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19th-Century Islamic Revival in Wallo, Ethiopia

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East Africa
HUSSEIN AHMED

The last three decades of the 20th century witnessed a revival of Islam in Ethiopia, the genesis of which can be traced back to the 19th century. Since the early 1970s Islamic revival has manifested itself in a growing awareness among Ethiopian Muslims of their collective identity, characterized by an intensified struggle to enhance the status of Islam at the national level, to establish a countrywide Islamic organization, and to participate actively in the public sphere. These aspirations were articulated through mass demonstrations, representations and publications, especially after the demise of the military regime that had ruled the country from 1974 to 1991.¹

One of the sources of inspiration for the resurgence of Islam in Ethiopia today is 19th-century Wallo, where reformist and militant clerics initiated a process of Islamic renewal. They also resisted the policy of religious coercion pursued by the Ethiopian rulers of the second half of the 19th century. This revival was primarily associated with the increased activity of the mystical orders: first the Qadiriyya, soon followed by the Sammaniyya, Shadhiliyya and Tijaniyya. These orders contributed to the further expansion and institutionalization of Islam by giving impetus to the development of literacy and scholarship and by introducing the ritual of *dhikr*. Moreover, they were the source of inspiration for the founding of shrines as local centres of pilgrimage.

►
Stieler's Hand-Atlas
 (Gotha, 1847);

Four reformist and militant shaykhs

Four of the most prominent exponents of the revivalist, scholarly, reformist and militant tradition of Islam in Wallo who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries were: Shaykh(s) Muhammad Shafi Muhammad (1743–1806/7), Ja'far Bukko b. Siddiq (1793–1860), Bushra Ay Muhammad (d.1862) and Talha b. Ja'far(c.1853–1936).

According to a biography written by his son, *Nasihah al-Muridin* (Advice for Novices), Shaykh Muhammad Shafi was a native of Warra Babbo. After his initiation into the Qadiriyya he travelled to Garfa where he befriended a local hereditary ruler, who provided him with men and arms for the propagation of Islam in southeast Wallo. Muhammad Shafi strongly felt that the Islam practised by the local people was heavily influenced by non-Islamic ideas and was therefore in need of reform. He accused the *'ulama'* of the time of complacency and avarice. His influence gradually spread to other parts of Wallo including Borana, where he established a more orthodox Islam among the Oromo- and Amharic-speaking populations. Later he moved to Albukko, where he set up his centre at Jama Negus which, after his death, became one of the biggest shrines in Wallo.

According to local traditions, Shaykh Muhammad Shafi divided his time between teaching, organizing a jihad (hence his epithet, *mujahid*), and prayer and meditation. This was a reflection of his initiative to develop a concept of a vigorous Islam in perpetual renewal and expansion through a harmonious combination of mystical exercise, education and physical coercion. He composed several religious treatises which still remain unpublished.

The son of the well-known mystic Siddiq Bukko (d.1800/01), Shaykh Ja'far was noted for his outspokenness and uncompromising position on questions related to faith and practice. According to a hagiographical account authored by his grandson under the title, *Misk al-Adhfar fi Mana'iq Sayf al-Haqq al-Shaykh Ja'far* (The Pungent Musk on the Virtues of Sayf al-Haqq Shaykh Ja'far), Shaykh

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claimed a major revolt against the harshness with which the policy of forced conversion was carried out and against the official prohibition of Islamic worship. His followers included Muslims of Qallu and Reqqe. During the revolt, churches which the local Muslims had been forced to build were demolished and priests who had been sent to instruct the converts expelled. Talha's and other revolts did not constitute a serious military challenge to the Christian rulers of Ethiopia, but they were a matter of concern. According to a local tradition, Ras Mika'el (formerly Muhammad 'Ali) once bragged to Yohannes in Warra Ilu that Talha was only an obscure cleric who, under the influence of a heavy dosage of *chat*, had incited the local Muslims to commit acts of bravado. Shortly after this, news arrived that Talha's men had successfully beaten off Mika'el's contingent. This earned Mika'el a sharp reprimand from Yohannes.

The Wallo Muslim resistance showed that indigenous Islam, given the necessary stimulus, was capable of not only inspiring the Muslim community to organize and mobilize its manpower and material resources for launching an armed opposition against a direct threat to its very existence, but was also capable of sustaining such opposition over a long period of time. That Islam played a crucial role as a unifying factor cutting across ethnic, regional and political loyalties is evident from the fact that the resistance led by Shaykh Talha included the Muslims of Qallu, Reqqe and southeast Tegray, as well as the disaffected members of the Wallo hereditary aristocracy. However, they acted within the context of Ethiopian polity. The mere fact that they shared a common faith with both the Egyptians and the Mahdists did not make them any less sensitive than the Ethiopian Christians to the hidden designs that these external powers had on Ethiopian sovereignty. They were reluctant to seek external help and to ally themselves with foreign elements even at a time when they were unjustly provoked and persecuted by the state and the church for no offence other than following a different religion. It is therefore difficult to accept such statements as: 'Thus the achievement of his [Yohannes's] aims, [...] did not alienate portions of the population, whether regional or religious [...].'²

Notes

1. See Hussein Ahmed, 'Islamic Literature and Religious Revival in Ethiopia (1991–1994)', *Islam et Sociétés au sud du Sahara*, 12 (1998): 89–108; and 'Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973–1993)', in Harold G. Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 1 (1994), 775–801.
2. Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford, 1975), 251 (emphasis added).

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Ja'far attempted to abolish certain rituals associated with *chat* (Arabic: *qat*). He strongly condemned the belief that traditional leaders of ritual ceremonies had the power of intercession with God and criticized members of the religious establishment, including the judges and those who recited the Qur'an, for their indifference to – or even violation of – Islamic law, especially their uncanonical appropriation of the *zakat* and contributions collected during funeral prayers, which were supposed to be distributed among the poor. Shaykh Ja'far also waged a perpetual struggle against the local chiefs and constantly exhorted them to rule according to the *shari'a*.

The third Muslim reformer was al-Hajj Bushra Ay Muhammad, who was born in Ifat. He travelled to the Sudan where he was initiated into the Sammani order by Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib b. al-Bashir (1824) before he moved on to Mecca for the pilgrimage. There he came into contact with some of the *'ulama'*, including Shaykh Muhammad 'Uthman al-Mirghani (1793–1853). After his return, he established his teaching centre at Gata (southeast of Kombolcha). He was renowned for his piety, sanctity and strict observance of the *shari'a*, as well as for his relentless struggle against all forms of *bid'a* (innovations). He regarded the neglect of the daily prayers as a relapse into infidelity and condemned the *zar* (spirit possession) cult, the ritual sacrifices offered under big trees, and the beating of drums. He authored a number of treatises, only one of which, *Minhat al-Ilahiyya wa'l-Faydat al-Rabbaniyya* (The Divine Gift and Divine Emanation), has been published.

The brief accounts and traditions about the lives and careers of the reforming and militant mystics and scholars of Wallo offer an insight into the dynamism of regional Islam, the interaction between indigenous Islam and new trends in Islamic thought emanating from the wider Muslim world, and the responses of the *'ulama'* to those trends. The accounts also reflect the vitality of Islamic scholarship and the local limitations on the implementation of the clerics' aspirations – of which they were keenly aware. Although the intellectual roots of the re-

formist tradition originated outside Wallo, the credit for introducing the new ideas and adapting them to local conditions belonged to the indigenous scholars who displayed exceptional qualities of leadership, organization and piety. The Muslim uprisings in Wallo in the 1880s were partly inspired by them. Another legacy is the vital role that the mystical orders still play in social and religious life as manifested in the veneration of saints and annual visits to their shrines.

Resistance to the imposition of Christianity

The policy of forced conversion to Christianity proclaimed by Emperor Yohannes IV (r.1872–1889) and implemented by his vassals was a serious, albeit temporary, setback. Its injustice and the ruthlessness with which it was carried out led to stiff resistance organized by militant *'ulama'*. Three forms of response of the Wallo Muslims to the imperial decree can be identified. Firstly, at the level of both the ordinary people and some of the *'ulama'*, there was an outward acceptance of Christianity which led to the phenomenon of 'Christians by day and Muslims by night': appearing to be practising Christians while remaining loyal to Islam. This was based on the Islamic concept of *taqiya* (dissimulation). Secondly, the enforcement of the edict by violent means caused an exodus of a large number of people to the Sudan and the Hijaz. Thirdly, there were organized and armed rebellions led by Muslim religious leaders. The first Muslim militant cleric who led an armed opposition against the policy of forced conversion of the Wallo Muslims imposed by Yohannes was Shaykh 'Ali Adam, originally from Jerru in northern Shawa. His militancy was derived from two sources: he was a disciple of Shaykh Muhammad Shafi and his father was renowned for his efforts to spread Islam in Reqqe. Shaykh 'Ali fought a contingent of Yohannes's army at Wahelo (northwest of Lake Hayq), where he and his overzealous followers lost their lives.

In 1884 Shaykh Talha, an innovative teacher and a prolific writer of manuals in Amharic for the teaching of Islam, pro-