like service in the Italian army, police and other work

⁸⁸² Ibid.

⁸⁸³ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. p. 32.

⁸⁸⁴ Trevaskis’ claim that undermined the Italians for failure to pay frequent tours to their districts and grasp the knowledge of the culture and laws of the society through ethnographic or sociological study seemed so unfounded. As far as to my knowledge, the Italians for whatever reason or motive have written a number of books on ethnography, culture, laws and other aspects of the society. With regard to the knowledge of the local dialects, I never heard of any British officer that could understand or speak any of the local languages.

⁸⁸⁵ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 70

⁸⁸⁶ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 164.

areas that opened their eyes to witness the existence of societies with less oppression.⁸⁸⁷ They also compared themselves with those Təgrä of immediate neighboring aristocratic clans of Bilen, Marya and Mänsa‘ə. In these three clans, the chiefs and nobles were generous to their subjects because they cultivate extensively and own numerous livestock. To the contrary, lords of the Three Mäfläs were mostly poorer and dependents of their Təgrä.⁸⁸⁸ They also discovered that the Šumaglā of these adjacent clans were less oppressive and their power over their respective Təgrä was dwindling from time to time, thus such observation induced them to think of liberty and the desire of breaking the customary chains and attain once freedom.⁸⁸⁹ To this end, the Təgrä of Ḥabab and ‘Ad-Täkles submitted their complaints to the new government in December 1941 explained above. The governor ruled the dues be nullified and illegal, but maintained their political office steady. The outcome of the decision had dire effect to the Šumaglā in general and the Kántibay in particular.

According to the interpretation of the Deputy Legal Adviser of the Administration, the land in dispute belongs, according to the Italian law in force in Eritrea, to the native community and not to the State, in accordance with native custom. Native custom, actually vested the land in the Šumaglā, who, in turn, granted rights of user to the subservient tenants in, ‘Ad-Täkles, ‘Ad-Tämaryam, etc. These rights of user, again according to native custom, involved certain vassalage, namely the payment of the aristocratic dues set forth in 1/1 on the file and confirmed by Governor’s Decree of 16.3.1908 for the ‘Ad-Tämaryam and by Decree of 24.3.1924 for the ‘Ad-Täkles. However, the recognition of the aristocratic dues might be a matter of administrative order by the C.A. with the advice and approval of the Governor. Therefore, considering this later legal background the B.M.A. was struggling to solve the issue as below.

Firstly it was not well known if the reforms introduced by Dr. Gasparini (mentioned in previous chapter), that recognized certain feudal dues was implemented accordingly, but Brigadier Kennedy Cooke, the Military Administrator of Eritrea had endorsed the ruling by the Legal Department and made decision on the nature of the Proclamations by Dr. Gasparini. In his letter written on 13th of January 1942 in response to the request by G.K.K. Trevaskis, Civil Affairs Officer in Kärän Division, the Military Administrator based on the ruling of the Legal Department confirmed that, the nature of the reforms was entirely administrative, so had no the

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 244.

⁸⁸⁸ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, pp. 11-12.

⁸⁸⁹ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 164.

force of legal enactment.⁸⁹⁰ This gives free hand to the officers to implement any solution they deem. Practically the suggestion was that all the dues were declared illegitimate and the clan lands became government lands. Major Lee, the Political Officer in Kärän on 2nd of February 1942 personally visited the 'Ad-Täkles and notified them that the Military Administration had declined to recognize the Šumaglā to collect dues as legal entities and the ownership of all the land was conferred to the government.⁸⁹¹ Both parties; the Šumaglā and Təgrā misunderstood the main message of his wording and were not happy of the declaration. Consequently, before the cultivation period, the 'Ad-Täkles threatened to drive out from the land all the Təgrā who refused to pay the dues. As a result conflict erupted between the two groups and one Šumaglā was killed, and the B.M.A took immediate action that ordering the Šumaglā not to evict any Təgrā from the land who had previously cultivated.⁸⁹² That summer, the Təgrā cultivated the land without any interruption from the Šumaglā and the Təgrā refused to pay the dues, and the Šumaglā insisted in their petition to the B.M.A. for the retention of their rights, but with no avail. Certainly, the ruling by Major Lea was temporary solution, and both parties misconstrued it and interpreted it in a way that served their interest and continued their opposing claims, so Major Lea forwarded the case to the Civil Affairs office for final verdict.

The three possible solutions proposed by G.K.K Trevaskis were; one, full implementation of Major Lea's decision that the land belongs to the Government and to nobody else; two, acknowledging the land belongs to the Təgrā by right of their use of it, and three, due to the right of ownership over it for many years, recognize the land belongs to the Šumaglā. Trevaskis, considering the B.M.A. was not there for social revolution preferred the third option that recognized the Šumaglā ownership of the land, but with the following conditions; One, The collection of all aristocratic dues other than land rentals is illegal unless provided voluntarily by the Təgrā to his lord.⁸⁹³ Two, the B.M.A. recognized those owners of the land prior to the British occupation in their ownership and no change of individual ownership would be made except by a competent authority based on legal decision. Three, the a quarter of the produce would be

⁸⁹⁰ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/01/1942, Ref.No.66/B/33, RDC.

⁸⁹¹ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/01/1942, RDC. In this archive G.K.K. Trevaskis reported on the dispute between the Šumaglā and Təgrā of the 'Ad-Täkles.

⁸⁹² Ibid.

⁸⁹³ In a letter to S.C.A.C., Keren, file No. 260/KE, 9 June 1943, Brigadier Longrigg added that the social relationship between the two classes in the clan may therefore be rightly regarded as a private matter in which the administration will not interfere.

collected by the land owner as a rental from the tenant. Four, for the period of the British Occupation this decision would be final and lasting.⁸⁹⁴

Trevaskis hoped that such resolution would satisfy both parties; for the Təgrä would receive protection from expulsion, forced exaction and other old dues, and the Šumaglā in their part would secure to receive rental of the land. Brigadier Kennedy Cooke reminded Trevaskis that the Dr. Gasparini's proclamation had no legal enforcement, thus it allowed them to be flexible for any practical action. He consented with what Trevaskis proposed and suggested him to cautiously continue implementing what he projected. The Chief Administrator reminded Trevaskis that the government wanted neither dissolve the clan structure immediately nor get involve into difficulty with the tribute system. Brigadier Kennedy Cooke let the Division Officers free to take a better remedy, and warn them not to take any general order that abolish all these dues a stroke of the pen.⁸⁹⁵ He also urged the officers to emphasize the Təgrä that, in return for the abolition of the dues, the government expects their strict obedience to the sheikhs and payment of the tribute without delay.⁸⁹⁶ The declaration and ruling was upheld by Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, the new Chief Administrator. This decision was to be effective for the duration of the B.M.A or for shorter period as it may desire, and any breach of the ruling would subjected to proper penalties. As the expectation of the governors, the Təgrä protested the decision and wrote petition by 22 persons urging for reconsideration. Trevaskis in his 2nd of July letter to the Chief Administrator mentioned Moḥamād Ḥamid Tagä as the leading figure of the Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles.

The Kāntibay, already weakened by power struggle with his cousins, lost all his revenue from the Təgrä and was unable to sustain his customary responsibilities of hospitality and short of ordering camels for his transport purposes.⁸⁹⁷ The biggest problem with in the economy of the Bet-'Asgädä was that because the Šumaglā were mostly poor in animals, except some employed in the government works, hence the dues they collected from the Təgrä represents their chief source of living.⁸⁹⁸ The British officer also expressed his pessimism that without the customary dues, the Nazərs and Šäkəs would not satisfactorily carryout their duties with the little payment

⁸⁹⁴ This point was reformed by Nadel to be in use for one year, and to introduce changes based on circumstances.

⁸⁹⁵ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/01/1942, Ref.No.66/B/33, RDC.

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁷ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 244.

⁸⁹⁸ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/12/1941, RDC.

from the government. Therefore, the weakening and the subsequent decline of the privileged class was not only the pressure coming from the subjects, but the determinant factor was from within the ruling class themselves. Economically, they failed to be productive and self sufficient, hence their dependence was no more tolerable by the Təgrä. Politically, they were on continuous power struggle between families and individuals that deteriorated their power and control. Technically they were unable to accommodate the results of modernization brought through the colonial intervention that increased awareness and desires of their subjects. The decadent ruling class seemed not to stand the strong Təgrä resistance. Therefore, the refusal of the Təgrä and the signs of consequent dissolution of the aristocratic vestiges had begun in early months of the British period.

In his report, a Senior Political Officer of Kärän Division associated the Abyssinian war and the Italian-British war effects on the Təgrä with that of the Hundred Years War effects on the British peasants.⁸⁹⁹ In both cases the war weakened the aristocracy and mitigated the burdens on the peasants. The coming of the British Military Administration in Eritrea with its relatively liberal principles and craving promises opened a new hope for the Təgrä to continue their struggle and assert their freedom. However, in dismissal of the above belief and as part of the alleged opposing claims of the two sides of the aristocracy my informants; Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Osman, Näsrädin, Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman, Moḥamädsə'id Ḥaməd etc. from the 'Ad-Täkles Šumaglā that I interviewed in Kärän strongly rejected the existence of neither exploitation of the Təgrä by the Šumaglā nor any struggle for emancipation initiated by the Təgrä themselves. They labeled it as a colonial project of dividing the people by sowing mutual animosity through defamation and weakening of the Šumaglā.⁹⁰⁰ But despite the rejection of the above informants, the Təgrä were under strict physical control characterized by mutual interdependence and semi contractual relationships, and it was their endeavor to get rid of that association. The existing literature be it written by local or foreign writers and the oral stories affirmed the existence of the subject-lord relationship, and resistance for emancipation.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁰ Interview, Ğa'əfär Saləh 'Osman, Näsrädin, Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman et al., 14/11/2021, Kärän. They also insisted that, the Təgrä had well enough living condition with justice secured and protection guaranteed. But the dispute of the 1940, particularly Ğa'əfär argued that it was the British conspiracy. They claimed, rather the Šumaglā of Bet-'Asgädä were providing services to the Təgrä more valuable than they received from their Təgrä mentioned in chapter four. Ğa'əfär disdained of the available documents as colonial products written by colonial officers and governors with shallow knowledge of the ground and far from the truth and holds a conspiratorial mission to divide the people. Therefore, to reconstruct the truth history and past of the Bet-'Asgädä, it must be studied by locals with local languages.

As a matter of historical coincidence, the moment the Təgrä of ‘Ad-Täkles got awakened of their situation and aspire for freedom was at a time when the ruling class was engulfed by two domestic developments. The first was when the Šumaglā set off to harden their management over the Təgrä for more exploitation than before. At that time, thanks to the decades long of ‘Ad-Šäkə’s offer of protection as an alternative masters⁹⁰¹ had attracted considerable proportion of the Bet-’Asgädä Təgrä, and the coming of Italians also encouraged the Təgrä to look for alternative livelihood outside of the ruling class’ control. As a result the demographic and economic status of the Šumaglā versus their Təgrä was significantly altered. Demographically looking to the situation, because many of the Təgrä left the Bet-’Asgädä and joined to other less demanding lords, particularly to ‘Ad-Šäkə, the proportion of Təgrä- Šumaglā was already changed.⁹⁰² The remaining Təgrä were obliged to feed and serve the growing number of Šumaglā which was quite not easy. Hence, economically both classes in general and the lords in particular were in dire and declining condition.

The second historical coincidence was that the Təgrä protest occurred when the ‘Ad-Täkles were in crisis of power struggle for chieftainship. The wrangling was between three dignitary families of Moḥamäd Näsrädin, Gälaydos ’Ezaz and Moḥamäd ’Edris ’Ukud, the son of an ex-Šum.⁹⁰³ In 1942, the young Moḥamäd ’Edris ’Ukud succeeded his deceased father, ’Edris Hummed ’Ukud. From the very beginning in office, the new Šumə faced challenges from two fronts; the two aspiring leaders⁹⁰⁴ together with their supporters and the violent protest of the Təgrä. At that time, the Təgrä- Šumaglā dispute reached its violent stage, where one Šumaglā was killed and many others wounded that fueled the protest. It was also a time when the Təgrä for the convenience of their struggle and declaration of freedom, appointed ‘Ali Tuluk as their leader, a Šum.⁹⁰⁵ At that particular juncture, for Moḥamäd ’Edris ’Ukud, the new Šum of ‘Ad-Täkles, the biggest concern was undermining the threats coming from ‘Ali Tuluk and his Təgrä followers than his cousins that contending for power.

At that moment a similar scenario had happened in their cousins, the Ḥabab. Not only for

⁹⁰¹ Big number of the Bet-’Asgädä Təgrä transferred to ‘Ad-Šäkə for two purposes; for religious ends and hoping for less oppression than their previous lords.

⁹⁰² G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, p. 164. This document failed to demonstrate its claims with statistical proves. However, I considered it as a convincing element because during that time, seeking protection under the religious family was fashion of the day. Therefore, the movement of the Təgrä and the subsequent demographic imbalance between the two classes was possible.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., 161-162.

⁹⁰⁴ The two aspiring leaders were from two families of former Nazirs that were deposed by the Italian government.

⁹⁰⁵ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, p. 18.

power struggle, but for many reasons the clan had been troubled by the open discrepancy between Kāntibay ‘Osman Hədəd and his eldest son, the possible successor, Hədəd. The Kāntibay was very old and was in power since 1895. But, despite his age, he was so intelligent, a fierce despot, an unpopular character that caused him to lose the reputation from the larger part of the clan. Because he had no trust on his cohorts, he made the seasonal trip from Mābə’a (ጠብኣ) to Māduryāt (ጠዱርዖት) by himself. The journey takes four days of travel twice a year leaving in May and back in November. So he never ever delegated authority to anyone in the clan. Even as the members of his clan were scattered from the Šə‘əb (ሸዕብ) in the east to Kārān and up to Kassala and Tokar in the west, laboring in the cotton fields, everyone was supposed to pay tax to the Kāntibay by himself.⁹⁰⁶ As the quarrel between the Kāntibay and his son was not settled, in September 1941, Bimbashi Maxwel-Darling, a British officer attempted to reconcile them, but not successful. Another reconciliation effort was made by Šākə Moḥamād ‘Amār of the ‘Ad-Šākə on his way back from the Sudan; he stayed at Mābə’a and resolved their differences, but seemed only temporary settlement.⁹⁰⁷ Therefore, during the early period of the British period, the Bet-’Asgädä in general and the ‘Ad-Täkles in particular were troubling internally in addition to the groundbreaking protests from their Təgrä.

Once the disavowal by the Təgrä of ‘Ad-Täkles was declared, in no time the feeling was ignited among Təgrä of other aristocratic clans to become so revolutionary in the history of the country. It soon became a fundamental unifying factor to the society already divided against itself by feuds and other conflicting interests. A genuine and holistic union of all subjected Təgrä throughout the western lowlands and northern highlands surfaced. Tired of paying tributes to their lords, the Nara of Gašə Sätit and the Təgrä of Semhar resented the domination of the Naybs and the Nabtabs joined their hands to collaborate with the revolting Təgrä of Bet-’Asgädä.⁹⁰⁸ Highly conscious of their situation and still unsatisfied by the mitigating measures taken during the Italian period, the Təgrä considered the new administration as relatively better in respecting rights and upholding humane values, thus put hopes for complete emancipation. The new British Military Administration thus was welcomed by the Təgrä with continuous campaign of petitions demanding for an end of the system and formation of new Təgrä clans out of the liberated

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁹⁰⁷ British Military Administration (Eritrea), *Ethnographical: Population, Races and Tribes of Keren*, pp. 11-12.

⁹⁰⁸ G.K.K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea; A colony in transition: 1941-52*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960, in Jordan Gebremedhin’s, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*, New Jersey, The Red Sea Press, INC. 1989, p. 66.

families. Following the incessant requests by the Təgrä, the Administration pronounced its stand on the issue of the Təgrä- Šumaglā relationship. The senior political officer, Major Lea, notified the crowd of public assembly of the ‘Ad-Täkles that his administration did not acknowledge the customary rights of the Šumaglā and would not give any official support for its implementation or the payment.⁹⁰⁹ Owing to the sympathy on the Təgrä’s plight, the British Military Administration approved the Šumaglā’s political power and ordered the Təgrä not to pay the dues to the lord unless it was on their will.⁹¹⁰ The decision that stressed to deprive the chiefs and Šumaglā of their customary rights was a strike that uprooted the foundations of the aristocratic order and the authority associated with it. The contradictory ruling by the administration indirectly encouraged the Təgrä to resume their denial; as a result it jeopardized the Šumaglā rights of collecting dues. Such incomplete declaration was not an acceptable solution to the Təgrä that expected for total emancipation from the centuries old custom. The class based exploitation was imprinted in their blood and became part of the culture. From this time on, the then Kärän division immersed into one of colossal class based struggles for emancipation in the history of community. As a matter of fact, preserving their political power while deprived of their customary economic sources, technically the lords were damned to be a line without teeth, powerless.

Reviewing the above decision, it seemed that the administration had already let the two contestant groups to fight each other and solve their problems themselves. In reaction to the defiance of the Təgrä to pay the customary dues and services, the Šumaglā felt at risk of their privileged position, thus immediately took a retaliatory action. They debarred the Təgrä from the right to cultivate their land so long as they would not pay the customary dues. The heightened tension overwhelmed the district, the climax of such friction led for an open fight that killed a man from the ‘Ad-Täkles, at a place called Gudlät.⁹¹¹ The state of affairs was threatening the stability, and possibly would erupt into a lasting anarchy and the land would leave barren at least for that summer. To stop such possibility, the administration intervened and reaffirmed its policy

⁹⁰⁹ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 164.

⁹¹⁰ G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition: 1941-52*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960, in Gebremedhin Jordan, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*, New Jersey, The Red Sea Press, INC. 1989, p. 71.

⁹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165. According to this document, the death of this unnamed person happened in 1942 at a place called Gudlät (ጉድለት). However, in the literature particularly in *Aynfelale* (let not separated) by Alemseged Tesfay, there was only one killing of ‘Ad-Täkles man by his Təgrä in 1943 at a place called Šälim Dängäl (ጸሊም ደንገል). Therefore, it creates a problem in identifying the truth, but it seemed that the death accident had happened once as explained by Alemseged Tesfay, which is well known event that will be discussed below in detail.

that prohibited the Šumaglā from ejecting the Təgrā off their land, and warned them that the transgression of the statute would cause for harsh penalty.

The year 1942 ended without any other confrontations that upset the peace and stability of the division. But by the end of the year, the Bet-ʿAsgädä as an excuse for their attempt to restore the old privileges conducted census, which was not supposed to be their authority. During the tour of survey, the Bet-ʿAsgädä ordered their right of hospitality from the Təgrā camps they visited. Expectedly, the Təgrā annoyed and rejected the requirements of their lords and rebelled under the guidance of their new but capable Šum ʿAli Tuluk. The Šum intentionally directed his followers to hinder the census and completely disregard the legitimacy of the Šum of ʿAd-Täkles.⁹¹² However, the Təgrā studied the scenario and concluded that such activities would endanger the liberties they achieved so far, hence the census was conducted without any further conflict. This and the subsequent developments indicated that, until the aspiration of the Təgrā was not fulfilled, the future of ʿAd-Täkles would be one of conflict if not bloody.⁹¹³

Unfortunately for the Bet-ʿAsgädä lords, their privileges were gone. The Təgrā have already experienced the *de facto* freedom and working hard towards their official emancipation.⁹¹⁴ The ban put on the Bet-ʿAsgädä from enjoying their traditional honor and benefits have left the ruling class in general and the chiefs in particular with no tangible influence and power. They were isolated with no hope of regaining obedience from their Təgrā and the Šum was no more the arbitrator for any disagreements among the Təgrā. Disputes among the Təgrā were forwarded to the Təgrā leaders for settlement. Šum ʿAli Tuluk carefully supervised the initial stage of the Təgrā organization into autonomous bodies, the manifestation of a milestone achievement. Though the Təgrā reached this level of freedom, but needed the legal recognition of their emancipation from the government.⁹¹⁵ Attempting to revoke the hitherto attained victory either by the British Administration or the Bet-ʿAsgädä themselves would be for no avail, but if any, the outcome would be uncontrollable social revolution with detrimental consequences throughout the lowlands of the country. Therefore, making the emancipation officially recognized by the administration took much energy and sacrifice particularly by the leading individuals in the urban areas that representing the Təgrā clans. The denial and protest of

⁹¹² G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrean History Collections of the Different Tribes Nations*, cit. p. 165.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

⁹¹⁴ Ibid.

⁹¹⁵ Ibid.

the Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles will be presented as part of the narration for the contribution of the individual Təgrä leaders below.

7.3. The Role of Individual Personalities

As Silverman David advised that; “any book which sets out to offer information and advice about doing a piece of research without telling a few personal ‘stories’ would be in danger of being received as empty and unhelpful.”⁹¹⁶ In any social movement, individual roles are vital in providing leadership and guidance. Likewise, during the Təgrä struggle for emancipation, there were individual figures that played key role in guiding the movement. The determined to free their people from the ensuing burden and in process imprisoned and exiled for the common cause. Therefore, during the Təgrä struggle for emancipation, there were resolute personalities that ready themselves to die for the liberty of their communities. Such personalities as a result won dwelling in the memory of their society. Here is the unfolding of individual stories that deserved consideration for their contribution in the emancipation process;

7.3.1. Moḥamäd Ḥamid Tagä

As discussed earlier, due to the Italian support for the continuation of the aristocratic system, the sporadic struggle for the liberation of the Təgrä had registered only initial successes and good lessons. Ḥamid Tagä, from 'Agdub clan of the 'Almäda clan played the spearhead role of the Təgrä resistance since Italian period. Some years back, together with his friends, Ḥamid Tagä involved in the movement that troubled the 'Ad-Täkles. Moḥamäd 'Edris 'Ukud, the Šum of 'Ad-Täkles recalled that Ḥamid Tagä was saved from exile to 'Asäb by the Italian Colonial Government only due to the intervention of his father, the late Šum.⁹¹⁷ In 1943, with the agitation of Ḥamid Tagä and his colleagues, from the Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles completely refused to pay the one quarter of their crop to the Šumaglä that they were ordered by the Chief Administrator. Trevaskis reported that, Ḥamid Tagä had considerable influence on the other Təgrä clans, so possibly he would persuade them to refuse the payment of the dues ordered by the Chief Administrator.⁹¹⁸ As a result, the Šum of 'Ad-Täkles confirmed the governor that four of the

⁹¹⁶ Silverman David, *Doing Qualitative Research* (London: SAGA Publication, Fourth Edition, 2013), p. 17.

⁹¹⁷ Native Administration Dispute General, Ad Sheikh-Ad Caih Dispute, Report on Ad Tekles and Shumagelle-Tigre dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke/2, Acc. No, 10959, RDC.

⁹¹⁸ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, Land Dispute, (Shumagelle V. Tigre: Ad Teklies), No/K/66/B/6, 2nd July 1943, RDC.

seven Ḥəsäts/sub clans (‘Ad Našəḥ, ‘Ad Nurädin, ‘Ad-Tämaryam, and ‘Ad ‘Elos) under his rule had refused to pay the quarter of the crop, and the remaining three had not openly refused but yet not paid their part. This was an absolute denial to obey the Chief Administrator’s order, thus a legal offense. On 25th of October 1943 in the presence of the Šum Moḥamäd ‘Edris ‘Ukud of ‘Ad-Täkles, the following protesters; Ḥamid Tagä, ‘Abdäla ‘Ibrahim, ‘Ali ‘Omär, ‘Abubakär Moḥamäd, Moḥamäd Ḥumäd, ‘Omär ‘Ali, ‘Ali Moḥamäd and two others⁹¹⁹ came to the office of civil Affairs officer of Kärän Division in representation of the Təgrä masses.⁹²⁰

As Wäkil/ representative of the team, Ḥamid Tagä said that; “all the Təgrä has immediately refused to accept the announcement of the Civil Affairs to pay land dues to the Šumaglä.” In other occasion he repeated the same message to G.K.K. Trevaskis in person and declared that; “he preferred to be exiled to ‘Aäsäb for prison than to pay a one grain of durra to the Šumaglä.” All the men, openly showed that they would not respect the order of the C.A. and do not recognized the Šumaglä had any right on the lands cultivated by the Təgrä and avowed that any threat of coercive measures would not change their mind. Particularly, Ḥamid Tagä expressed his determination to face any circumstances of punishment the government could give him but would not agree to pay any to the ‘Ad-Täkles and affirmed that he and his team would continue to agitate all the Təgrä to negate the dues in union.

Frustrated of their stand, the officer urged his senior, the Chief Administrator with the recommendation of prosecuting all members of the team for going against his ruling and to confine them at least for one year until the potential danger was avoided, and Ḥamid Tagä be sent to ‘Asäb for indefinite period of time.⁹²¹ Ḥamid Tagä had already been warned that his conduct might have serious consequence. Colonel S.F Nadel, the Chief Secretary and Brigadier Longrigg, Chief Administrator approved the request of the Officer/ Trevaskis to take any steps to warn him specifically⁹²² with sufficient evidence and give order to leave the district under proclamation 10 of 1943.⁹²³ As Ḥamid Tagä persisted in his agitating acts, on 9th of November 1943, Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg issued a letter of prison order based on article 2 of the

⁹¹⁹ Moḥamäd ‘Edris and ‘Ibrahim Suleman were members of the team that came to Kärän together but did not appear to the meeting.

⁹²⁰ Native Administration Dispute General, Ad Sheikh-Ad Caih Dispute, Report on Ad-Tekles and Shumagelle-Tigre dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke/2, Acc. no, 10959, no. BMA/K/66.B.6, 29 October 1943, RDC.

⁹²¹ Ibid

⁹²² Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE, 4 August 1943, RDC.

⁹²³ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE, 5 August 1943, RDC.

Compulsory Change of Residence Proclamation No. 10 of 1943. The verdict was ordering the convict to reside within the township of 'Asäb until the Administrator ordered otherwise. In the letter Ḥamid Tagä was reminded to live according to Article 3 of the proclamation that makes it an offense for leaving the town of 'Asäb without any written permission. Once he arrived in 'Asäb by the ship known as "General Platt," Ḥamid Tagä was no longer under police detention, but was supposed to live loyal to the terms of the orders of the Chief Administrator.⁹²⁴

7.3.2. Ḥamid Tagä and the Ḥəsät Chiefs

The BMA declared the customary dues be a private matter, on voluntary basis of the Təgrä in which the administration would not have any intervention, and the land dues payable to the Ṣumaglā was fixed not to be more than a quarter of the agricultural products. The ruling was to be functional for one year only, but would be revised based on the circumstances. In materializing the ruling, the S.C.A.O. succeeded partially, still many of the Təgrä refused to pay. In opposition of the ruling, many Təgrä ringleaders attempted to mobilize their followers to oppose the payment in different means, consequently faced imprisonments. It was reported that on a letter of 19th, January 1944, the following Təgrä notables; Moḥamäd Nur Moḥamäd 'Abdälä, Moḥamäd Suleman 'Edris Nur, 'Isma'el Sicap, Moḥamäd 'Adäm 'Abdälä and Ḥamid Sä'id 'Osman were accused of offending Proclamation 4/43 over a considerable period.⁹²⁵ Four of them were from Kärän and one was from Massawa Division. They were accused of having been collecting sheep, goats, durra and money from Təgrä of the 'Ad-Ṣäḳə and Ḥabab clans in order to further the 'Asgädä cause.

Previously, already four of 'Ad-Täkles men found guilty of the same transgression and fined with money and six months of prison service.⁹²⁶ They were accused for creating problems for long time, and wasting the people's money for traveling here and there in the country stirring people to defy loyalty to the Administration by splitting the clans and organizing an autonomous clan of their own under the name of 'Asgädä.⁹²⁷ In opposition to the imprisonment and the penalty judgment on the above five persons, the Təgrä of Ḥabab and 'Ad-Ṣäḳə in union took an

⁹²⁴ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE/1, 9 November 1943, RDC.

⁹²⁵ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke Acc. No, 10957, No. BMA/K/41.B/2, 19 January 1944, RDC.

⁹²⁶ Ibid.

⁹²⁷ Ibid.

oath to decline any evidence in the court against the accused five, consequently many witnesses presented to the police and each declared he knew nothing. For lack of evidence, prosecuting them was not possible. Although, the above accusations legally were not substantiated, the charge by Charitable Gifts Proclamation was possible only if they spent the collected money extravagantly and with no accountability or if they collect in deceit, they could also be charged under the War Crimes Proclamation or agitation for disobedience.

The year 1944 begun with the refusal or long overdue by the Təgrä to pay the quarter dues of their products to the Šumaglā and this was the result of the inspiration by the severely punished ringleaders. As mentioned elsewhere, by the end of January 1944 only four Həsäts settled their payment out of seven that forming the clan of ‘Ad-Täkles. It seemed that forcing the Təgrä to pay the dues even using police force was impossible because doing so would tempt their trust to the leaders and possible disorder. As a convincing mechanism, the influential Islamic leader, Sayad Bakri el Morgani was sent to these three Həsäts to persuade them to be abided by the rules of the Chief Administrator. The attempt by Sayad Bakri el Morgani was a failure.⁹²⁸ The moment he arrived in the area, the people went up to the mountain rather than stay and meet him. This act was purely disrespect for such honorable person. He stayed there for eight days and communicated with many people but they too declared that, they would follow the majority. The only tangible thing he brought with him was the name list of 30 men who were agitating the others not to pay. The justification provided by the Təgrä for not paying was the word of Major Lea and Captain Trevaskis that initially they told them they would not to pay the Šumaglā.⁹²⁹ If that attempt proved a failure, the officers were preparing to apply the Article 186 of the *Ordinamento di Polizia* that allowed to seizing their cattle and camels so as to force them to obey the administrative order.⁹³⁰ Later, considering the Nazir of ‘Ad-Täkles’ report stating the clan resumed collection on 1st February 1944, the Article 186 of the *Ordinamento di Polizia* was not implemented.⁹³¹

A group of another four people who represent the Təgrä of ‘Ad-Täkles petitioned and

⁹²⁸ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE, No. BMA/K/66.B.6. 9th February 1944, RDC. (Ad Teklies Disbedience).

⁹²⁹ The proclamation by Major Lea has been only for provisional purpose and not a lasting order and was reformed by succeeding decrees that ordering the Təgrä to pay ¼ of their products and left the customary dues to be on voluntary basis.

⁹³⁰ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke Acc. No, 10957, No. BMA/K/66.B.6, 23 January 1944, RDC.

⁹³¹ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE, No. BMA/K/66.B.6, 11 February 1944, RDC. (Təgrä-Šumaglā dispute).

collected contributions from various members of Təgrä Bet-ʿAsgädä to fund the court expenses. The men were Ḥamid Moḥamäd Ḥäsäbälä, ʿEdris ʿOmär ʿIsa, ʿAbdälä ʿIbrahim Ḥamid and ʿAli Tuluk Suleman. They were charged by Proclamation No. 4 of 1943 of many offenses; for contravening parts of the money and for not producing a permit of the collection for charitable purpose, lack of accounts and for using the money for their personal advantage and comfort, for not obeying the final verdict of the Chief Administrator etc.⁹³² On 29th of January, 1944, Stephen Longrigg, Chief Administrator, based on the Compulsory Change of Residence Proclamation No. 10 of 1943, ordered the convicts to reside within the township of ʿAsäb until he ordered otherwise. The proclamation limited their stay only in the town of ʿAsäb and leaving the town without a written permission was to be considered an offense.

The A/Senior Civil Affairs Officer at ʿAsäb reported that the five ʿAd-Täkles exiles were in desperate condition for logistics. As the B.M.A. did not furnish them any provision, the Muslim communities of the town temporarily feed the prisoners.⁹³³ The attempt to cover the maintenance of those exiles from their families back home was not successful, but later the S.C.A.O. of Massawa during his visit to ʿAsäb observed their situation and reported to the Chief Administrator and somewhat solved their problems. While their condition was understandably not good, the S.C.A.O. of Kärän was insisting that until the disputes at home were not settled, it was not recommended the exiles to return home. To the worst, the S.C.A.O. stressed with strong words that, the report of the S.C.A.O. of Massawa was not customary, so even if they suffered from lack of provision, they were not sent to ʿAsäb to lead an easy life.⁹³⁴

The S.C.A.O. of ʿAsäb and Massawa had reservations on the banishment. They criticized the ruling unjustifiable, because the administration considered offense for their party in a land dispute. So banishing them to the coastal and volcanic hot stormy region was unfair and urged the Chief Administrator and the S.C.A.O. of Kärän to re-examine their decision and allow returning to their homes. Especially the ʿAsäb Officer insisted for their return, because through time people would consider them as patriots and if they died as martyrs.⁹³⁵ In reaction, the

⁹³² Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke Acc. No, 10957, No. BMA/3976, 26 January 1944, RDC.

⁹³³ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No.3/G., RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles at Assab), 28th February 1944.

⁹³⁴ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No.BMA/K/66.B.6., RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles at Assab), 5th April 1944.

⁹³⁵ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No.5/G. urgent, RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles, Assab ex Keren), 14th May 1944.

S.C.A.O. of Kärän had strong conviction that they were banished for having been ringleaders of a movement that agitating the Təgrä for nonpayment of a quarter dues to the Šumaglā, and they round to collect illegal money from the poor and squandered it on food and drink, so bringing them back before the seasonal payment has been made would be imprudent and would destroy the people's respect on the S.C.A.O. and the Administration in general.⁹³⁶ After six months of exile, the administration decided the release of the banished 'Ad-Täkles Təgrä ringleaders on June 16, 1944. In their letter, after their return back home, they promised to behave peaceful and consented that they would face serious consequences if they infringe their assurances in the following terms;

⁹³⁶ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No.BMA/K/66.B.6., RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles, Assab ex Keren), 5th June 1944.

(Made in accordance with the Chief Secretary's wire No. 885I dated the 16 June 1944.)

ASSAB.

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Keren Exiles.

1. Mohamed Hamid Taghe, Ad Takles.
2. Abdalla Ibrahim, Ad Takles.
3. Ali Tulug, Ad Takles.
4. Hamad Humed, Ad Takles.
5. Idris Omer, Ad Takles.

DECLARATION.

We, the undersigned, hereby solemnly declare that we shall henceforth be of good behaviour, and we shall strictly observe all advice, orders, directions and instructions given to us by the duly-appointed representatives of the British Military Administration:

We, the undersigned, further solemnly declare that after our return to our homes in the district of Keren, Eritrea, we shall exercise every possible effort to live in peace and harmony with our fellow tribesmen and clansmen, and that, in the event of the occurrence of disputes of any kind or sort, we hereby agree to have such disputes settled by arbitration, and we agree to accept unconditionally all and any decisions given by any Board of Arbitrators appointed by the S.C.A.O. of our home district of Keren:

Moreover, we solemnly hereby undertake freely and irrevocably to surrender all our possessions to the British Military Administration in the event of our failure to honour the promises made hereabove.

1. *v.i.e. R.T.P. of Mohd. Hamid Taghe*

2. *v.i.e. Abdalla Ibrahim*

3. *v.i.e. Ali Tulug*

4. *v.i.e. R.T.P. of Hamad Humed*

5. *v.i.e. R.T.P. of Idris Omer*

Signed in my presence, the contents having been read and explained to the five Keren natives who have consented to my satisfaction that they have each separately understood, this 19th day of June, 1944 at Assab.

(Signature)
 Major S.C.A.O., Assab.
ASSAB

I hereby certify that I have this day interpreted the contents of the above Declaration to the five Keren natives, whose names are given above, and who have indicated that they have understood.

Assab, 19th of June, 1944.

(Signature)

Doc. 7.1 Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Šumaglä- Təgrä dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957.

The release of the exiles was materialized because of the settlement of the dispute through reconciliation; as a result the Təgrä signed an agreement of disbursement for the past harvest and the future years. The assessors committee was already established by the Administration and its work was to investigate the litigation presented by the Šumaglā onto the Təgrä for the payments they denied to settle. The Šumaglā presented 988 claims that filed against the Təgrä that refused to pay. The committee accompanied by 30 armed mounted policemen under 1st Sergeant and 5 armed *banda* went to Habäro Ša‘əda (ሃበሮ ጻዕዳ) on the 22nd of June 1944 to hear the filed claims and the next two days, 23-24 of June they met with both parties. With a great deal of pressure the Təgrä elders as spokesmen agreed on the following conditions;⁹³⁷

The representatives of the Təgrä consented to pay the Šumaglā the required quarter of the crops harvested of the past and the future. They officially admitted the Šumaglā ownership of the land. They also declared that even though last year there was no harvest, they agreed to offer for each field two measures of durra to show their good faith; one measure for the Šumaglā and one for the government and for the coming harvest, they shall pay the Šumaglā a quarter of their product. The declaration was signed by the representatives of every Təgrä family of ‘Ad-Tämaryam, ‘Ad-’Elos, ‘Ad-Ḥaršə and ‘Ad-Gimi Ḥsäts. The payment of the equivalent of two measures of durra at a value of EA Shgs 1.20 per measure was initiated right away.⁹³⁸ On the 27th of June, the working group moved to Qar‘obäl (ቃርዖበል) and the next day the agreement was reached from ‘Ad-Näsrädin and ‘Ad-Drar clans and a preliminary collection was conducted. The Šumaglā on their part signed the following statements; they affirmed that they have accepted the declaration signed by the Təgrä and promised that they shall not evict a Təgrä from his field without a permission of the government. A week later the C.S.A.C. went there and pointed out that, because they have settled their issues peacefully, the government had kept its promise and released the prisoners who were already presented there.⁹³⁹ He also warned the community not to follow for any agitations like the previous that brought them harm. Therefore, as the agreement was accepted by both sides as valid ruling, any infringement of it would be dealt with a civil

⁹³⁷ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, RDC, (Report on the settlement of the ‘Ad-Täkles Šumaglā / Təgrä Dispute), June 1944.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ Ibid.

dispute by the court.⁹⁴⁰ However, latent agitators were there from both sides for different purposes; in the Šumaglā agitating for a change of Nazir, and in the Təgrä preaching for the ownership of the land.

Within few months of his return from 'Asäb, and before the ink of his signatory was dried, Ḥamid Tagä together with two other Təgrä ringleaders petitioned to the Chief Administrator. Their main point of claim was that, their ancestors started farming in Habäro and Qar'obäl areas during Egyptian occupation, therefore agricultural product was not part of their customary dues, but the rights of the 'Asgädä were only concerned with herds. His allegation continues that, only through time that they allowed the 'Asgädä a small amount of the product, but not a fourth of the harvest they then claimed.⁹⁴¹ They also stressed that in mid 1920s Gasparini had exempted them from the tribute of grain and other heavy burdens. In particular to the grain dues, it was initially maintained for three years and later was substituted with cash 1.50 Lire and finally due to their protest was abolished under the Regional *Commissario Della Croce*.⁹⁴²

The main argument of the Təgrä 'Ad-Täkles was an opposition to the continuation of the ownership of the land in the hands of the Šumaglā. It was against the tendency of the Təgrä to have a settled agricultural life and pushing them to continue a nomadic life. Besides they assumed it was against the gift of nature, because the land is essential for the nomadic herdsmen as well as to the lords for it was source of all production. Additionally, the Italian Government Decree of *Ordinamento Fondiari* of 1926 proclaimed the territories of the *Bassopiano Orientale* and *Occidentale* to be Government land; therefore it was no more ownership of the Bet-'Asgädä and accordingly article 8 of the decree orders every clan was made to pay the cultivation tax fixed by and to the Italian Government in lire 1.50 per quintal.⁹⁴³ As the Təgrä were not agreed up on it, the negotiation was signed with coercive measures, as a result the quarter of the cultivation dues were collected by force of arms from their final harvest. In reaction, the ringleaders led by Ḥamid Tagä once again wrote 20 pages of detailed petition letter with their thumbprint addressing to the C.A. demanding to reconsider his decision. A renewed version of

⁹⁴⁰ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No.260/KE/1., RDC, (Ad Teklies Shumagelle/Tigre Dispute), 30 September 1944.

⁹⁴¹ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, RDC, (To H.E. Brigadier C. D'Arcy McCarthy O.B.E. Chief Administrator-Eritrea, Asmara), 22 February 1945.

⁹⁴² Ibid.

⁹⁴³ Ibid., p 17.

the appeal was again presented to the Chief Administrator again on 31st of March 1945.⁹⁴⁴ The points of argument were mainly demanding for an equal treatment with other clans including; 'Ad-Šäḵə, Bet-Ma'əla, Rašayda, Šawra etc. These clans that cultivate and graze in the Bet-'Asgädä territories that later declare *demeniale* and, yet they were not paying dues to the clan, but only to the government.⁹⁴⁵ Therefore, they stipulated for an equal treatment and enjoyment of the land like the other clans.

According to G. Tod, the Senior Civil Affairs Officer of Kärän Division, the Təgrä encouraged and advised by Lidonne, an Italian lawyer in Kärän, they vowed to decline the payment of a quarter of their product to the Šumaglä at the meeting held on 30th April, 1945 at Šädäm (ሸደም), 'Ansäba River. As evidence G. Tod forwarded the document written by the lawyer to his seniors. It was full of failings including; unsigned, unstamped letter and lacks the address of the lawyer that wrote it. Similarly, the last petition presented in March 1945, addressing to the Chief Administrator too had problems. The police investigation proved that, two of the thumbprint of the petitioners were found to belong to other people than the petitioners.⁹⁴⁶ During the meeting at Šädäm, G. Tod discovered that Mohammed Ḥamid Tagä, Moḥamäd 'Ali Suleman and 'Edris Fayd were the driving forces of the refusal and protest of the Təgrä. The first was the greatest agitator and was seen in Asmara visiting Quirolo⁹⁴⁷ for advice and discovered that he had the plan to set up an autonomous Təgrä clan to which himself to be the chief.⁹⁴⁸ As we have seen above, previously he has been exiled to 'Asäb, but despite his signature and promise for behaving peaceful and readiness for reconciliation, he got back to his old game. The second man was much younger than Ḥamid Tagä, but his energetic and aggressive character was the most attracting the Təgrä followers. His disrespect to the government was considered by the Təgrä as strength of reasoning and his speech was the most convincing element. To the enthusiasm of the Təgrä, he demanded the 'Asgädä lands be the

⁹⁴⁴ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, RDC, (To the Chief Secretary, B.M.A., Eritrea, Asmara.), 31 March 1945.

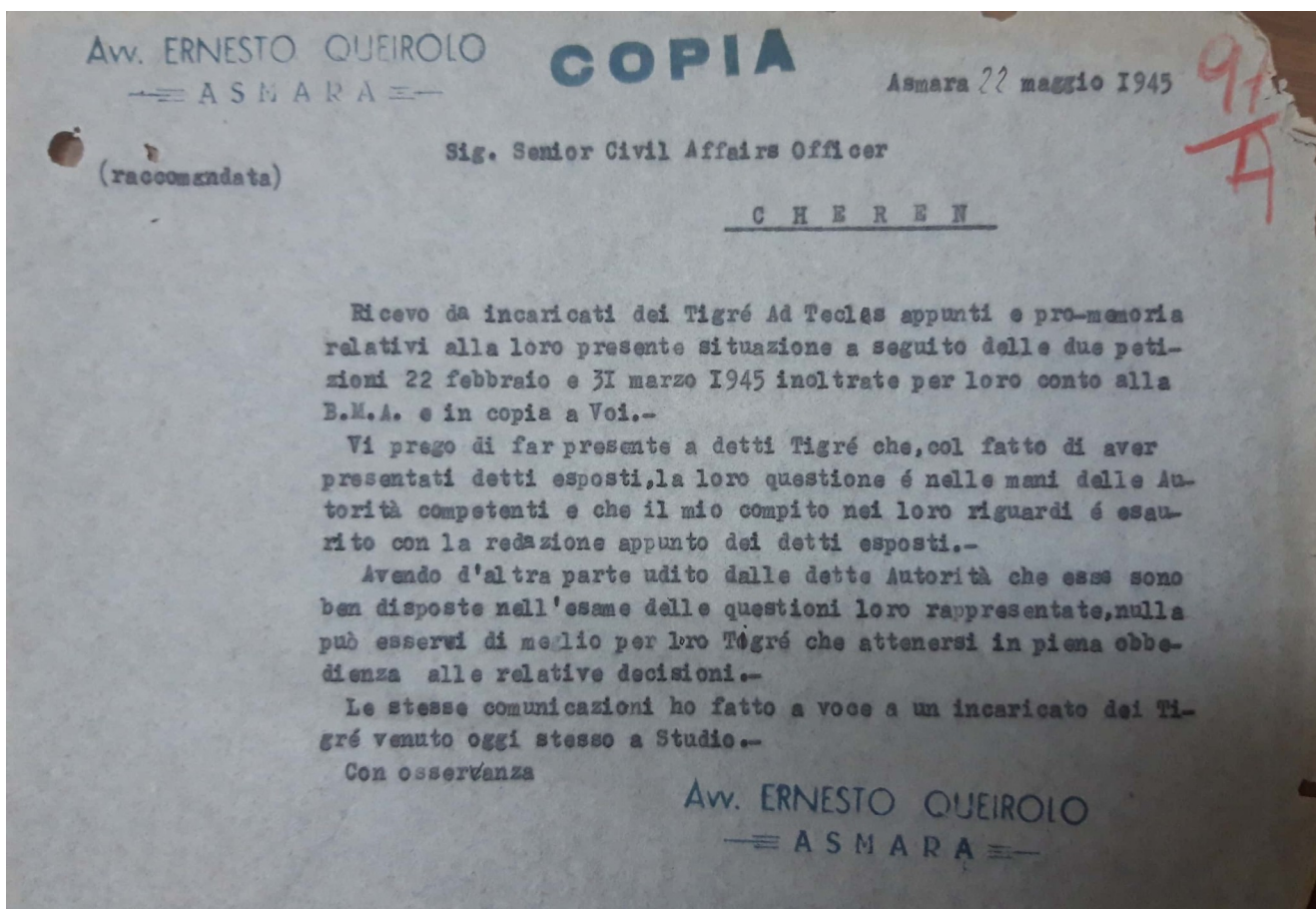
⁹⁴⁵ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, 260/KE/1, 31 March 1945, RDC.

⁹⁴⁶ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, K.66.B.6/58, RDC, (Ad Teklies Tribe-Tigre/Shumagelle Dispute), 16th May 1945.

⁹⁴⁷ Quirolo was an Italian lawyer used to sympathize and support the Təgrä through, writing petitions, advice and encourage in their protests. He was interviewed and reprimanded by the police in Asmara for his activities and he promised to write his Təgrä clients that he had detached himself from that case. He was also warned that, if he involved himself in the issue he would be held responsible.

⁹⁴⁸ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, K.66.B.6/60, RDC, (Tigre/Shumagelle Dispute –Ad Teklies), 17 May 1945.

ownership of the Təgrä. Such delicate issues fascinated the Təgrä to follow him blindly, praised and assumed him as a chief. 'Edris Fayd was a herdsman, in his middle age. He was rhetoric and stressed more on the ownership of the land and vowed that not a measure of harvest would be given to the Šumaglā. Later, he was known for actively and constantly agitating the Təgrä against the aristocratic lords and the unfairness of payment of the land.⁹⁴⁹



Doc. 7.2. Queirolo's letter of assurance not to continue his support to the Təgrä protestors. This was written in response to the reprimand by the Senior Civil Affairs Officer, Keren.

Source: Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Šumaglā- Təgrä dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957.

Considered the activities of these three people as the core of the Təgrä protest, Major G. Tod expressed his fear that, as long as they were allowed to continue their activities, any peaceful solution would be impossible. Owing to the previous warnings given by himself and the C.A.O. of Kärän, if they continue their trouble making, he suggested the C.A. either to send them to

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid

‘Asäb or jail them somewhere.⁹⁵⁰ Finally Chief Administrator based on Article 2 of the compulsory change of residence Proclamation No.10 of 1943 (as amended by Proclamation No.20 of 1944), that authorize the C.A. to employ whenever he felt it was an expedient for reasons of public order, he declared his ruling that the three Təgrä leaders as of 20th of July be banished to ‘Asäb. The limit for their exile was to be until he ordered their release. In this case, as usual they had warnings not to leave the town without a written permission, and the disobey of this order would lead to liable for imprisonment not more than one year and a fine not exceeding 2000 E.A. Shs. or both.⁹⁵¹

From the correspondences of letters, it seemed that there was no consensus of officers on the decision of the change of residence punishment by the C.A. for the three ‘Ad-Täkles Təgrä leaders. For example, Major Trevaskis, the Political Secretary on his letter of 8th November, 1945 enunciated that he was shocked by the contents of the prison order letter of the C.A. and criticized it as a morally unjustifiable, inhumane and a sign of administrative weakness.⁹⁵² He further argued that, the B.M.A. as a Provisional Administration should understand and sympathize, the social and political questions for emancipation by the Təgrä as long as they do not create any lawlessness or political disobedience. He called the Administration to be open for criticism and sending these people from relatively cool area to the hottest Danakil coast was almost equivalent to persecution. Pacifying the troubling individuals in such means was in principle an indication of administrative flaw. He bitterly criticized the C.A. that for getting away from administrative difficulties applying; deportation, illegal imprisonment etc. was not a sign of potency or wisdom. He finally suggested that, such cases should have been solved through utilizing legal or administrative machinery that were at the hands of the government.⁹⁵³

On 19th of November 1945, the C.A.O of Kärän had arranged to visit the ‘Ad-Täkles and Bet Ğuk territories with special mission to make sure if the payment of the Təgrä dues to the Šumaglā was performed according to the ruling.⁹⁵⁴ The report of which was essential for the C.A. to decide on the status ‘Ad-Täkles exiles. A report from Major G. Tod, the S.C.A.O confirmed

⁹⁵⁰ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, K.66.B.6/60, RDC, (Tigre/Shumagelle Dispute –Ad Teklies), 17 May 1945.

⁹⁵¹ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, No. 260/KE/I, RDC, (Ad Teklies Dispute), 23 June 1945.

⁹⁵² Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, File No. 260/KE/1, RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles in Assab), 8 November 1945.

⁹⁵³ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁴ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, File No. K/66.B.6/83, RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles), 17 November 1945.

that the 'Ad-Täkles situation found to be satisfactory.⁹⁵⁵ The Šumaglā were plowing the land side by side with the Təgrä and the latter were paying dues without complains. According to the report, the relative peace was as a result of the removal of the three protest leaders, the reconciliatory role of Šäḵə Ḥasän Moḥamäd 'Abdäl 'Aziz, and the damage by locusts and the subsequent hunger.⁹⁵⁶ Major G. Tod provided detailed information of the situation of 'Ad-Täkles that; the payment of the dues of the season went efficiently, the lesser Šumaglā were getting poorer and initiated cultivating their land and willing to sell extra land. To the contrary, the Təgrä were not eager to buy the land as they insisted that it belonged to them.⁹⁵⁷ Therefore, he suggested that the administration was better to encourage the Təgrä to buy land and promise them that they would not pay dues to the Šumaglā for the land they own. With regard to the exiles of 'Asäb, the frequent broke of assurances given by the people not to follow the footsteps of the ringleaders became a culture since Italian period. Therefore, he recommended that they better stay there, because if they came, the so far achieved stability would be disturbed. However, if the Administration decided to get them back, he would suggest and agree for the return of Moḥamäd 'Ali Suleman and 'Edris Fayəd at the first rains of 1946. Then it would be the farming season, so they would not have time to agitate their people.

In relation to Ḥamid Tagä, due to his most undesirable and dangerous character, his coming would seriously jeopardize the constructive work done by the administration, hence the S.C.A.O. recommended his release be after the settlement of the payment of the year 1946.⁹⁵⁸ The suggestions of the S.C.A.O initially encountered opposition from various officers of the administration on legal and moral grounds. Their points of arguments were that the Təgrä cause had not reached any bloodshed or widespread disturbance, and the deportation was never allowed in the British Dependency unless it caused grave disturbance, thus all supported the release of the exiles after harvest around September or October of 1946. On 15th of June 1946, the three 'Ad-Täkles exiles sent an application letter to the Chief Administrator of Eritrea for his

⁹⁵⁵ Native Administration Dispute General Keren, Shumagelle-Tigre dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke, Acc. No, 10957, File No. K/66.B.6/85, RDC, (Ad Teklies Exiles), 17 December 1945.

⁹⁵⁶ Šäḵə Ḥasän was from the 'Ad Drqe of Massawa, considered a holy man. On his way to visit his father's tomb in the 'Ad-Täkles territory, he heard of the conflict between the Təgrä and Šumaglā of 'Ad-Täkles and reconciled them.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid

mercy;⁹⁵⁹



Doc. 7.3. A letter of mercy by the three Təgrä exiles in 'Asäb. Source: Native Administration Disputes General Keren, Šumaglā- Təgrä dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke/1, Acc. No, 10958, RDC.

The acting Chief Secretary on 24th of October 1946 sent a letter to the S.C.A.O. of 'Asäb. His letter enclosed an order by the C.A. that revoked the imprisonment, and ordered the release of the three exiles. The letter additionally demanded the returnees to sign and be fully aware that should they misbehave in the future, they will be once again deported from their residence.⁹⁶⁰

⁹⁵⁹ Disputes General Keren, Box 82, File No. 260/KE/1, Acc. No. 10958, "A Tramite C.A.O. Assab, Domanda di Grazia," Assab 15th June, 1946, RDC.

⁹⁶⁰ Disputes General Keren, Box 82, File No. 260/KE/1, Acc. No. 10958, File No. 260/KE/1, "Assab Exiles," Asmara, 24th October 1946, RDC.

7.3.3. Ḥumād Šəntub and 'Ibrahim Sulṭan

The 1943 emerged with an accident that seemed to have been waiting to happen. The incident involved the death of the lord had heightened the conflict and revolutionized the Təgrä cause. It occurred as follows; a Təgrä ⁹⁶¹ of 'Ad-Nurädin⁹⁶² of 'Ad-Täkles known by the name Ḥumād Šəntub (ሐሙድ ሸንጡብ) from the Rugbat clan happened to be a cause to the death of his lord. The accident occurred as follows; while Ḥumād Šəntub was plowing a plot of land that he inherited from his father at a place called Şälim Dängäl (ጸሊም ደንገል), his lord appeared and ordered to leave the land for he doesn't settled the dues of Mätälämi (ሙተለሚ).⁹⁶³ Šəntub replied that he would not leave the land that he cultivated for long and further expanded by clearing the woods, and told his lord that he doesn't know him in relation to the ownership of the land. The Šumaglā so irritated and threaten Šəntub to await him there the next day, if he was man of his word.⁹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the next day, Šəntub got sick and was in poor health, so his neighboring farmers from Rugbat, 'Almäda, Dob'at and 'Aglumba were plowing his plot collectively. It was then that the grudge exploded to inflict the homicide. While the Təgrä were plowing, the lord came along with other Šumaglā armed with knife and swords and attempted to disband the pairs of oxen. The diseased Šəntub arrived into the field to see the farmers so could not tolerate the act of his lord while interrupting the tillage and then threw a rock; unluckily broke his lord's leg and the Təgrä peasants grabbed the arms of the accompanying Šumaglā. The seriously wounded lord was taken to hospital, but died shortly and Šəntub was taken to prison.⁹⁶⁵

The British administration adjudged on Šəntub to pay the life compensation and three years of prison service. Initially, Šəntub refused to pay, but later with the entreaty of the elders of his village accepted the verdict and have been sent to 'Adi-K^wala (ዓዲ ኸላ) detention center to

⁹⁶¹ Moḥamädsə'id Ḥamd stated that the Təgrä was from 'Awäläräym (ዓወለረይም) areas of Rugbat clan close relative to 'Ibrahim Sulṭan.

⁹⁶² Näsrädin Moḥamād negated the literature on the issue of Šəntub and highlighted that it was an ordinary event and in the community it is considered as an ordinary conflict. The 'Ad Nurädin, mentioned by Alemseged as the name of the deceased clan was wrong, because by then the 'Ad Nurädin were not there and Gäbres, the dead lord was of 'Ad-Tämaryam wäd Gälaydos, a sub clan of the 'Ad-Täkles.

⁹⁶³ Moḥamädsə'id Ḥamd and Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman both provided a different narrative of the event as follows; Šəntub was plowing the field of his lord on the first day and the next day was plowing his own plot. While plowing the latter, the lord came and ordered to plow his land, but Šəntub defied to the order and the fighting erupted that led for the death of the lord.

⁹⁶⁴ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p 73.

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid.

complete the prison term.⁹⁶⁶ However, the snowball effect of the incident as a cause for subsequent conflict was not the killing of the lord, but the amount and valuation of the compensation. Traditionally, the life of a Təgrä was not valued as equivalent to the Šumaglā, but half of it. Therefore, in settlement of the compensation the Šumaglā demanded double the amount of price paid to a Təgrä i.e. 100 camels or their equivalent. Such price was basically the demand of the Kāntibay of Ḥabab,⁹⁶⁷ senior and influential figure of the Bet-ʿAsgädä chiefs and the issue got complicated when it was supported by Dəgläl of Bāni-ʿAmär, Šum of Marya Šālam, Šum of Marya Qäyḥ and Nayb of Sāmhar.⁹⁶⁸ On the Təgrä side, they denied disbursing the amount required by the Šumaglā and insisted on equal pay like the usual price of the Təgrä and all the Təgrä clans were on the side of Šntub.⁹⁶⁹ Hence, the incident that was supposed to be settled according to the custom heightened the tension in a perverted manner.

Ğaʿəfär Saḥəl ʿOmär criticized the above narration and claimed that, according to the custom the Ḥabab in general and the ʿAd-Täkles in particular never received any blood compensation from their Təgrä and had no intention for compensation. But, when Kāntibay ʿOsman of Ḥabab intervened in the issue, he proposed the Təgrä to pay the value of two Təgrä souls. ʿAd-Täkles lords tried to handle the issue wisely because Gäbräyäs was around 70 years old and the incident of striking on a leg with a stone doesn't normally lead in to death, so they considered the death as the destiny of the man on God's will. Even to avoid any revenge on the Ad-Šntub clan by the youngsters of ʿAd-Täkles, Šum Moḥmud Šäḳə of ʿAd-Täkles moved the killer's clan from Dängäl, where they lived to Gäbgäb (ገብገብ), but there was no intention of committing any vengeance as it was considered as a natural death.⁹⁷⁰ In my opinion, this narration though might have facts, but as Ğaʿəfär Saḥəl is from the Šumaglā ʿAd-Täkles, it needs cautious consideration for subjectivity. The dispute persisted and invited hands of learned and acquainted people of Təgrä background in the urban areas, particularly from Kärän. These individuals advised Šntub to insist firmly on his stand and advocated for his individual rights and the whole Təgrä class.⁹⁷¹ Eritreans employed under Italian Colonial Government as laborers, soldiers, and clerks that later joined their clans played a significant role in mobilizing the rural

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

⁹⁶⁷ In such homicidal cases the Kāntibay of Ḥabab play his leading role on behalf of the other two clans of Bet-ʿAsgädä. This shows that the prominence of the authority in the ʿAd-Ḥabab was influential and well respected.

⁹⁶⁸ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 74.

⁹⁶⁹ Interview, Moḥamädsəʿid Ḥamd, 10/09/2021, ʿAsmāra.

⁹⁷⁰ Interview, Ğaʿəfär Saləḥ ʿOsman, 14/11/2021, Kärän.

⁹⁷¹ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 74.

communities towards the class and political struggles of the 1940s.⁹⁷² Šākə 'Ibrahim Sulṭan was one of the advocates of the Təgrä later to emerge as the principal figure of the Təgrä movement and party politics of the 1940s. He involved himself in the case of Šnṭub, advocated for equal pay of compensation price. The British administration's attempt to press Šnṭub to accept the ruling ended with no success, and then they elongated his prison term.⁹⁷³

Taking the incident as a good excuse, almost all Təgrä of the aristocratic clans rose united and expressed their support for Šnṭub and denied to pay *Mägäsa* and *Mätälämi* in unison.⁹⁷⁴ In this way the struggle once solely limited against Bet-'Asgädä lords spread to the Bāni-'Amär areas of Barka after the settlement of conflict between the clans along the border, and to other aristocratic clans. The united resistance took a wider form to depose the oppressive system and it was the result of the highest desire to end the centuries of exploitation. The move was followed and supported by the majority of the Təgrä speaking population.⁹⁷⁵ The unity and shared common suffering and feeling of oneness among the Təgrä subjects in their struggle resembled a 'nation' and could be exemplified with the Benedict Anderson's tenet of 'Imagined Communities'⁹⁷⁶ which share bonds of solidarity and horizontal comradeship where serfs of different lords from different tribes involved the sense of mutual empathy and unity in action by all to get rid of the aged šumaglā bondage. Taking all the developments into consideration, therefore, Ḥumäd Šnṭub's case was an igniting click to the amassed hunger of the Təgrä for emancipation, than the homicide that caused the confrontation.⁹⁷⁷

As usual, Ğa'əfär Saḥəl 'Omär of 'Ad-Täkles understated the case of Šnṭub, and declared that it was not unique. According to him, there were a number of similar incidents that the Təgrä killed their lords and settled with no much lasting consequences.⁹⁷⁸ But the issue of Šnṭub was

⁹⁷² Abdulkader Mohammad, *Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism*, cit. pp.1376-1408.

⁹⁷³ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 74.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁵ This proportion was 9/10 that shows the ruling class were representing only one tenth of the Təgrä speaking communities.

⁹⁷⁶ Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp 5-7.

⁹⁷⁷ In the interview of Šākə 'Ibrahim Sulṭan, there is an event where Hdad a Šumaglā of 'Ad-Tämaryam was accidentally killed by the Təgrä. After negotiations between the Kāntibay of 'Ad-Tämaryam and Sultan, the father of 'Ibrahim, the blood issue was settled through the accord reached the Təgrä to pay 63 pregnant cows and a girl for marriage. Therefore, in my opinion the Təgrä would settle the killing committed by Šnṭub through negotiation like the earlier experience. 'Ibrahim Sulṭan, the proponent of the dispute was well informed of the event so he would apply it as a model of conflict resolution, but it seemed that 'Ibrahim Sulṭan and the Təgrä were determined to use the occasion to end their goal of emancipation.

⁹⁷⁸ As explained in chapter four of the thesis the Təgrä were considered as equivalent to animals whereby if a Təgrä killed his lord, he was not required to compensate but the killer Təgrä and his descendants were given to the family

exaggerated by 'Ibrahim Sulṭan and conspired by the British aiming to weaken the supremacy of the Bet-'Asgädä.⁹⁷⁹ For long time, the issue of Šntub's compensation remained a disputing factor for it was not settled on time. In 1975, the final attempt to resolve the issue of the blood compensation was not successful. 'Ibrahim Sulṭan while he was in Khartoum called on to the Bet-'Asgädä to accept the double amount of the price as they demanded two decades back, but the Bet-'Asgädä under the leadership of Kāntibay Moḥamād 'Edris Šäḵə rejected the offer and remained unpaid to date.⁹⁸⁰

'Ibrahim Sulṭan was a leading figure in the Təgrä emancipation movement, and later advanced his role as politician representing the Təgrä in particular and Muslim section of the country in general. Hence, it is vital to review his political biography from the interview he conducted in 1982 while in exile in Cairo. It depicts his personal occurrences and helps for better understanding of the genesis of his hatred on the Šumaglā, their oppression on the Təgrä and the trajectories leading him to the ladder of politics. His life experience as a Təgrä boy appeared to show that he was born to fight for a reason. 'Ibrahim Sulṭan was born in 1916 in Kärän, from a big family of more than 13 children. He was from the Rugbat clan of the 'Almäda that used to have been Təgrä of 'Ad-Täkles. In his early childhood, he got the opportunity to study in Italian school. He graduated in grade eight, and then 'Ibrahim started working in the railway as a secretary. While working in the railway, because he squabbled with an Italian, he was fired from his job. Later he intended to go to Cairo to resume his study in al-Azhar University, which was the prestigious academic institution for the Eritrean lowlanders with Arabic education. He decided to travel to Egypt and left Kärän, descended down in the infamous Ṭnqulḥas (ጥንቁልሓስ) road driving his donkey loaded with provisions of food and water. Unluckily, his father and the Italians got the information from watching people, so his plan was interrupted and begun a new job as an Arabic interpreter at the municipality office in Kärän. But, soon was caught while talking with an Italian girl, in which during the fascist era it was forbidden for Eritrean men to chat with Italian women. Consequently, as a punishment he was reassigned to 'Aqurdät (አቕርደት) to work as an interpreter. While in 'Aqurdät he was again charged for his opinion that

of the deceased to be their servants as a compensation. This was an expression of the Šumaglā's diminution towards their Təgrä. But the case of Šntub was totally to the reverse that the lords demanded a compensation double the amount used to be paid to the Təgrä. Therefore, in the later era there must have changes of rule on the issue of blood compensation for both the Təgrä and the Šumaglā.

⁹⁷⁹ Interview, Gä'əfär Saḥəl 'Omär, 14/11/2021, Kärän.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid.

he criticized the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, as a result of a court ruling the Italians reassigned him to Təgray, northern Ethiopia. Later, they brought him back to Asmara to work as (*Capo Interprete*), an interpreter of the governor of the colony. Therefore, thanks to his education, competence and command of good Italian language he could rise to the highest rank as government employee that was possible for Eritreans.⁹⁸¹

During the British period too, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan continued in the same position, but because he was not satisfied with the salary, he opened his own legal advisor office in Kärän and later started a joint venture business of limestone factory in Täsänäy. The later enterprise was not successful and then went back to 'Asmära and became the founding member of the Chamber of Commerce (from the founding members he was the only Eritrean). It was there that in 1946 he drafted the program, a key to establish the Muslim League Party. 'Ibrahim was involved in both active movements of the time; he was one of the founding members of the “Maḥbär Fqri hagär,” (ማሕበር ፍቅረ ሃገር) Organization for the love of the nation and the leading figure in the Təgrä emancipation movement. Thus, he was serving as a bridge between the class struggle that representing the larger section of the lowland communities and the then glowing national political struggle for independence. At the same time, his leadership experience in Təgrä movement seemed to have been the main factor behind his transformation into a national political figure. He had manipulated the cause to mobilize the Təgrä in support of his national political struggle as it would affect the future of the Təgrä; the movements mutually affect each other.⁹⁸² Hence, his cumulative personal qualities made him popular and laid the foundation to play a key role in the dual; class and national struggles that put him as a very important leader of the time.⁹⁸³ The extreme desire of the Təgrä for emancipation from the bitter subjection under the Bet-'Asgädä could be imagined by recounting “a Təgrä childhood memories” of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan and his explanation for how he entered into Təgrä politics as follows;

“I began to understand about Təgrä and Šumaglā relationships from my childhood in the Italian period. From then on I hated Šnu'ə (ጽኑ'ዕ) (Šumaglā) Šäḳə, Säydna (ሰይድና) etc. I hate any form of aggression and grown up with

⁹⁸¹ Popular facts and figures ER/FC/30/40-ER/FC/31/40-44.

⁹⁸² The political atmosphere of the time made the national political movement and the Təgrä cause affect each other. The union of Eritrea with Ethiopia was certainly would have been the victory of the Šumaglā, thus the Təgrä would remain subjects as the feudal Ethiopia had allied with the Šumaglā. But if the independence of Eritrea was confirmed the Təgrä would be emancipated. Therefore, the national politics for independence and the Təgrä movement had a common future.

⁹⁸³ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. pp. 98-99.

such hatred. Therefore, as a Təgrä I had noticed and disdained them from early childhood. Because the Šumaglā (Šän 'it) (ጸጎሲት) used to insulting us, I was not happy and hate the humiliation. They affronted us with awful terms; they called us qmqm (ቅምቅም) i.e bugs. They do not consider us as humans. They used to marry our beautiful girls but they deny giving us their girls. Our lives and wealth were under their control etc. when a *Nabətab* woman gave birth, they called from their Təgrä and cut the umbilical cord in front of him/them, the hair of the new born baby was shaved in front of the Təgrä and the circumcision of the baby boy was conducted in the presence of the Təgrä. This was to declare the Təgrä was to be the servant of the new born baby... If a Təgrä wanted to wed his daughter, he required to offer Qlay (ቅለይ), a gift in money to secure the approval of his lord.....while providing offers and services, stroke by the Šumaglā was normal..... We hated this disgrace. After studying in Italian school I started to work and it was this time that I seriously be concerned with the Təgrä issues.”⁹⁸⁴

Thus such awful life experience was quite enough reason for someone with a conscience to dream for its suspension, and this compelled 'Ibrahim to determine for change. 'Ibrahim Sulṭan also claimed that, his family to have held the leadership of the Təgrä in an organized form starting from his grandfather, his father Sulṭan ⁹⁸⁵ and then himself. But it is dubious and not convincing because as mentioned in many parts of this study, the main weakness of the Təgrä was the lack and inability to have an organized social formation accompanied with legitimized leadership. Therefore, the family of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan might have had the role of guiding the Təgrä in their Rugbat clan, otherwise it is difficult to say they were leading the Təgrä as a whole and there is no mention of his family or any union of the Təgrä under a single family or leadership. In support of this, Alemseged Tesfay stated that the hatred of the Təgrä on their lords couldn't transformed into a wider political movement and this was due to the lack of organization and leadership, but the intervention and activities of British Administration had its own destructive role.⁹⁸⁶ Hence, his family's role must have been a nominal clan level influence.

'Ibrahim engaged on dual fronts; the class struggle for the Təgrä emancipation and a national politics for independence against the occupation of a threatening Imperial Ethiopia. He was capable of managing the struggle thanks to his background. He was an urban and one of the few learned Təgrä. Based on his interview, he seemed to have been a rare person with

⁹⁸⁴ Interview, Ibrahim Sultan, 1982, Cairo. The hand written script of the interview was in Təgrña.

⁹⁸⁵ As described in his interview, by profession 'Ibrahim Sulṭan was a merchant but had some form of influence in his clan.

⁹⁸⁶ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 95.

opportunities to meet with the British governors and the Šumaglā chiefs that were politically supporting union with Ethiopia. With whom he exchanged ideas in the urban areas of Kārān or Asmara on the resolution of the Təgrā issue. On this case, 'Ibrahim Sulṭān remembers an important occasion;

One day while I was working as an interpreter in the governor's office in 'Asmāra, I met with Kāntibay 'Osman of Ḥabab, Dəglāl Šākə Moḥamād of Bāni 'Amār, Šum Ḥumād 'Arāy of Marya and Cavalier Abi. I took them in my car to the house of Mohamed Ali Fkak, a man from Bet-'Asgädä. There, I told them; you all listen! Let the Təgrā sub-clans have their own chiefs and for you the title of Nazr is enough. Out of all only Kāntibay Osman of Ḥabab gave his good words, said, "It is good idea, but the remaining members of the ruling class will not accept, and the remaining dignitaries denied supporting the suggestion."⁹⁸⁷

Therefore, we can understand that, despite the violent protests at home, the leaders of both classes had sporadic but harmonious relations and discussing the issue of Təgrā cause. In assessing the British Administration on the handling of the Təgrā struggle, Alemseged criticized the administration for its negative roles. The Təgrā cause was one of the many issues that were thwarted as the result of the British policy and viewpoint.⁹⁸⁸ Beginning from the 1943, the administration through its governor Steven Longrigg alluded that the solution to the Təgrā issue needed an extensive socio-cultural studies. In this condition, the officials and researchers including Trevaskis conducted a detailed study of the social formation, geographic distribution, culture and practices of the Təgrā speaking people. The main purpose of the study was to identify the possible ways to divide and weaken the strength and authority of the Šumaglā. The bigger clans of the Šumaglā were an aggregation of small clans and sub-clans serving as an umbrella that minimize the division and diversity, and result of the study suggested to break the strong power of the Šumaglā and transfer it into the smaller and weaker clan and sub clan chiefs.⁹⁸⁹ This idea was originally of the British, acquired through the advice of knowledgeable group of Təgrā origin, 'Ibrahim Sulṭān was the core. Later on the mass of Təgrā, who had hatred on Šumaglā oppression and aspiration for liberty gradually accepted and supported the plan. In this case, for the Təgrā that demanding emancipation and reorganization under their ancient clans even in their

⁹⁸⁷ Interview, Ibrahim Sultan, 1982, Cairo.

⁹⁸⁸ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 97.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid.

smaller and weaker form was a priority, but looking the effects from the national point of view was beyond their scale of thought including to 'Ibrahim Sulṭan for he was the main actor in that formation.

To the extent Trevaskis acknowledged the role of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan for the successful accomplishment of the study; his role from generating the idea of reorganization of autonomous Təgrä clans to counting and investigating the genealogical details and identifying the clan territories was considerable.⁹⁹⁰ This shows how strong the Təgrä supported the British idea without much consideration of the consequences in the disintegration of the Təgrä unity and strength. Overwhelmed by the desire for freedom, the Təgrä show no hesitation to uphold the initiative of reconstructing the old clans again and creating new clans each with their own chiefs at the cost of weakening the Šumaglā strength and authority. 'Ibrahim together with his colleagues and the British Administration believed that the only way to end the Təgrä oppression was deposing the authority of the Šumaglā.⁹⁹¹ According to the annual report of 1943, by Stephen H. Longrigg, the British chief Administrator of Eritrea, the colony was in relative peace. Until November of 1943, in the 'Aqurdät division, the border area was disturbed by bandits that raiding villages and kidnapping travelers, consequently troubled the peace of the area. However, the most serious development was the restart of an old feud between Bäni-‘Amär and the Hadändäwa (ሃደንደዋ) of the Sudan leading to frequent raids along the border that caused for the killing of people and looting of livestock.⁹⁹² Although the conflict between the Bäni-‘Amär and Hadändäwa (Hedareb) clans in the Barka lowlands had temporized the Təgrä struggle in the region, the Təgrä protest in the Sahəl and Kärän area was in progress. When the Bäni-‘Amär - Hadändäwa dispute was settled peacefully in November 1945, the revolt of the Təgrä of Bet- 'Asgädä reawakened the Təgrä struggle in Barka against the Bäni-‘Amär lords.⁹⁹³ On 10th of May

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid, Alemseged Tesfay viewed the issue from the point of view of the consequence of the proliferation of the clans on the national unity and the struggle of the Eritrean people for independence. He illustrated that the realization of the proposed idea of “new tribal reorganization” as a lasting solution took some years up until 1949, and had destructive effect in the unity and struggle of Eritrean people for independence. The recommended plan, instead of reflecting the basic nature and demands of the Təgrä and uproot the aristocratic system, it disbanded the existing organizational unity and transferred power to the sub-clans. Clans used to have been organized and fought common struggle under one chief, under this plan the clans got dispersed and gave more emphasis on their internal affairs or encourage to concentrate on inter-clan contention.

⁹⁹¹ Alemseged Tesfay, emphasized that while the Təgrä leaders and the British Administration uphold the reorganization of Təgrä clans as a solution, both had their own respective interests. The Təgrä leaders hoped it would endow the Təgrä their freedom and the British were using the solution as part of their divide and rule policy in their effort to dividing Eritrea into the Sudan and Ethiopia.

⁹⁹² Stephen H. Longrigg, *British Military Administration, Eritrea: Annual Report*, cit. p. 29.

⁹⁹³ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. pp 71-72.

1945, the Senior Civil Affairs Officer of Kärän Division on his weekly report stated that with the heightening security issues, the unsettled Təgrä–Šumaglā dispute of the ‘Ad-Täkles was exacerbating and urged for measures to avoid an open conflict. He also reported that, anger was heightened in the region and three spokesmen that agitated the conflict were arrested.⁹⁹⁴ The following year was a time when the British officers were overwhelmed with increasing demands of the Təgrä for their complete freedom and the year ended the Administration witnessing a condition where ninety percent of the Təgrä population of the western lowlands, northern highlands came in unison against the remaining ten percent of the ruling class.⁹⁹⁵

7.4. The Party Politics and the Təgrä Cause

With the relaxation of the restrictions on political activities, a number of political parties founded with varying goals. The Təgrä cause became a political ingredient of the parties and was deeply affected by the then political atmosphere. The hope of regaining the traditional privileges and dues by the Bet-’Asgädä and the western lowland chiefs and the notables of Massawa was not died quickly. For that reason they established a united front with the Unionists and the Orthodox Church in hope of achieving their common interest in union with Ethiopia. With the strengthening of the Unionist party, 1946 was the year that witnessed the highest possibility of reversing the struggle of the Təgrä. In return of their efforts for union, Ethiopia promised the church to restore the lands it lost during the Italian period and to the aristocratic chiefs to regain their lost economic interests and political influence.⁹⁹⁶ But soon the alliance was collapsed when it failed to materialize its sought goals.

The resistance of the Təgrä against the aristocratic lords had increased the communication of the Təgrä of different clans that created a common feeling and a sense of unity. Especially in the later part of the 1940s, the reorganization of the clans that was taken as the fundamental solution to the Təgrä issue together with the national question for independence led for the Təgrä and other Muslim communities to have a basic understanding of the politics. More importantly the Təgrä uprising led for the rise of individual leaders with strong base in the people that transcend their particular clan and geography for the first time in the history of the society.⁹⁹⁷ ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan was one of them. But such developments in the political

⁹⁹⁴ General Administration Weekly Report to C.A.B, Box no. 14, 1/4/6, Acc. No. 10105, BMA 2/44, RDC.

⁹⁹⁵ G.K.K Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. pp. 71-72.

⁹⁹⁶ Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 66-67.

⁹⁹⁷ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 161.

consciousness and sense of unity through common challenges do not mean an established leadership with clear principles and strategies was set up. For example, in the beginning it seemed that 'Ibrahim Sulṭan was not considering to employ the Təgrä uprising as a social base for his political activity. But the later developments including the growing influence of the Unionist Party through its declaration to work for conserving the traditional social order and land ownership had changed the scene. Such Ethiopian principle had already gained sympathy and support from the aristocratic chiefs of the lowland.

For the Muslim League leaders, the biggest threat was that if the aristocratic lords regained their customary rights and positions with the full support of Ethiopia, the Təgrä struggle would be devoid of its goals. Since the victory of the Unionists would lead Eritrea to be united with Ethiopia, the emancipation of the Təgrä would remain unrealistic, therefore, for 'Ibrahim the calculation was clear that Eritrean political future would define the Təgrä destiny.⁹⁹⁸ Therefore, founding a political organization using the Təgrä movement as a social base was imperative. To fulfill this objective his experience of estrangement at the Wa'əla Bet Gyorgis (ዋዕላ ቤት ግዮርጊስ) by the members of Maḥbär Fqri Hagär (ማሕበር ፍቅረ ሃገር) that demanding union with Ethiopia was a cornerstone for founding the Muslim League party. Until the end of 1946, the Təgrä class uprising was a secular, it had neither an Islamic name nor Islamic character.⁹⁹⁹ In the late 1946, Muslim League as a political party was formed representing the Muslim section of the country demanding for the independence of Eritrea after a ten-year period of administration by the United Nations.¹⁰⁰⁰ Under the banner of Islam, the party employed the religious identity an essential element of nationalist goals and organized many of the ethnically and linguistically different Eritrean Muslims.¹⁰⁰¹ The founding members of the party were urbanized individuals with Təgrä background and non-Təgrä Muslims from the plateau working as merchants and veteran employees in Italian colonial government.¹⁰⁰² Its agenda widely circulated in 'Asmära and Kärän, and greatly accepted by the Muslims. The party had religious dimensions and in its first congress in Kärän nominated Sayid Abubaker el-Mirgani, the leader of Katmiya (ኸትሚያ) sect in Eritrea as a president. However, the party had problems including;

⁹⁹⁸ Venosa, Joseph L, "The First Line Against Second Class Citizenship: The Eritrean Muslim League, Islamic Institutional Autonomy, and Representation on the Eve of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Federation, 1950-52," *The International Journal of African History Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2013, pp. 397-422.

⁹⁹⁹ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 162.

¹⁰⁰⁰ John Markakis, *National and class Conflict*, cit. p. 64.

¹⁰⁰¹ Miran, Jonathan, "A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea, p 204.

¹⁰⁰² Jordan Gebremedhin, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea*, cit. pp. 66-67.

financial constraints, conflict of interest, ethnic and area based divisions from the very beginning, and later weakened by the intervention of the Ethiopian government.¹⁰⁰³ Membership and representation of the party was not limited to the Təgrä community, but it was embracing broader Muslim groups comprising of the lowlanders and the highland particularly the urban areas.

Therefore, 'Ibrahim despite his initial dependence on the Təgrä as a social base, later widened membership of the party including to the non- Təgrä Muslims of the urban Gäbärti (ጀበርቲ) and the Saho (ሳሆ).¹⁰⁰⁴ Parallel with the organization of the party, the British Administration was working on the reorganization of the Təgrä clans by disintegrating the aristocratic order of the Šumaglā and transferring it to the newly forming clan chiefs. Being so popular in the urban and rural areas, 'Ibrahim became the key in all aspects of the Təgrä and the Muslim communities of the country. In the work in progress of the reorganization of the Təgrä, 'Ibrahim was actively working with the Administration, thus he was preoccupied with the two objectives. Thus both 'Ibrahim and the Administration represented by Trevaskis, had congruent objectives in discarding the Šumaglā, but for different ends; for the first it was in termination of the oppressive rule and for the latter was mainly to weaken the unity of the society, and then be suitable for their goal of dividing Eritrea into Ethiopia and the Sudan.¹⁰⁰⁵

7.5. The Role of Islam in the Emancipation of the Təgrä

In the previous unit we have seen the role the 'Ad-Šäḳə and the Katmiya orders with the support of the Naybs and Muslim powers in reviving Islam among the already Muslim Təgrä and the successful conversion of the Christian Bet-'Asgädä lords. The hope of the Təgrä emancipation through religious orders particularly the holy families of the 'Ad-Šäḳə was futile. The clan forged friendship with the Bet-'Asgädä based on marriage and class alliances and finally they became aristocratic lords by themselves. The 'Ad-Šäḳə's sympathy for the Mahdya of Sudan had made the Italians to favor the Katmiya order under the al-Mirgani family. Martini took measures

¹⁰⁰³ Abdulkader Mohammad in *Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism*, pp 1395-1396. The challenges were emanating from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government promised the Šumaglā and the Dəgläl to retain their privileges if they support the unionist party. The other problem within the party was the separation of its members in the western lowlands and Massawa, the tension between the Təgrä and Šumaglā expressed when the lords rejected the selection of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan as secretary general of the party for he was Təgrä, an inferior background. In the later period the biggest challenge to the party was the accusation of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan as an agent of the Italian.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 251.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

that further thwarted the political and religious influence of 'Ad-Šākə and consolidated the Katmiya's influence.¹⁰⁰⁶ In the 1920s the 'Ad-Šākə authority was limited only to the Ḥabab, but the Katmiya too had greater influence in the clan.¹⁰⁰⁷ In relation to the Təgrä's aspiration for emancipation, the Katmiya order did nothing but similar to what the 'Ad-Šākə did a century ago.

The Katmiya order succeeded in incorporating membership and allegiance from both urban and rural communities and maintained the old religious formations, notable families and holy lineages with far reaching effects in the society.¹⁰⁰⁸ The religious order run the Quranic schools and it maintained in providing religious duties, teaching Arabic and training youngsters for positions within it. Hence, its overwhelming position in the region allowed the order to manage the traditional practices and laws including; reimbursement of debt, the settlement of disputes, inheritance etc. Consequently, in its areas of influence, the Katmiya religious courts became integral part of the civil authority and played its role in maintaining the aristocratic social division because it was essential for protecting their religious position.¹⁰⁰⁹ Therefore, despite the expectations of the Təgrä, both orders; the 'Ad-Šākə and the Katmiya happened to be perfidy for the hopes and expectations of the Təgrä in different historical periods of time. The Katmiya order was building a mere new privileged class that deeply affecting the religious, social and economic activities of the society at the guise of the religion. The members of the new class acted as regulators of the relationship between the Təgrä and Šumaglā. The Khalifas within the Katmiya order served as religious leaders, chiefs, sub-chiefs and tax collectors all together.¹⁰¹⁰ The dual position (both religious and political) of the Katmiya officials, also economically benefited the Šumaglā.¹⁰¹¹ Such role of maintaining the preexisting social division played by the Katmiya only strengthened the perception of the Təgrä and the leaders that the main rationale of the control of everyday Islamic establishments was to secure the loyalty and

¹⁰⁰⁶ Miran, Jonathan, "A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea, p 199.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 200.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. p. 171.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁰¹¹ The Šumaglā as the landlords exercised their position within their respective clans to exploit other resources of the community for their benefit. The structure of the regional waqf system, an Islamic endowment was one of the connecting points of the Katmiya-Šumaglā interests. The designation and management of the waqf in the western lowlands often developed into a system of benefaction that connecting the political, religious and social power of the Šumaglā leaders. The institutional abuses through the alliance of Šumaglā and the Katmiya authorities in transferring or selling community properties to their own relatives at the expense of the whole public were openly opposed by some Təgrä leaders. This fact shows how far the two interest groups were connected.

reduce any possible opposition.¹⁰¹² Owing to their contrary role, the Islamic institutions and their leaders were not that much concerned for transforming the predicaments of the Təgrä. Hence, it was clearly revealed that not only the Italians but the Islamic orders too were disinterested in solving Təgrä cause.

The coming of the al-Azhar University educated 'Ibrahim al-Mukhtar (1909-69) as Mufti into the involvement of the cause had brought considerable changes to the interests of the Təgrä. In the western lowlands, the main demands of the rural Təgrä leaders were; access to the land and community property, and the strong criticism on the Šumaglä that have corrupted the Islamic practices. However, the coming of 'Ibrahim al-Mukhtar into the stage had solved the Təgrä concerns. By mid 1943, 'Ibrahim al-Mukhtar with the blessing and support of the British Military Administration put the various waqf (ዋቕፍ) committees under his control.¹⁰¹³ His objective was both to restructure the institutions from the Katmiya benefaction and to unseat the religious authorities that were negligent in Islamic practices.¹⁰¹⁴ With the power he was given by the administration to directly appoint members of the waqf committees, Ibrahim announced that he had authorized the Šari'a qadi (ሻሪዓ ቃዲ) of each town to establish an awqaf (plural for waqf) board and assigning members in his administrative jurisdiction.¹⁰¹⁵ Despite the challenges from the Katmiya authorities, the reforms conducted fitted together with the Təgrä struggle. A growing number of urban Təgrä supported 'Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's efforts in standardizing Islamic practices in the mosques, awqaf, and Islamic schools and protecting the unnecessary influence of the Šumaglä in the Islamic institutions.¹⁰¹⁶ Yet, regardless of the reforms he conducted, 'Ibrahim al-Mukhtar together with his cliques did not openly expressed their support of the Təgrä emancipation in early 1940s, but the nature of his reforms were outright demonstrations of his standing.

So as to empower their argument for the emancipation of the Təgrä from the grips of the Šumaglä, the Təgrä leaders of the 1940s had goes a century back in history to prove that the Təgrä were the true Muslim than the late converted and less practicing Muslim lords of Bet-'Asgädä. This was mainly applied as a moral and spiritual weapon that uniting the disadvantaged Təgrä and to increase the sympathy from the non- Təgrä Muslims of the country. Many of the

¹⁰¹² Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. p. 173.

¹⁰¹³ Miran, Jonathan, "A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea, p 205.

¹⁰¹⁴ Venosa, *Serfs*, cit. p.. 175.

¹⁰¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid.

leading figures in the movement articulated new approaches on Təgrä identity that put more emphasis on moral cause defining the Təgrä as dedicated Muslims and rationalized their claim of freeing the Təgrä from the exploitation of the Šumaglā, whom many considered as less genuine in their religious performance.¹⁰¹⁷ The justification of the moral arguments against the Šumaglā was for they were Orthodox Christians before their conversion in the early nineteenth century; thereby the lords adopted the belief, language and culture of the Təgrä. Therefore, the subjection of the true Muslims by the late converts and weak in practicing Islam were morally not acceptable, so the Təgrä deserve an immediate emancipation.

In the mid 1940s, the Təgrä of Naqfa particularly the 'Asfäda and other Təgrä in the western lowlands, considering the cooperation of the Kántibay with Ethiopia, a Christian state as a treachery to the Muslims, thus they opted to look to Islam as a unifying factor to defend themselves.¹⁰¹⁸ They assume the chiefs; the Kántibay, the Dgläl and other chiefs had sold their souls to the Christian Ethiopia. Thus they deprived of all their authority over the faithful Muslim. For any Muslim that obeyed their orders then was regarded as a betrayal of Islam.¹⁰¹⁹ Trevaskis described the effect of such damnation in the following terms; as the message was spread, the whole rural Təgrä under their administration was stumbled. Neglect overwhelmed the Təgrä territories; the Native Courts were not functioning properly, taxes were not collected, schools and healthcare centers were paralyzed. All the rules being violated as a result semi anarchy was prevailed, that was the reflection for the politicization of the Muslims.¹⁰²⁰

As mentioned above, the party politics of the 1940s was between those of demanding for independence and those of supporting for union with Ethiopia. The Muslim League as an umbrella party of the Muslims managed the enrollment of almost every Muslim in the country was mainly struggling against partition and union with the Christian Ethiopia.¹⁰²¹ However, independence was not the aspiration of all Muslims of the country. Ethiopia dispensed bribes and pledged the Šumaglā of Ḥabab and the lords of the western lowlands that he would offer them privileges if they supported the unionist party.¹⁰²² The unity of all the Təgrä in their common aspiration for liberty pushed the chiefs to defend their privileges.¹⁰²³ The Šumaglā's fear was

¹⁰¹⁷ Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁰¹⁸ G.K.K. Trevaskis, *The Deluge*, cit. pp. 155-156.

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰²¹ Ibid., pp. 166-168.

¹⁰²² Abdulkader Mohammad, *Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism*, cit. p. 1395.

¹⁰²³ G.K.K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, cit. p. 73.

coinciding with the Ethiopian interest.¹⁰²⁴ To that end, Haileselassie promised the lords that it would retain their aristocratic position once they come to his aide. As a result the Muslim League that was expected to carry out the dual goal; of Eritrean national independence and Təgrä emancipation, faced the challenge of division into regional blocks; Independent Muslim League of the Western Province¹⁰²⁵, Muslim League of Massawa branch etc that demanding for union and later for federation with Ethiopia against the proper party advocating for Eritrean independence and emancipation of the Təgrä class.

Owing to the Təgrä-Šumaglā tensions, the difference of opinion and advocacy was visible; while the Təgrä being politically conscious offered full support to 'Ibrahim Sulṭan as the general secretary of the Muslim League party, the *Nabtabs* of Bāni 'Amār and the Šumaglā of the Bet-'Asgädä on the other hand disapproved his appointment for they consider him as inferior due to his Təgrä origin. Such division was an opportunity for the Ethiopian government for its intervention to divide the party and denigrated 'Ibrahim as an agent of the Italians devoted for their interest. Through time Ethiopian involvement increased at the cost of the division and weakening of the Eritrean party politics, that won over the division of the ML members through its promise given to the lords that if they support for federation it would guaranteed their previous position on their Təgrä, permit of seasonal pasture of their cattle inside Ethiopia, protection of their stocks from the Šfta (ሸፍታ) etc.¹⁰²⁶ The role of the Islam as a unifying factor in the Muslim League's endeavor to grant the Təgrä their freedom was tested by the Ethiopian and Šumaglā alliance of convenience. However, thanks to the active efforts of individuals particularly 'Ibrahim Sulṭan, the willingness and support of the British Administration, the concerted entanglements by the Ethiopian government and their Šumaglā allies to stifle the Təgrä struggle became a failure.

¹⁰²⁴ Trevaskis stipulated that, the Šumaglā were not the only to show interest of alliance with Ethiopia, but the land demanding highlanders, the chiefs deposed during the consecutive European colonial era, people aspiring authority, people who sought to restore their privilege and status, the unemployed and owed by the Gābārti, people of antipathy with the Italians etc. To end their ambition, they opted and support the shift violent means.

¹⁰²⁵ The Independent Muslim League of the Western Province was led by 'Ali Musa Rād'ay (ዓሊ ሙሶ ረድኣይ) who split from the Muslim League and formed his new party. The initial objective of his party was the partition of Eritrea between the Sudan and Ethiopia but later due to the Ethiopian promises and to cool down the bloody conflict between the Bāni 'Amār and the Hadändäwa of the Sudan he shifted to support the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia.

¹⁰²⁶ Mohammad Abdulkader, *Competing Identities and the Emergence of Eritrean Nationalism*, cit. p. 1396.

7.6. The Emancipation and the Idea of the Reorganization of Clans

As we have seen above, the British had conducted a detailed study of the Təgrä communities and decided to employ the reorganization of autonomous Təgrä clans before the coming of the Four Power Commission. Maintaining the existing clan organization was considered an extension of the problem. Therefore, a lasting solution was required and to that end the BMA adopted a new way of looking towards discovering the well known clans and their relationship. They conducted several public meetings with the Təgrä people, therefore based on the findings; they decided the reorganization of the Təgrä groups to be based on their genealogical origin and blood relationship believed to exist between the different Təgrä communities. This act of social restructuring would leave the Šumaglā with no customary significant position. Their old functions as security providers, tribute collectors had been already taken by the government. The biggest catastrophe emanated from the emancipation and clan reorganization was the breakdown of the strong and numerous Šumaglā clans that muster various ancient Təgrä clans that were pulverized into small family groups.¹⁰²⁷

The attempt for seceding and forming independent Təgrä group was not a new notion. The failed endeavor by 'Asfāda and the Ad Qäyə (ዓድ ቃይአ) clans was good examples. The Ad Qäyə, a small group lost their clan identity in the late 18th century and scattered as Təgrä of Ḥabab, 'Ad-Šäḵə and Beni Amer. In 1927 those under Ḥabab attempted to form an independent clan, unfortunately the leaders of the scheme were jailed by the Italian Colonial Government.¹⁰²⁸ In 1938, the 'Asfāda clan had good inspirational experience to the rest of the Təgrä groups. Its members that were split in Bet-'Asgädä, Bäni-'Amär and others united and contributed funds to have their own leadership under the ex-sumbashi 'Ali Ḥamid. They succeeded to convince the Italian governors¹⁰²⁹ to announce the formation of an independent clan, but short lived. Almost immediately, denounced by the same administration and the chief was deported away from his

¹⁰²⁷ The end of the Šumaglā clans' umbrella clan was not shattered by the emancipation, as I put a detailed explanation in the conclusion part of the thesis; the Təgrä still continued to use the Šumaglā umbrella clans to identify themselves both in Eritrea and the Sudan. Therefore, tribal reorganization that endowed the Təgrä groups to have autonomous clans was not the end of the significance of the Šumaglā clans.

¹⁰²⁸ Native Administration Dispute General, Ad Sheikh-Ad Caih Dispute, Report on Tigre Unrest: Ad Caieh Tribe, 29/10/1943, Box no. 82, File no. 286/Ke/2, Acc. No. 10959, RDC.

¹⁰²⁹ The leading figures of the clan succeeded to convince the Governor of Eritrea in obtaining his decree while General Antonelli, the Governor of Kärän was on leave from the town. On his return he halted the decree and sent 'Ali Ḥamid in to prison in 'Adi Qäyḥ.

people to ‘Adi-Qäyḥ (ዓዲ ቀይሕ).¹⁰³⁰ The demand for the resurrection of the old clans was renewed again in the early days of British Military Administration, but at no time inhibited by the district governors of Kärän and Naqfa.

As explained above, by 1946, the conflict between Bäni-‘Amär and Hadändäwa was solved and the British Administration was still confronted by the petitions and demands of the Təgrä for outright liberation in all aristocratic areas. The situation was an apprehensive moment for the British Administration, thus the governors were searching for resolutions. Trevaskis, one of the administrative officers had deeply studied the Təgrä communities, thus had accumulated good knowledge on the social formation of the society. But he had no idea on how to settle the issue, so had to examine the wishes of the Təgrä. To that effect with the help of people like ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan several meetings were conducted with the Təgrä people in different localities.

Initially, the chiefs of various Təgrä clans and sub-clans aspired to have each independent political entity, including those groupings composed of few families. Later on the British administration understood that allowing the reorganization of such small groups into independent political groupings would lead to administrative inconveniences, so decided to reorganize them in relatively larger Təgrä units.¹⁰³¹ Materialization of the scheme was the idea and advice of the then erudite and businessmen of Təgrä origin from the urban centers in the western lowlands. ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan, being one of these Təgrä advisors from Kärän presented his idea of resurrection of the ancient Təgrä clans and families that disintegrated and lost in the last three hundred years to remain subjects of the ruling class.¹⁰³² The resurrection was essentially the undoing of the fragmentation of the Təgrä families during the last three centuries. As it is explained in chapter three, the act of disbanding of the original Təgrä sociopolitical organization was done by the ruling class to easily consolidate their control. The nomadic nature of the economy of the society also had played its part in disbanding and weakening the ancient Təgrä social organization. The idea ‘Ibrahim proposed was initially considered a fantasy by the administration, but later was accepted as a solution to the highly feared potential anarchy and its realization (clan reorganization) was started in 1947.¹⁰³³ By then the authority of the chiefs was already weakened to a non-existent level. However, due to the visit of the Four Power Commission, the British

¹⁰³⁰ Native Administration, Disputes General Keren; Shumagele-Tigre Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Keli, Acc. No. 10957, 13/12/1941, RDC.

¹⁰³¹ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 160.

¹⁰³² G.K.K. Trevaskis, *The Deluge*, cit. p. 159.

¹⁰³³ Alemseged Tesfay, *Aynfelale (let us not separated)*, cit. p. 160.

Administration was unable to take any concrete action in that particular year. Because such Administrative action in the issue could be considered as political interference, the reorganization process has been paused until the departure of Commission.¹⁰³⁴

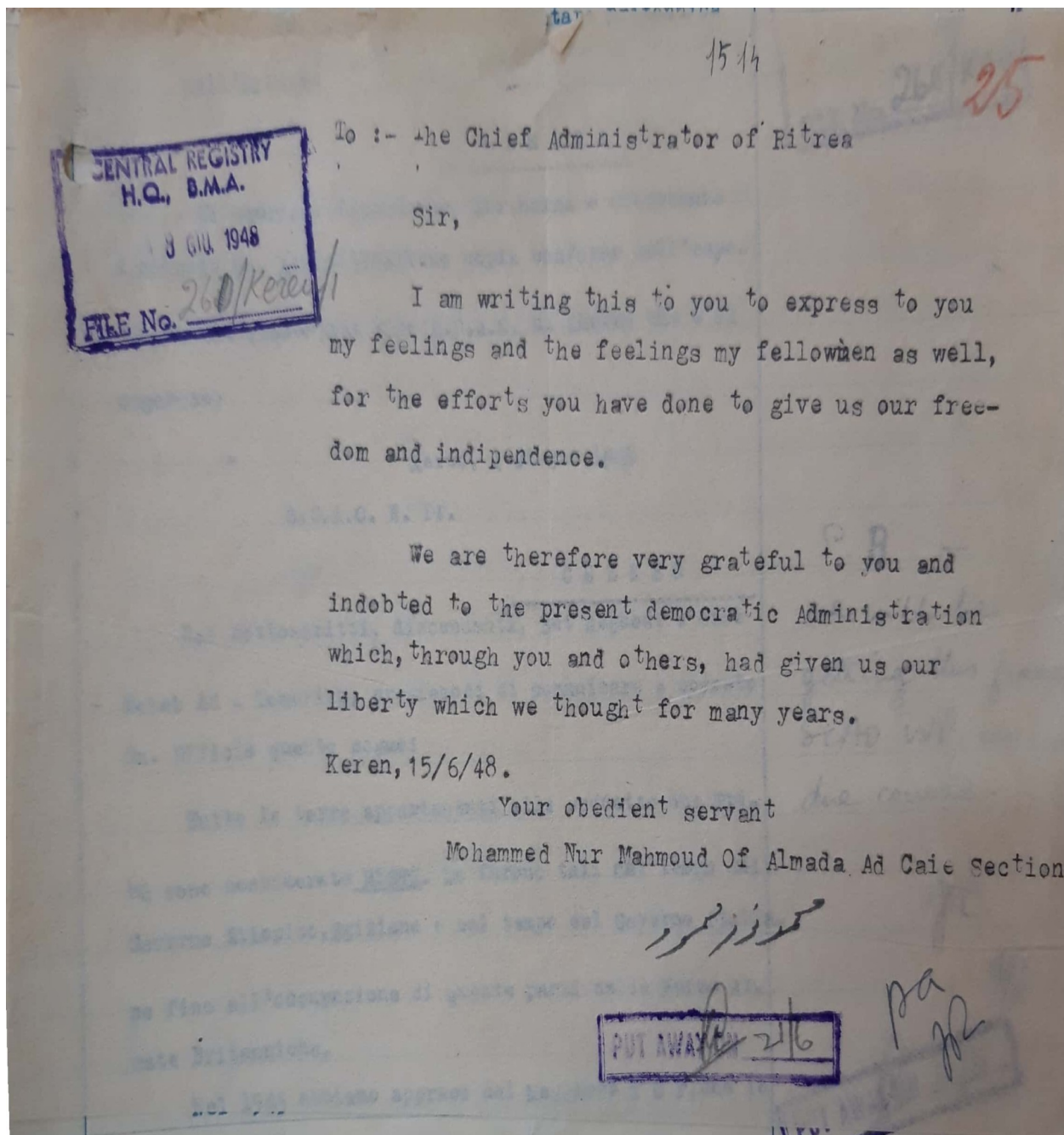
On 24th of February 1950 a petition letter was presented to the U.N. Commission for Eritrea by five notables of the Šumaglā ‘Ad-Täkles. The letter criticized the measures taken by the British Administration for emancipating the Təgrä from certain customary obligations and for not respecting their rights on the ownership of the land.¹⁰³⁵ It was a direct reaction to the decision of May 1948, that the Administration freed the Təgrä not to pay any customary dues after the harvest of 1949. As a result, the Təgrä refused to the pay and the grievance of the Šumaglā had already reached in to deaf ears of the Administration. Therefore, the ‘Ad-Täkles through this letter begged the U.N. Commission for intervention in the establishment of the juridical social relations between themselves and Təgrä people. Through which to oblige the Təgrä cultivators to pay the fourth of their product as annual rentals, as it has been done before.¹⁰³⁶ The Senior Divisional Officer, in response to the ‘Ad-Täkles’ petition sent a letter to the U.N. Commission. The letter stated that the British Administration regarded the land in question as State Property just as it was under the Italian Government; however a certain landlords enjoyed the individual rights over the land for long time and had been allowed to collect rents from the cultivators. The petition was requesting for the extension of landlord-tenant status, but both parties have already been told by the British Administration that collective land disputes between the tribes would be considered by the future government after the destiny of the territory was determined.¹⁰³⁷ And the Division Officer made the U.N. Commission clear that, there was no justification to change the policy in that matter.

¹⁰³⁴ G.K.K. Trevaskis, Tribal Reorganization File, cit. p 25.

¹⁰³⁵ Native Administration, Political Organization- Keren, Box No. 204, File No. 255/Ke, RDC, (U.N. Commission For Eritrea, Asmara), 24th February, 1950, Keren.

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid

¹⁰³⁷ Native Administration, Political Organization- Keren, Box No. 204, File No. 255/Ke, No: HQ/WP/66.B.8, RDC, (Undated Petition by ‘Ad-Täkles addressed to U.N.C.), 21st March, 1950, Keren.



A letter from the chief a sub clan in the 'Almäda dedicated to the C.A. of Eritrea for his role in granting their independence. Source: Native Administration Disputes General Keren, Šumaglā- Təgrä dispute-Dispute, Box no. 82, File no. 260/Ke/1, Acc. No, 10958, 260/Keren, June 1948, RDC.

By April 1948, following the departure of the Four Power Commission, greater consideration was given to the problem of the Təgrä-Šumaglā relations and, almost all the aristocratic orders were doomed. The aristocratic system of governance in the Bet-'Asgädä;

Ḥabab, ‘Ad-Täkles, ‘Ad-Tämaryam, Bet-ğukə, the Bāni-‘Amär of Barka and other aristocratic orders in the western lowlands were totally collapsed and gave way for the formation of independent clans.¹⁰³⁸ Then, the administration staff found itself busy working on the reorganization of new Təgrä clans according to immediate and hypothetical genealogy and blood relations with respective chiefs and court systems. Although the reorganization of autonomous Təgrä clans was considered as the manifestation of the emancipation, the pronouncement by ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan to the assembled Təgrä people at *Gioco Kärän* (a stadium in Kärän) is considered as the breaking point event to the aristocratic order and the real liberation of the Təgrä of the western lowland in general and the Bet-‘Asgädä in particular.¹⁰³⁹

That day is still vividly remembered in the memory of the community and known by the Təgrä people as አምዕል ሕርየት (the day of liberation). It holds a symbolic representation for the demise of the aristocratic order and their long awaited emancipation. In that particular place, where the Təgrä people gathered in their hundreds, ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan declared that all humans are equal and from now on all the Təgrä are free from the aristocratic dues and services. The oppressive aristocratic rule was over and the Təgrä will be ruled by the law of God. He decried all the chiefs calling their titles with gesture and body language uttered that “ዮም አምዕል ሕርየትቱ (today is a liberation day) to achieve this: እግል ሼኽ ሸኽሸኽናሁ (we poked the Šäḵə s)¹⁰⁴⁰; እግል ሹም ሸምሸምናሁ (we punched the Šums); እግል ከንቴባይ ከንቴናሁ (we deposed the Kāntibays); እግል ደግለል ደርገግናሁ (we unseated the Dängäl).”¹⁰⁴¹ This pivotal *coup de grace* was mainly targeting to Kāntibay of Bet-‘Asgädä, Kāntibay of Mänəsa‘ə, Kāntibay of ‘Ad-Tämaryam, Dängäl of Bāni-‘Amär, Šäḵəs of Sämhar, Šums of ‘Ad-Täkles, Marya etc. but in particular it was against the authority and the titles of these figures than personal attack.

Critics of the event blamed ‘Ibrahim Sulṭan for his disparagement of the chiefs and religious leaders. And they charge him that; he said these derisions because he was intoxicated of the success he achieved. Despite the historical relations of chiefs and Šäḵəs with the Təgrä, insulting these respected public figures especially to the Šäḵəs was morally not correct and was assumed as disrespect for the religion and custom of the community.¹⁰⁴² Consequently, it had

¹⁰³⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁹ Interview, Moḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd, 10/09/2021, ‘Asmära.

¹⁰⁴⁰ According to Moḥamädsə‘id ‘Osman, many Təgrä considered the insult to the Šäḵəs was disrespect to Islam, thus withdrew their support to Ibrahim.

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴² Interview, ‘Abä Gäbrämädhn Täkläyohans, 18/10/2021, Kärän.

negative effects on his personal values and his national political movement. People including many Təgrä who had respect for these figures could not accept such shocking terms, so questioned their support for 'Ibrahim. The Šumaglā considered his insult as insane.¹⁰⁴³ In this fashion the centuries old Bet-'Asgädä and other clan's aristocratic order was shattered its existence.

The research question of this thesis was mainly why the emancipation happened in late 1940s why not earlier or later got its answer here. The freedom of the Təgrä was realized as a result of the cumulative effect of two interconnected factors: the first was the extensive colonial intervention. As explained in Chapter Five, the effect of the Ottoman and Egyptian Empires in the arrangement of Bet-'Asgädä aristocratic system was insignificant, however the coming of the Italian colonial Administration had fundamental effects in the relationship. Primarily the colonial government substituted the protective role of the aristocratic lords. The replacement of the protection was accompanied by the transfer of the ownership of land into the government. The two elements were considered as the core pillars of the aristocratic relationship that gave the lords the upper hand. Consequently, the power and influence of the ruling class was wearied down. The colonial intervention had multidimensional in character. It involved the natives in military, infrastructural and bureaucratic works. As any other resident of the colony, the members of the Təgrä class took part in these colonial engagements that exposed them to the outside world accordingly increased their awareness. In their work areas, the Təgrä increasingly understood that the lords were only drones (dependent) that exploit their resources and labor. They also discovered the existence alternative works that support once livelihood without any burden. The social mobility due to the colonial engagement also helped the Təgrä to see free people with in the colony that live with no any subordination or any class affiliation.

By the end of their services in the colonial activities, many of the Təgrä settled in urban areas engaged in business, government offices and in irrigation schemes. Such mobility certainly detached the bond they had with their respective traditional lords, but not from their clan affiliation and communication. Realistically, it is difficult to draw a statistical explanation of the number of Təgrä that had the opportunity to such level of exposure. They might have been insignificant in proportion to the total population of the subjects, but as the colonial intervention went for decades and its effects were gradual with fundamental results. The second factor was

¹⁰⁴³ Interview, Moḥamädsə'id 'Osman, 10/09/2021, 'Asmära.

the home grown individual and group level initiative of resistance demanding for emancipation. Due to the administrative convenience of the aristocratic arrangement of the clans, both colonial governments: the Italian and British, despite their sympathy with the Təgrä subjects, they introduced only some basic reforms and were not willing to declare emancipation. Therefore, here comes the part of individuals with Təgrä background that played a guiding role in agitating the subjects. Hence, given the decline of the influence of the ruling class and the contrary growing awareness, wealth and exposure of the Təgrä, the directing initiatives of the Təgrä intelligentsia was successful.

Therefore, in the pre-Italian period, the consciousness and general condition of the Təgrä was not matured enough to instigate any resistance demanding for emancipation. The Təgrä were under strong control of their lord. The lords fully controlled the land, the source of production and still held the position of protection of their Təgrä. The Italian period itself was the time for the formation of the necessary elements of motivation that gradually amassed to form the necessary level of idea and material towards organized claim for emancipation. The defeat of the Italians and the coming of the British period was almost a perfect coincidence with the accumulated established readiness of the Təgrä that demanded the negation of the remaining customary dues and official termination of the subordination. During the beginning and the development of the protest, it was a home made initiative and there was no any visible external influence or link that serving as a model of struggle. Therefore, as the whole research results shows that the emancipation happened in the 1940s because the cumulative experience and awareness of the Təgrä was matured accompanied by the World War II results and the subsequent political developments created a fertile ground for protest. The contemporary situation was the utmost time for fruitful results. The leading individuals read the scenario very well and took bold determination towards their ends. The British despite their indifference to end the aristocratic relationship in excuse of provisional nature of their mandate, it goes beyond their control, therefore, postponing the implementation of the emancipation was not possible. In short, in the 1940s, the consciousness and burning desire of the Təgrä for emancipation and the political developments in the colony coincided at perfect time for the demise and throw of the three hundred years of aristocratic relationship of the Bet-³Asgädä in to history.

In summary, looking the decade of the British Period from the Təgrä point of view, it was the realization of the cumulative experiences of the people in the Italian Period's deep capital

intervention. The changes introduced during the Italian period undermined the pre-colonial relations of production, and increased the awareness of the Təgrä. The opportunities they experienced helped them to prove that they were the only chained people in the country and the available education and militarism had produced able and great leaders agitating for emancipation. The administrative policy of the Italians was aimed to maintain the aristocratic order; but was willing only to introduce very little reforms. The B.M.A in their part was faced protests against their lords and demanded for reforms however their decision to retain the aristocratic order was difficult in front of the mounting Təgrä opposition, so they introduce some reforms. The bigger aristocratic clans were containing numerous sub-clans for centuries; therefore, the tight form of clan organization was the most important means of control and stability for the British officers. Hence they decided to retain the situation with no much changes for various reasons.

The international law and the domestic circumstances restricted the BMA from conducting any form of changes. Basically the Administration was mandated by the International Community only as a care taker Administration which was limited from introducing any administrative or other fundamental reforms. The British were under potential security threats that emanated from the different factors; the lack of fulfilment of the British war time promises to the people of Eritrea, the ensuing post war economic and social crises and the austerity measures taken had created dissatisfaction among the Eritreans. Hence, the B.M.A had greater security threats from the dissatisfied Eritreans. When we come to the Təgrä question, the British Administration, despite its sympathy for the Təgrä cause, as part of the solution of curbing any potential anarchy, decided to retain the clan governance at the hands of the traditional lords. Therefore, the unwillingness and restraints of the administration was mainly from the security point of view. However, the clan chiefs were not strong enough to perform the expected works as they were weakened of their coercive measures during Italian Administration and successive Təgrä protests.

However, the maintenance of the archaic form of aristocratic order was against the wishes of the Təgrä that used to represent ninety percent of the total population of the western lowlands and the northern highlands of Eritrea. The Kāntibay and his few privileged Šumaglā allied themselves with the British Administration in smothering the demands of the mass of Təgrä. The three of them were different in their goals; the British were working to maintain the

status quo as it was until the fate of the country was decided and the Təgrä issue to be decided by the legitimate Eritrean government. Therefore, initially they were against any form of Təgrä social revolution, at least before the end of WWII. For the landlord Šumaglā, their goal was to continue the ownership of the land and the dues in the form of land rent they earned from their tigre tenants. For the Təgrä, their demand was emancipation from all forms of aristocratic dues, ownership the land they cultivate and formation of independent clans.

When the Təgrä protest became uncontrollable, the British tired of the protests and felt of bounden duty, unable to sustain the rejection and thanks to the role of urban and educated Təgrä individuals, British Administration was compelled to reconsider its stand. It had to answer the three essential Təgrä demands; therefore as of harvest of 1948, the administration declared the Təgrä should not pay any dues to their lords, and allowed to continue to use and own the land they cultivate. With regard to the formation of independent clans, the administration with the recommendation and information from the Təgrä intelligentsia had dissolved the existing umbrella aristocratic clans and managed to form independent Təgrä clans. The clans were formed through the resurrection of the ancient clans that dissipated centuries ago mainly by the ruling classes for aristocratic expediency. Therefore, the three hundred years of aristocratic system finally demised at the cumulative efforts of the Təgrä and the administrative willingness of the British Administration. However, the quality of the procedure and its long term effects in the framework and its efficacy in national politics is becoming a subject of diverging opinions in a number of literary works. The emancipation of the Təgrä was mainly involving formation of new Təgrä clans with their own chiefs and court systems. Although it was not at the scope of this study, it is still an interesting and broad area of interest for academic endeavours.

FINAL NOTES

Hierarchical social division has been the historical experience of most societies around the globe. The aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä was part of the common historical realities. Every hierarchical order had a life span with different factors for its origin, consolidation and decline. This thesis has demonstrated the aristocratic system of the Bet-'Asgädä in these three epochs of aristocratic developments. The northern highlands has been the destination for various groups of people from different places with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Hence, the communities that inhabited the region prior to the arrival of the Bet-'Asgädä reflects the reality of multicultural. However, the Təgrä, as a language and culture prevailed as a dominant cultural value. Groups of people with different cultures were absorbed by the Təgrä language and culture. The Bet-'Asgädä's experience was not different, they abandoned Christianity, Təgrña language and cultivation to embrace Islam, adopt Təgrä language and accustomed with pastoral livelihood of their subjects.

The Bet-'Asgädä, as a ruling class imposed their superiority up on the various Təgrä clans of Sahäl. The origin of that aristocratic system can be summarized into two theories. The first was the historical claim of the Bet-'Asgädä. The ruling clan claimed that for centuries their ancestors as representatives of the Negus used to rule and collect revenues from the entire inhabitants of the northern highland. The geographic extension under the influence of their ancestors was the whole of Sahäl as far as Qarura and parts of the present day Sudan. Hence, their aristocratic position was an extension of their forefathers' tradition. The second theory stated that the dispersed pastoral Təgrä in the northern highlands were helpless in defending themselves from any external attacks, therefore the coming of the B'əmnät family or the Bet-'Asgädä was an advantage for the Təgrä. The Bet-'Asgädä due to their warrior tradition would provide them protection, then the Təgrä easily even willingly became subjects, consequently pseudo-contract aristocratic system evolved. The theory from the Təgrä section is similar to the second supposition, they defined the ancient Təgrä clans to have been peaceful but weaker as a result of their nomadic distribution. Then the warrior and well organized Bet-'Asgädä could simply impose their aristocratic rule and took the protector position.

Practically, be it peacefully or forcefully the Bet-'Asgädä imposed their rule on the Təgrä

communities of Sahəl. Together with the Təgrä communities, the land ownership was declared to be the property of the ruling class. However, the Təgrä had the right for utilizing the land as long as they paid the required dues reflecting subordination to a certain Šəmaglä of the Bet-ʼAsgädä. Probably, as the Təgrä considered the Bet-ʼAsgädä would fill the security threats they had, they might have shown no opposition to be their subordinates.

Through various mechanisms the Bet-ʼAsgädä managed to consolidate their rule upon the Təgrä clans firmly. In both classes, the social status was predetermined by birth. However, there were some exceptional exits like when a Təgrä woman married to a noble man. In such cases she was treated as equal to the privileged class. The ruling families were in continuous power struggle for different reason; on division of booty, territorial claims or inheritance. Therefore, every family of the ruling class was supposed to be strong. A weaker noble was deprived of his land and Təgrä then destined to be impoverished almost to the level of the subjects. In some cases even made to leave the clan territory and seek refugee in the neighbouring clans. In addition to this the Bet-ʼAsgädä ruling families were experiencing power struggle from the very beginning of their days in Sahəl, fratricide was part of their history. Consequently after some generations, the house of the ruling class was divided in to three independent clans: The Ḥabab (ʼAd-Hbtyäs), ʼAd-Tämaryam and ʼAd-Täklēs. The first two had their own chiefs with the title of Kāntibay, and the chief of the third clan was holding only the title of Šum. Each clan also had its own Təgrä and well defined territories. To consolidate their position, the Bet-ʼAsgädä, disintegrated the Təgrä groups among the families of the ruling class that weakened the integrity and power of the Təgrä. This had bared them from from claiming their old clan identity. The Bet-ʼAsgädä also outlawed the interclass marriage, performed practices that made the Təgrä psychologically define themselves inferior, and the ruling class developed a friendly relations with most of the external powers coming to their land in a way that maintaining their interests.

The aristocratic system was chiefly characterized with well defined duties and obligations of the respective classes. The lords were responsible for providing protection against any internal or external attacks up on their Təgrä and allowed their Təgrä the right of utilizing the pasture lands of the clan territories. The Təgrä on their part were obligated to provide labour services and material provisions to their lords. The material provisions and services offered by the Təgrä were living animals and dairy products. This was the reflection of the pastoral livelihood of the society. Hence, in comparison to the conventional land and tenants based feudal experience in

European and other regions around the world the well established aristocratic system of the Bet-ʿAsgädä was not purely feudalism, but pastoral aristocracy. In addition to the gifts and services the Bet-ʿAsgädä enjoyed from their Təgrä, they had material privileges that were exclusively reserved to comfort their life and symbolized superiority.

Viewing from the point of view of the Təgrä aspiration for emancipation, various external powers and the Islamic revivalist movements in the region had respective footprints. The Ottomans introduced some changes in the organization of the clans along the coastal lowland into villages for the expediency of governance and collection of revenues. The dues was entirely collected from the Təgrä, hence they compelled to pay to both lords and the Nayb. The same was during the Egyptian period. As the expansion of Islam in the region was part of their policy, the Egyptians pushed the lords of the Bet-ʿAsgädä to adopt Islam and the conversion was conducted by the teachings of the ʿAd-Šäḳə. However, the conversion of the Bet-ʿAsgädä was well calculated decision to maintain their aristocratic interests intact and an appeasement to gain recognition by the regional powers.

The Təgray raids were part of the external powers that disturbed the livelihood of the clans of the western lowlands, the eastern coastal areas and the northern highlands. In the collective memory of the clans, the Abyssinians are remembered as invaders, killers and raiders. In comparison to the Ottomans and the Egyptians, the coming of the Italian Colonial system was crucial for the Təgrä. The degree of Italian influence up on the aristocratic system was much deeper than the previous powers. The Ḥabab was among the first districts fall under the protectorate of the Italians. Later, the Italian colonial policies and projects had fundamentally transformed the condition of the Təgrä. The colonial intervention was mainly involved through formal declarations and informal policy outcomes. The declarations banned or improved some elements of the Təgrä dues and services they offered to their lords. The informal policy results were in the form of indirect effects of the colonial policies and projects. The latter transformed the Təgrä in the following areas; the Italian substitution of the lords as protectors of the Təgrä was primary in increasing the morale of the Təgrä. Formal declarations by the Italian governors also had mitigating role in lessening the burden.

The influence of Italian colonial interventions was expressed by the role of the individuals that guided the Təgrä protest. Most of these individuals that performed the leadership role were the results of the Italian colonial education or militarization. The Italian policy of

maintaining the political authority of the customary tradition in fear of uncontrollable social crisis and administrative convenience was incompatible with the growing awareness and determination of the Təgrä masses demanding for complete emancipation. By the end of the five decades of Italian rule, the growing consciousness of the Təgrä had no room to accommodate the demands of the lords. As a result, the authority of the lords declined into nominal status and the Təgrä-Šəmaglä relation was by de facto no more functioning.

The cumulative transformations attained during the Italian period had kindled the aspiration of the Təgrä to fully emancipate from the centuries of subordination. Hence, in 1941, immediately after the British occupied Eritrea, the Military Administration was approached by the Təgrä that demanding the termination of the remaining rights and the dissolution of the political power of the aristocratic chiefs. However, in spite of sympathy for the plight of the Təgrä, the British had neither the legal rights nor administrative willingness to materialize the Təgrä demands. Nevertheless, at this particular stage, the Təgrä struggle had already matured and produced individuals resolutely took the responsibility of guiding the protest toward its end. Following the footsteps of these leaders, the Təgrä people denied to pay the customary dues. The anxious Šəmaglä tried their best to maintain their privileges through different means, including an alliance with the Ethiopian government.

Towards the end of the 1940s, the mounting opposition of the Təgrä posed an impasse for the British Administration to maintain the aristocratic chiefs in power and continue the traditional dues. The cause reached to its optimal moment of explosion and unpostponable stage. However, the decline of the aristocratic system was not only the outcome of the Təgrä struggle, but the internal and inherent weaknesses of the Šəmaglä were evident self-destructive factors. Hence, unable to resist the ensuing protest but to relinquish their centuries of privileged position.

In any collective struggle, the role of individuals is vital. Parallely, the position of these individuals in the memory and historical reconstruction of a given society needs to keep its proper place. In the case of the individual roles in the Təgrä struggle for emancipation, Ḥamid Tagä took the lions share. His complete personal biography is not available any way; however the British documents mentioned him as a leading figure in the Təgrä protests of the 1940s. His struggle began during Italian colonial period. Under the British period, accused of agitating the Təgrä movement he suffered for two terms of imprisonment sentences in 'Asäb. On the other hand, in the Təgrä emancipation movement and the subsequent party politics, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan

came into prominence, consequently considered as the key player and overshadowed the role of other fighters that preceded him. During the Təgrä emancipation movement, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan became visible figure in the legal case of Šəntub. However, the protests by Ḥamid Tagä and his colleagues goes back to Italian period. Nonetheless, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan had the opportunity and position in Italian and British periods that was the highest possible for Eritreans. Using all such positions, he could urbanize and politicize the issue being at the tip of the spearhead of the struggle.

To the contrary, Ḥamid Tagä seemed to have no any educational background. The Təgrä emancipation movement had considerable effect in the foundation of the national political struggle, but Ḥamid Tagä was overlooked in the process. Therefore, in my opinion Ḥamid Tagä's role seemed to have been the foundation for what 'Ibrahim had known for and pushed to its completion and amassed his personal fame. Truly, equal to Ḥamid Tagä, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan had the personal experience of the suffering for being a Təgrä, but he did not opted the violent way of the struggle for the emancipation. As explained by Alemseged Tesfay, the so called "tribal reorganization" as a solution fo the Təgrä cause was chiefly the advice of 'Ibrahim Sulṭan to the British Governors. However, the tribal reorganization had multiplied the existing few and tightly organized clans in to a number of autonomous clans, as a result greatly dwindled the unity of the Təgrä people with negative impact in national politics. In addition to the diversification of the clan identities, the unionist voice of the Šumaglā versus the independence demands of the Təgrä section was one expression of the negative consequences. Therefore, based on the above fact, in this part of national history, 'Ibrahim Sulṭan pursued conditional solutions targeted on weakening the aristocratic clans, thus followed opportunist approach. Finally, Ḥamid Tagä and his colleagues as well deserved honor and hold their proper historical position in the Eritrean national historiography.

The Post-Emancipation Realities

The scope of this study was limited until the official termination of the aristocratic system. However, the procedure of realization of the termination and clan reorganization will be open for further study. But I felt it is important to mention the vestiges of the aristocratic practices that were kept practical for decades after the official emancipation and practices that are actively operational to date. I hope such description would ignite questions and be starting points for

furtherance of this area of study. These points are mainly three; the semi feudalist land ownership in 'Afə'abät area that ended in the late 1970s, the representation of clan identity, and the still continuing aristocratic practices including provision of dues by the Təgrä to their ex-lords in the 'Ad-Täkles.

Despite the general declaration of the Təgrä emancipation, the issue of land ownership seemed to have been unaccomplished case on ground. Hence, when it comes to land, the emancipation was more of theoretical than reality. The land was mostly retained by the lords. Especially, in the 'Afə'abät areas, until 1977 large tracts of fertile lands were in the hands of few aristocratic lords. The poor peasants in 'Afə'abät and the surrounding areas with the support of the EPLF organized themselves against the land holdings of the Šəmaglä under the banner of "land to the tiller".¹⁰⁴⁴ The ratio of the landlord-Təgrä was too high. On average every land lord had 45 Təgräs working in his land. A good example of sweeping land reform was conducted by the EPLF. As part of its national and class struggle the front redistributed the land to the landless peasants.

An alliance of political opinion and practical support between the aristocratic lords and the Ethiopian occupying forces of the 1940s was slightly repeated again in 1978. The EPLF was working a holistic redistribution of the land owned by the few lords to the landless mass of Təgrä. Unfortunately, the balance of power changed against the front and the Ethiopian forces occupied 'Afə'abät. In their opposition to the land distribution, the Šumaglā welcomed the coming of the Ethiopian forces while the mass left the town to the surrounding countrysides. Therefore, the land redistribution was postponed, and the next year the town was again occupied by the EPLF. The milestone work of land distribution that dismantled the aristocratic relations of production was successfully conducted in March 1979.¹⁰⁴⁵ In that particular event around 208 hectares of land previously owned by seven landlords was parceled and given equally to 88 Təgrä who were cultivating it. Another decision was made to distribute 550 hectares of land to 1000 Təgrä. Previously, the land was left barren for 24 years because of the dispute among the Šumaglā landlords of various clans. This shows that the emancipation of the Təgrä was not completed by the declarations of the 1940s. Particularly, the land reform seemed to have been half-finished. Therefore, it seeks intensive study.

In the so called declaration of the Təgrä emancipation, the aristocratic vestiges in the

¹⁰⁴⁴ Eritrean People's Liberation Front, Selected Articles from EPLF Publications (1973-1980), May 1982. P 89.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibid.

form of clan links and dependence in other means between the umbrella aristocratic clans and the various smaller Təgrä clans is still active in across the border, in the Sudan.¹⁰⁴⁶ The Ḥabab and the Bäni ‘Amär clans inhabit the northeastern and eastern parts of the Sudan respectively recognized as Sudanese clans with their own chiefs and defined clan territories. For various reasons; be it due to warfare or economic factors, when people from the smaller clans in the western lowlands and northern highlands of Eritrea move to the Sudan, they have to claim affiliation to either of the two recognized clans. Therefore, those settled in the northern part claim to be Ḥabab and those in the southern part to belong to Bäni ‘Amär. For people outside of the two clans, identifying themselves by their own clan identity would be unacceptable by the Sudanese, but only in either of the two umbrella clans. To gain recognition, one has to provide proof of blood relations through witnesses.¹⁰⁴⁷ Consequently, the significant recognition of the Ḥabab and the Bäni ‘Amär in the Sudan has made the smaller Təgrä clans to identify themselves with the ex-aristocratic umbrella clans. Yet, greater number of people belonging to the smaller Təgrä clans living in Eritrea are still identify themselves by the bigger aristocratic clans like Marya, ‘Ad-Tämaryam, Ḥabab, Bäni ‘Amär, ‘Ad-Šäḵə etc but they mention their real clan name only when it is for documentation or serious and detailed conversation with other Təgrä.

However, there are many Təgrä people of the smaller clans proudly identify themselves by their own clans.¹⁰⁴⁸ The advantage for being the umbrella clans is not for dues or other interests, but the feeling of moral superiority, fame and retention of historic greatness.¹⁰⁴⁹ This shows us that despite the reorganization of independent clans, the older aristocratic identification of the Təgrä clans is still active.

The objection of the commonly accepted narration of the Təgrä emancipation is common among the Šumaglā side. For example, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin provided a revisionist assertion that could represent the views of the ex-lords. He stipulated that the available literature including the British and Alemseged Tesfay on the struggle of the Təgrä was an exaggerated and full of misinformation that are far from truth. He confirmed that, the Təgrä uprising was the agenda of the British colonial administration and it was not fully supported by all Təgrä.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Interview, Mäḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd, 10 September, 2021, ‘Asmära.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Interview, Näsrädin Moḥamäd Näsrädin, 18 October, 2021, Kärän.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Interview, Mäḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd, 10 September, 2021, ‘Asmära. Mäḥamädsə‘id stated that unlike other Təgrä clans, the Təgrä groups still living in Habäro that used to be subjects of ‘Ad-Täkles have unique experience. They do not like to be identifying themselves as ‘Ad-Täkles. It irritates them.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Interview, Mäḥamädsə‘id Ḥamd, 10 September, 2021, ‘Asmära.

According to him, the literature are short of giving detailed explanation of the events, so it needed reconsideration to be studied again. He substantiated his point of argument by providing examples of Təgrä groups that were not only participated in the movement but even do not heard of their liberation for long. Still now there are Təgrä that retained the custom and willing to continue their dues for the last 70 years even if the owners of the land are in the Sudan. So they still kept their loyalty and friendly relations with their ex-masters. As an example, he mentioned that he is still receiving the quarter of the produce from his grandfather's land, and assured me that he came yesterday from that particular land and was in no doubt that it will continue to his children. At the same time, it was true that, there were Təgrä that were so happy when the declaration allowed them to take the land they used to cultivate in a lease form from their lord for themselves. There are also Təgrä still honor the custom and willing to milk for their ex-lords. To the contrary, there are also Təgrä that see their Šumaglā in enmity and grudges.

As a matter of fact, political and social transformations during the 30 years war of independence had narrowed or lessened the gap between the two classes. However, the continuity or termination of different practices including marriage, milking, plowing etc needs thorough examination. The last but not least issue that deserves cautious study is if the members of the two classes had developed affiliation and support with the two contending armed fronts struggling for the liberation of Eritrea. Therefore, as a social transformation, the declaration of emancipation of the Təgrä was not an overnight realization and not a lasting complete solution. As a result, this area of history calls for further examination, and it is the authors' hope that this thesis has played an opening role for upcoming researchers.

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