

Key Dimensions in Abyssinia-Ottoman Relations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Critical Review of Literatures

by

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Abstract

This article aims to tackle three fundamental dimensions in Abyssinia-Ottoman friction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, whether the sixteenth-century friction was the product of Ottomans and/or Portuguese involvement induced or not; second regarding the binary opposition that framed this friction as foreign vs. indigenous or as a Christian Abyssinians vs. Muslim outsiders discourse; and third, whether behind the success of Muslims’ conquest was local resource and strong leadership or external support. Utilizing Turkish, Arabic, and other pertinent sources, the article concludes the war was the product of historically evolved frictions sustained over time between Christian rulers and Muslims in Abyssinia and the Ottomans which helped to restore a relative peace and stability in Abyssinia.

Keywords: Abyssinia, Christianity, Islam, Ottoman Empire, Muslims

Introduction

In the middle of the 16th century, an unprecedented development threatens one of the ancient kingdoms in the world, the Abyssinian Christian Kingdom. Thousands of years-old traditional establishment, religious, cultural and political, was tested by the unwavering rise of various Islamic sultanates in-and-around Abyssinia. The most aggressive move, however, came from the Sultanate of Adal. Under the leadership of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi, the Adal sultanate by organizing the already resentful Islamic sultanates in-and-around Abyssinia, made the first of its kind move that had devastated the Christian establishment in Abyssinia.

Consequently, the war that broke out had more fundamental implications than simply a civil or internal friction between groups in a country but, equally, international. In fact, each of these sides has had a direct strategic and military support from foreign powers. The Christian kingdom was supported by the Portuguese and the Islamic Sultanates under Imam Ahmed by the Ottoman Empire.

The overall academic discourses in the area, however, view the encounter in a narrative that localizes the Christian Kingdom and Portuguese actions, on the one hand, and externalizing Imam Ahmed and the Ottoman Empire's moves on the other. The Christian rulers in Abyssinia and their Portuguese supporters have been portrayed to defend the 'local-indigenous' Christian nation from the aggressive 'foreign' Muslims and their Ottoman accompanies (see, for instance, Ephraim 1968; Tadesse 1972; Shenk 1993). Firstly, therefore, the paper questions this binary opposition. Second, the paper argues that the sixteenth-century outburst of frictions between Muslims and Christian rulers in Abyssinia and the later involvement of Portuguese and Ottomans in Abyssinia was primarily the result of a sore and unhealthy form of relationship between Muslims and Christian rulers in the past centuries in the country.

Thirdly, contrary to the conventional view that Ottomans supported Imam Ahmed in the war against the Christian kingdom, especially during the 1920s and 1930s (see, for instance, Trimmingham 1952; Ephraim 1968; Tadesse 1972; Shenk 1993; Erlich 1994), the paper rather argues that Imam Ahmed came out victorious primarily by mobilizing local resources and soldiers without any support rendered from the Ottoman Empire's side. The support of Ottoman Empire came after the 1530s and without any practical significance, not even able to save the life of Imam Ahmed himself in 1540s. However, Ottoman Empire's involvement in Abyssinia takes different shape after they came to replace the Mamluks' administration in Yemen around 1538.

Accordingly, the first part of this article retrospectively traces the genesis of the sixteenth-century encounter in Abyssinia. Here, I argue that without the necessary appraisal of the initial encounter between Muslims and Christians in the 7th century Abyssinia, any reflection on war and frictions in the later periods, including in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, would be very inadequate. In doing so, the article attempts to show some degree of continuity from earlier periods to the seventeenth century. The second part, apart from assessing the involvement of the Ottoman Empire in the post 1530s Abyssinia, examines the nature of encounter among the Ottoman Empire, Muslim Abyssinians, and the Christian Abyssinian rulers in the subsequent periods, especially in the first half of the seventeenth century. To this end, the article closely engages mainly secondary literatures in the field. However, in an effort to support the principal arguments of the article, some primary classical texts, written in Arabic, Turkish and English, of travel accounts, books and other publications pertaining to Ottoman-Africa relations in general and Ottoman-Abyssinia relations, in particular, are employed.

The First Encounter: Islam and Christianity in Abyssinia

Abyssinia is one of the first nations to accept Christianity in the world in the first AD¹. Abyssinia was not only the pioneer in accepting Christianity as a national-official religion but also “have been longer [older] Christians than most of the nations of Europe” (Crawford 1868, 307). This undeniably rendered Ethiopia with the opportunity to encounter many civilizations, especially the organized Christianity of Egypt and the Christian Byzantine empire (O’Leary 1936). This religious-based relation was later developed into political spheres, especially with the then superpower, the Byzantine Empire in the early six century. The existing religious-based relation was scaled up when the Byzantine Empire based in “Constantinople drew Aksumite Kings into the political and economic strategy of the East, which involved around Byzantine-Persia rivalry” (Erlich 1994, 4). This was mainly because South Arabia was then a bone of contention between the Persians and Byzantine Empires for quite some time. These empires had competed to take political, economic and religious precedence over the area. This was also accompanied by frequent wars between them.

Justinian, Byzantine emperor wrote to Timothy III, Patriarch of Alexandria, Egypt to involve Abyssinians in the war to control South Arabia. The Abyssinian and Byzantine Empire’s solders together invaded and conquered South Arabia, and Christianity became state sponsored religion throughout the region. It should be noted, however, that this conquest had more of economic and political goals than religious (See, for instance, Bruce 1813, 427). This is the period in which Abraha, Abyssinian emperor’s regent in Yemen, came to destroy Ka’ba of Pre-Islamic Arabia in 570 AD although the Persians eventually came and evicted both the Abyssinians and Byzantines from South Arabia in 590 AD (Erlich 1994).

The introduction of Christianity and the subsequent interaction the Abyssinian kingdom had with other Christian powers such as the Byzantine Empire created what can be called a formative moment for Abyssinian Christian identity construction. The process of identity construction was on the way, firstly, through closely aligning with the Christian world and, secondly, by distinguishing oneself from, and going against, non-Christian peoples in-and-around Abyssinia². In addition to these, various diplomatic exchanges with like-minded nations and visits to-and-from Europe or Christian world such as Italy, Portugal and Greece had played significant roles.

While the Abyssinian Christian identity was taking roots in the late fifth and early sixth century, another development from the other side of the red sea introduces a new episode in the making of Abyssinian history and identity. This was the emergence of Islam in Mecca and its subsequent introduction to Abyssinia. While this was happening, the Abyssinian Aksumite Christian kingdom was losing its strength and started declining³. Among other things, two major factors played significant roles. For one thing, the human and material costs the kingdom had incurred in the South Arabian campaigns must have been unbearable (Henze 2004).

Second, following Persian Empire's defeat of Abyssinian kingdom and Byzantine Empire in 590 AD⁴, the Abyssinian kingdom lost its conquest in Yemen and the subsequent dominance in the red sea trade which had "turned Ethiopia into a red sea empire" (Erlich 1994). Nevertheless, the first Hijriya to Abyssinia in 622 AD marked the first synthesis of civilizational encounter in the Abyssinian history. In fact, Abyssinia was the first nation in the world to experience the encounter of Islam and Christianity, in their early conceptions, which often times associated with Eastern and Western civilizations. This moment also played a significant role in later encounters of civilizations, especially the sixteenth-century encounter of Portuguese, Ottoman Empire, indigenous Islamic sultanates and the Christian kingdom in Abyssinia.

The first Hijriya to Abyssinia in 622 AD was undertaken by Muslims from Mecca in response to persecutions, torture and inhumane treatment. Due to this cruel and inhumane treatment in Mecca, the prophet Muhammad ordered his companions and close relatives by saying, "If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you) for the king will not tolerate injustice, and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah relieves you from your distress" (Ibn Ishaq 1955, 146). Following their arrival in Abyssinia, the king, later named al Najashi gave them protection and sanctuary. They enjoyed security and peace; the king has shown them "hospitality"; and they had the freedom to worship (Ibn Ishaq 1955). Because of the Muslims' migration to Abyssinia, the conversion of the king himself into Islam or some other reason (s), a rebel from the kingdom rose to take power. However, Al- Najashi "destroyed his enemies" and stabilized his domain (Ibn Ishaq 1995, 153).

In short, this marks the first encounter of civilizations in Abyssinia which, in the later course of Abyssinian history, shaped all encounters and contacts with other worlds or civilizations. A good instance of which is the sixteenth-century complex encounters of civilizations under investigation. In the meantime, in the periods between the seventh and sixteenth century, Islam and Muslims went through, what can be called, a 'transitional period' in Abyssinian history.

A Transitional Period for Islam and Muslims in Abyssinia

The sixteenth century is an important period in the discourse on Abyssinian identity and history. This is the period in which the seed that was sown some nine centuries ago by Islam began to germinate and its initial fruits in-and-around Abyssinia started to be felt by the relatively old establishment of the Christian Abyssinian administration. This is the initial principal frame of the contested encounter of civilizations in the sixteenth century.

In the years between the seventh and sixteenth centuries, Islam and the associated sultanates passed through various challenges and adventures in Abyssinia. All of these Islamic sultanates had various instances of friction and constant struggle with the northern Abyssinian Christian kingdom as early as the tenth century. One of the first Islamic sultanates, for instance, was the Makhzumi sultanate (896-1285).

This sultanate was located in the eastern Shoa of the Abyssinian Christian domain. However, given internal frictions and struggles against the Christian administration, the sultanate did not last long (Trimingham 1952). This was followed by Walasma sultanate based in Ifat, the eastern edge of Shoa, Abyssinia in the thirteenth century. Other “Muslim states” or sultanates included Hadya, Fatagar, Dawro, Bali and others, especially in the eastern and southern regions had a long bitter history of struggle and recurrent violence with the Abyssinian Christian highland administration (Trimingham 1952, 62). These are, in the words of Trimingham, “Muslim colonies” which were located within-and-around the Abyssinian Christian kingdom (63). According to him, Islam claimed many of its souls in Abyssinia in the years between the tenth and twelfth centuries. In these centuries, contrary to the view that Muslims and Islamic sultanates represented insignificant slices of land and population, “the actual area of these Muslim kingdoms was much larger than that of the Christian kingdom” (Trimingham 1952, 68).

The condition of these Islamic sultanates, however, changes in the sixteenth century. This period saw one of the most heightened clashes ever between the Christian administration and Islamic sultanates in Abyssinia. During this time, the massive movement of Islamic independence and conquest under Imam Ahmed (1506-1543) was one of the most remarkable moves ever made in the history of Islam and Muslims in Abyssinia. There are many reasons why this move of Imam Ahmed stood out in the history of Islam and Muslims in Abyssinia.

Firstly, the sixteenth-century conquest of Imam Ahmed served, even though short lived, as a safety valve for the accumulated historical grievances of Muslims and their sultanates in the history of Islam and Muslims in Christian Abyssinian domination, especially in the periods between the tenth and fifteenth century. In fact, this historical instance typically represented what is generally called 'bending the twig too far will lash back with destructive ferocity' in Abyssinia. Secondly, many of the Islamic sultanates came under the power base of Imam Ahmed to repel back and offensively attack the colonizing Abyssinian Christian kingdom successfully (Shihab-ad-Din 2003). In an actual sense, this conquest of Imam Ahmed can be argued to have effectively exemplified what the Christian missionary, Trimingham, feared for Abyssinian Christianity, the unity of Muslims or Islamic sultanates in Abyssinia (Trimingham 1952). The bitter struggle for freedom from the Abyssinian Christian rule, however, continued up until the end of nineteenth and at the beginning of twentieth century when Menelik II destroyed and reduced all of these sultanates into his colonial domains.

The transition period between the ninth and the sixteenth centuries, many of the recurrent struggles and frictions between the Christian administration and Muslims and their sultanates already developed into one of the unparalleled clashes ever between Muslims and Christian rulers of Abyssinia in the first half of the sixteenth century. On the top of this, this war was not only fought between the two parties per se. In fact, the Portuguese gave hands to the Christian Abyssinian administration while the Ottomans, although to be visible only in the later course of the frictions, assisted Imam Ahmed's side.

However, the degree of involvement in terms of their respective goals; the amount of help they rendered; the timing of their participation in the war; and related other dimensions are highly contested and, at times, contradictory.

The Encounter of Abyssinians and Ottomans in the Sixteenth Century

The encounter between the Ottoman Empire and Abyssinian Kingdom in the sixteenth century is not as well documented and unambiguous as the one between the Abyssinian kingdom and the Portuguese. This is especially the case for the alleged involvement of the Ottoman Empire before 1540s. There are, however, at least two intelligible scenarios that may account for this alleged involvement of Ottomans in Abyssinia. The first one would be that the Ottoman Empire did not actually come into contact with the Abyssinian kingdom or Muslims in any way before 1540s and as such, the contact assumed between Ottomans and Abyssinian Kingdom (and Muslim Sultanates included) before the 1540s can only be seen perhaps as the product of, what Salvadore (2010) calls, “anti-Islam psychosis” or, alternatively, what Semir Yusuf (2009) calls, ‘hi/storying’ induced imagination rather than an actual historical incident. The second scenario would be that the Ottoman Empire, directly or indirectly, had indeed involved either for the issue of Muslims or for the sake of its own political and economic interests in Abyssinia. A brief weighing of these scenarios is in order.

In relative terms, the first scenario has ample historical foundations, especially from Turkish sources that confirm the absence of the Ottoman Empire in Abyssinia up until 1540s (Yavuz 1985; Orhonlu 1996). Drawing from their observations, some three concrete points can be raised to support this claim. For one thing, Ottoman’s presence in the red sea region in general and Yemen, a closely tied nation to Abyssinia, both geographically and historically, in particular, did not start until 1530s. Ottomans came to control Yemen only after the 1530s. In fact, according to Casale (2010, 53), it was Hadim Suleiman Pasha who “By 1541, after leading an expedition to India and, in the process, successfully conquering Yemen. . . .” In other words, the support Imam Ahmed had received was sent from Zebid, Yemen, in his later conflicts with the Christian Abyssinian Kingdom in the post 1530s period⁵.

Secondly, before getting involved in the region, including supporting Imam Ahmed, the Ottoman Empire was “closely following the condition of Muslims in Abyssinia” from Zebid, Yemen (Orhonlu 1996, 23). This, according to him, was during the post 1530s and not before this period. However, the immediate pushing factor for the involvement of Ottomans in Abyssinia was the advent of Portuguese soldiers into the region (Orhonlu 1996, 23). These soldiers came to Abyssinia in 1541 (Markham 1869; Orhonlu 1996). Following this, in a letter dated in 1541/42, “Sultan Ahmed”, Imam Ahmed requested support from Ottoman administrators in Zebid, Yemen with the name “el-hakim villayet habes”, that is, leader of Habasha, Abyssinia (Orhonolu 1996, 27). Similarly, it can also be concluded that the “*Osmanlı yönetimi, 16. yüzyılın ilk yarısında Habeşistan’a doğrudan müdahale edebilecek durumda değildi*”⁶ (Kolcak 2010, 56).

Thirdly, according to Shihab ad-Din (2003), in the wars that were fought between the forces of Imam Ahmed and the Christian kingdom, especially with king Lebna Dengle, almost all members of his power base came principally from in-and-around Abyssinia. They included many of the Muslims in Muslim sultanates including the Somali, Harla, Afar, “Malasai” and other sultanates and Muslims who joined him in the course of his campaigns. Yet, they were also a few Arab soldiers, probably came from Yemen (See, for instance, Shihab ad-Din 2003, 85). However, there is no any mention or indication of the Ottoman Turks or Empire in any way in his *Futuhu Al-Habash* (2003). Put differently, the wars that were fought and won by Imam Ahmed before the 1540s were primarily achieved by local material and human resources. Above all this, the reference to Ottoman’s involvement in Abyssinia after 1540s is more frequent both in the Abyssinian and Portuguese accounts (See, for instance, Hozier 1869; Alvarez 1881; Trimmingham 1952; Salvadore 2010).

When it comes to the second scenario, there are those who argue that Ottoman Turks involved in the pre-1530s period in Abyssinia (See, for instance, Trimmingham 1952; Erlich 1994; Milkias 2011 and others). However, without an occasional reference to “Turks”⁷, which in itself, I would argue, could have been the result of their ‘anti-Islam psychosis’ or mere concoction in the history; otherwise, none of the documents reviewed here unequivocally ascertain the participation or involvement of Ottoman Turks in the pre-1530s period in Abyssinia (See, for instance, Hozier 1869; Alvarez 1881; Trimmingham 1952; Shihab ad-Din 2003). Contrary to this, Turkish sources only date the involvement of Ottomans in the post 1530s period (See, for instance, Yavuz 1986; Orhonlu 1996; Yildirim 2001).

Ottoman Empire’s Presence and Influence in Abyssinia

The time and space dimension of Ottoman and Abyssinian encounter is very crucial to understand, firstly, the presence, and secondly, if there is any, influence⁸. If, as I have highlighted above, the encounter is to be counted from the pre 1530s period, then moving to enumerate the possibility of influences of any sort would prove fruitless. Needless to say, therefore, that the archeology of any influence must be traced back to some kind of genesis, in this case, the presence of contact or encounter at a certain point in time between the Ottoman Empire and the Abyssinians, Christians or Muslims. As I have briefly argued above, Ottoman’s presence in Abyssinia, especially in the post 1540s period is a well-grounded phenomenon on multiple accounts (see, for instance, Yavuz 1986; Orhonlu 1996; Yildirim 2001).

The presence of Ottoman Empire in the red sea region was felt throughout the Abyssinian kingdom during the post 1530s periods. Before outlining this encounter, I find it necessary to briefly comment on the background of Ottoman’s presence in this region and this, in turn, must be understood in the broader geopolitical, religious and economic contexts of the time. In a nutshell, there are at least three fundamental factors behind Ottoman Empire’s presence and later influence in the second half of the sixteenth-century Abyssinia.

The first and most obvious one would be Ottoman Empire's intent of regaining the control of eastern trade that originated in India and the protection of Muslims living therein. Before the Ottoman Empire begun expanding southward, the Portuguese had already started their 'discovery and exploration' in the late fifteenth century. The Portuguese reached India under Vasco Dagama and established their presence in the region. By doing so, they were then able to redirect the rich eastern trade from the Muslims and Arabs (Markham 1868). This later led to a war, especially the 1538 siege between Ottomans and Portuguese at *Diu* is one good example (Casale 2010). Although the control of the eastern trade was a fundamental bone of contention between the Ottoman Empire and Portuguese, there were other equally detrimental pursuits of the Ottomans and Portuguese in the region as well.

Even though the principal purpose of Portuguese exploration was aimed at locating the origin of Eastern trade, the explorers were also responsible for identifying the country of the 'Prester John'. Once they 'ascertained' *the* land of "Prester John" in 1494, official relations had started taking its roots, especially since 1520s on. This brings the issues of a Red sea-Abyssinia-Eastern trade triangle into the whole picture. While doing their imperial conquests, the Portuguese were attacking Muslim dominated localities in the red sea region, for instance, as early as 1499 when Vasco Dagama bombarded the port of Mogadishu (Kerr 1824); Suarez's destruction of Zeila in 1517 (Hozier 1869); and the sacking of Barbara in 1518 (Trimingham 1952). In the meantime, the Ottoman Empire was fighting with the Mamluks dynasty and subsequently put Egypt under its imperial control in 1516 (Salim 1997, 66). It was after the control of Egypt that the Ottomans started their move towards the south, especially along Suakin, Masawwa and Jeddah (Alvarez 1881; Orhonlu 1996; Salim 1997). The expansion of Ottomans in the Red sea region during this time is, firstly, aimed at controlling the Muslim Mamluks dynasty's power base in the region; secondly, and most importantly, the protection of Muslims and Islamic holy places. This thus constitutes the second and third factors, consecutively, why the Ottoman Empire got involved in the Red sea region in general and Abyssinia in particular.

Of the two reasons, the protections of Muslims and Islamic holy places were one of the fundamental *raison d'etre* of Ottoman's presence and their later intervention in Abyssinia (Yavuz 1986). According to him (1986, 45), the Ottoman empire was concerned primarily with protecting Muslims around the red sea and Indian ocean from the dangers of the Portuguese attack and, secondly, to save Muslim's Holy places of Mecca and Medina from possible destruction by the Portuguese. This concern holds especially true for there are many places, for instances, where the destruction of Muslim's Holy places were explicitly mentioned among Abyssinian and Portuguese sources (See, for instance, Alvarez 1881, Trimingham 1952; Salvatore 2010). Apart from this, the Ottoman Empire was "closely following the condition of Muslims in Abyssinia" from Zebid, Yemen (Orhonlu 1996, 23). This, however, changes when Portuguese soldiers arrived and began taking joint military action against Muslims in Abyssinia in the 1540s. When the joint military force defeated and wounded Imam Ahmed of Adal in 1541, he had asked for help from Ottomans residing in Zebid, Yemen (Orhonlu 1996). The Ottomans answered the call by sending soldiers to the sultanate. This then marks the first instance of Ottoman's involvement in Abyssinia.

The influence of Ottoman Empire in the post 1540s period in Abyssinia can be seen from three dimensions. First, after receiving the call for help, the Ottoman office based in Zebid replied back with some 400 soldiers. Before calling out for Ottoman's support, Imam Ahmed was already able to defeat the Christian Abyssinian kingdom in 1529. In addition to defeating the Christian kingdom, he was then able to expand and conquer more than a third of Abyssinia. Given the intensity of the war, however, two key figures had died from the Abyssinian and Portuguese side. One was the King of the Abyssinian kingdom, Lebna Dengle, who died while escaping the war of Imam Ahmed and the second one was the well-known Portuguese commander, Christopher Dagama, the nephew of Vasco Dagama, was killed during the war.

Imam Ahmed's victories, however, lasted only until the point at which the Portuguese reorganized themselves and defeated his force and wounded him in 1541. Although Ottoman Empire's support initially helped him to regain some success, he was finally defeated and killed by a Portuguese soldier in 1543. This defeat of the Adal sultanate had two natural consequences. Firstly, after the death of Imam Ahmed, there was no competent charismatic leader who could unite Muslims and their sultanates in-and-around Abyssinia against the Christian Abyssinian kingdom, except for some unorganized efforts, which were managed with minor frictions (Trimingham 1952). Obviously, once the Islamic Adal Sultanate had been reduced to a tributary status, the Christian kingdom then, by waging subsequent wars, attacked and regained control over what was lost to the 'invasion' of Gagn. This leverage of the Christian kingdom was accompanied by persecutions and killing of various Sultanates and Muslims (Orhonlu 1996, 29). One of these persecutions was, for instance, directed at the Mazaga Islamic kingdom⁹ in Tigray. In addition to king Glawdewos, King Minas also pursued the same goal in the 1550s.

The loss of Imam Ahmed in Abyssinia sent an explicit message to the Ottomans that Muslims in Abyssinia were in extreme difficulty. They have then intensified their move towards the south, conquering and 'rescuing' Muslims from the attack of the Portuguese and Christian Abyssinian soldiers. This then constitutes the second dimension in which the Ottomans moved from supporting Muslims' cause in Abyssinia from outside to direct military intervention. They took up on themselves the responsibility of rescuing Muslims from the Christian forces in Abyssinia. This Ottoman's direct military campaign through the land of Abyssinia has been linked with economic interests, especially the extraction of Gold in the post 1550s (Yildirim 2001). Contrary to this, the ottomans worked to maintain the '*Habes Eyaleti*'¹⁰ on the basis of charity. In fact, after putting Masawwa and Arkiko under its control in 1557, administrative costs were even paid not from imposed taxes or local resources, either money or so, but the payment sent from Egypt and Yemen (Yavuz 1986; Orhonlu 1996).

While the Ottomans were moving southward, they were building mosques, welfare institutions and, as a result, a number of Christians and others were accepting Islam. However, following the weakening of Ottoman power given the natural death of Ottoman commander, Ozdemir Pasha, the Christina kingdom came and destroyed all what was built in Debora (Orhonlu 1996, 48).

The control of Masawwa and its environment was continued up until the First World War under various Ottoman commanders and leaders (See, for a detailed discussion, Orhonlu 1996). In spite of all these, Ottoman Empire's presence, in a different form of relation with Abyssinia, although not strong, remained in Abyssinia and also, in today's Ethiopia. In other words, Ottoman Empire did not suffer the same rejection as the Portuguese in its demise.

The third dimension of Ottoman Empire's influence in the Christian Abyssinia kingdom is the involvement in internal politics. Internally, due to Yeshaq the Bahre Negash's conflict and war against the Abyssinian Christian king, Minas (1559-1563) in 1560, Yeshaq took refuge in Masawwa, which was under Ottomans' control. The commander of Ottomans, Ozdemir-oglu Osman Pasha, who was the son of Ozdemir Pasha, accepts the alliance with Yishaq. This alliance was critical for Osman Pasha, mainly because this could give him the chance to regain what was lost during his father's death around Arkiko, Debora and Masawwa zone. Accordingly, Yeshaq was, for Osman Pasha, like 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Yeshaq, on the one hand, was hoping to gain the support of Ottomans and also the Portuguese who were mainly concentrated in India, on the other. His expectation of help from the Portuguese was due to his earlier evacuation of Portuguese missionaries who were about to be killed by King Minas. However, the help he expected did not turn out to be positive from the Portuguese side. Consequently, he was killed during the war, along with Ottomans, against King Sarsta Dengel (1563-1597). After killing Yeshaq, the new Abyssinia king pushed back Ottomans in the year 1580 (Orhonlu, 1996; Trimmingham, 1952).

The external dimension of Ottoman's presence and its influence in Abyssinia, especially in the Masawwa region concerns the last Abyssinian king who brought Portuguese missionary activity in Abyssinia to an end. Since their first move to put Abyssinia under Portuguese influence through forcefully imposing Catholicism in Abyssinia, there was a growing popular dissatisfaction among the Abyssinian mass and political leaders. This was also characterized by actions ranging from social pressure to civil unrest and war. This was especially the overall condition in the periods starting from king Glawdewos (1559-1563) up until the end of Susuneyos's reign (1607-1632).

Realizing the dangers of Portuguese missionary activities in-and-around Abyssinia, King Fasiladas decided to uproot, for once and for all, Portuguese missionaries and their "interference" in-and-around Abyssinia (Hozier 1869, 13). One of the ways in which he accomplished this goal was by closely working with the Ottoman Empire based in Masawwa. According to Hozier, King Fasiladas "concluded a treaty with the Turkish governors of Massowah and Suakin to prevent the passage of Europeans into his dominions. Some Capuchin preachers, who attempted to evade this treaty and enter Abyssinia, met with cruel death" (1869, 13).

Under this treaty, the Ottomans played an important role. On the one hand, they pushed away a historical powerful enemy in the red sea region from Abyssinia, and they showed a relatively keen interest in normalizing the region, on the other. In addition to this, Ottoman's peaceful agreement with the Christian Abyssinian Kingdom paved the way for the peaceful expansion of Islam in Abyssinia. Due to this, Manoel d'Almeda, who lived in Abyssinia from 1624-33, testified that "adherents of Islam were scattered throughout the whole of the empire and formed a third of the population" (Trimingham 1952, 101).

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore three major issues underlying Ottoman-Abyssinia encounters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The first part systematically evaluated whether the friction in the sixteenth-century Abyssinia was between two different groups, Abyssinians and non-Abyssinians or Muslims and Christians. Framed along two divergent, mutually exclusive groups, the general view presented a binary opposition presupposing indigenous and foreign forces, portraying Christian rulers as Abyssinians and Muslims and their sultanates as aggressors and invaders from 'outside'. However, a review of pertinent literatures reveals a picture fundamentally different from this misleading reading.

For one thing, Muslims who fought against Christian Abyssinian rulers were Abyssinian Muslims and those Muslims who were under the rule of Christian Abyssinian elites. As Almeda had observed, these Muslims "were scattered throughout the whole of the empire and formed a third of the population" (Trimingham 1952, 101). It is therefore, fundamentally, at least in its genesis, an internal friction among Abyssinians, not *with* or *against* foreigners. Second, the sixteenth-century bold war and the subsequent involvement of the Portuguese, and the Ottoman Empire was fundamentally the result of historically evolved frictions between Christian rulers and Muslim subjects and their sultanates in-and-around Abyssinia, especially in the centuries leading to the sixteenth century.

At the end, although the Portuguese sided with the Christian Abyssinian kingdom, and later, the Ottoman Empire participated in the escalating friction between the two parties, Imam Ahmed was strong enough to defeat the Christian kingdom with a local resource and human power in the 1520s. He successfully defeated the kingdom without any external support, and as I have argued above, the Ottoman Empire's participation started off only in the 1540s. Even though the Portuguese officially started their formal relationship with Christian Abyssinian rulers in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire came into the picture only after 1540. The sixteenth-century friction, however, was reduced significantly by the policy change adopted by the Abyssinian Christian ruler, King Fasiladas in the first half of the seventeenth century. This change in policy made the allying Portuguese the Christian enemy while concluding a peaceful agreement with the Ottoman Empire.

Notes

¹ The first nation in the world (See <http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2013/03/04/ethiopia-the-first-christian-nation> accessed in Thursday, April 16, 2015. Others still claim that it was not even Armenians who precede Ethiopians in accepting Christianity in the first century AD (Portella, Woldegebar, and Pringle (2012): *Abyssinian Christianity: The First Christian Nation?* They argued that Abyssinian Christianity lays out a groundbreaking and compelling argument that Ethiopia may indeed have been the first Christian nation.

² Contrasted with, for instance, Muslims and their sultanates (like the Mazaga) which were within the Abyssinian cultural and geographic boundary; other Muslims and their sultanates; and non-Muslims under the imperial control of the Abyssinian kingdom.

³ Although the Aksumite kingdom was declining during this time, the Abyssinian Christian identity was being internalized and expanding. One manifestation of this would be Paul Henze's testimony that "the period of Aksum's decline was a time of continual expansion of the Orthodox Church and consolidation of its doctrine, ritual and organizational structure" (2004, 47). A more solid Ethiopian nationalism based Christianity was taking roots, however, during the first half of the seventeenth century (Trimingham 1952, 101).

⁴ Shahid 1979

⁵ Except for a handful of Arabs, perhaps of Yemeni origin, about whom exists fragmented reference, the principal sources of Imam Ahmed's military base were Muslims in-and around Abyssinia, not from Arabs or Ottoman Empire (See, for instance, Shihab Ad-Din 2003).

⁶ A rough translation would suggest that '*the Ottoman empire was not ready to intervene in Abyssinia in the first half of the sixteenth century*' (Author's translation).

⁷ This, of course, does not imply that Turks, in as much the same way as Armenians, Arabs, Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans, were not, in small numbers, trading with Abyssinians since long (See, for instance, Alvarez's *Narration*, 1881, 104-410).

⁸ Here by "influence" I'm implying any practical engagement-actions taken (military or otherwise) impacting the existing socio-political order(s) in Abyssinia.

⁹ They have asked the Ottomans for support against the attacking Christian force. Beside this, the queen of the kingdom, Ga'ewa fled to Masawwa for protection which was under full Ottoman control since 1557 (Trimingham 1952; Orhonlu 1996). Alvarez (1881, 95) mentioned them as "Moors . . . [they say that they] were not allowed to build mosque or possess them" implying their discontent under the Christian kingdom.

¹⁰ Ottoman's Habasha province. Geographically, it constitutes the area centered on Masawwa (Orhonlu 1996).

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