

## HARAR-WALLO RELATIONS REVISITED: HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

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**ABSTRACT** Since at least the sixteenth century, the areas of the present day regions of Harar and Wallo have been important centres of teaching and diffusion of Islam as well as of preservation of Islamic culture and education. Preachers and scholars from these areas played a decisive role in the introduction and dissemination of the faith in the country, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They contributed to the further development and consolidation of both Islamic institutions and law, and mysticism as manifested in the propagation of the religious orders, veneration of saints, and visits to shrines. They also actively promoted and sustained a tradition of Islamic reform and renewal. Overcoming their geographical distance, the two regions maintained close contacts through the Islamic school system, movement of teachers, students and instructional materials, and exchange of goods and services. This paper examines the nature and extent of the interregional relationships, the part that learned men and merchants played in strengthening those relationships, as well as their impact on the lives of the common people and elites of the two communities. It then suggests new areas for further research, which may shed more light on some controversial aspects of the Harari-Wallo links.

**Key Words:** Harar; Wallo; Interregional relationships; Islam; Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

The existing primary and secondary literature on Harar rarely makes any reference to the contacts—historical, cultural and religious—between the city-state of Harar and the congeries of Muslim principalities that flourished elsewhere in Ethiopia, including those in Wallo from at least 1700.<sup>(1)</sup> This reticence and neglect gives the wrong impression that the two entities lived in splendid isolation, analogous perhaps to the relations between mediaeval Ethiopia and Europe. In the case of Harar-Wallo relations, however, ample oral and written evidence suggests that they were well-developed by the end of the sixteenth century and continued to the nineteenth century.<sup>(2)</sup>

As will be explained below, there are also striking similarities between the two regions in terms of shared religious and historical experiences. The two reasons for emphasizing the common features rather than the differences are: firstly, Islam by its very nature is universalistic, transcending regional and ethnic identities and affiliations. In the context of Ethiopian history, it can be argued that Islam has played an integrative rather than a divisive role in the evolution and development of Ethiopian society and culture. Secondly, the historical records, both oral and documentary, testify more to the interactions and commonalities than to the distinct and separate identities of the Muslim communities of Ethiopia.

In exploring the interregional relationship of two important locales of teaching

and dispersion of Islam in Ethiopia, the present communication has three objectives: to highlight the nature, extent and significance of the links between the two centres of Islamic culture (Wallo and Harar); to suggest new areas and aspects for further research; and to propose that regional or local studies on Islam can, and should, be promoted and integrated as a basis of a comprehensive study of Islam in Ethiopia as a whole.

## INTERREGIONAL TRANSFER OF RELIGIOUS LEARNING AND CULTURE

As early as the fourteenth century, some members of the ruling family of the Walasma dynasty of Ifat shifted their political centre from the eastern Shewa region to the highlands of Harar.<sup>(3)</sup> Under the control of the rulers from Ifat, the town of Harar and its environs thus became the nucleus of the sultanate of Adal, which gradually extended its hegemony into large parts of the hinterland of Zeila, and challenged the Christian kingdom in the north.

The earliest contacts between Harar and Wallo can be traced as far back as the sixteenth century when Harar was flourishing as the sultanate's capital. During the course of the campaign of Adal's military general Imam Ahmad b. Ibrahim into the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (including Amhara Sayint in the Wallo area), he and his commanders left a number of preachers/teachers in various parts of the region to propagate Islam among the indigenous populations. That these influential persons from Harar made a lasting impact in the Wallo region, is apparent in the fact that the names of some of these teachers have been preserved in oral traditions. For example, Garado is the name of a small sub-district southwest of Dessie, capital of present-day South Wallo Administrative Zone of the Amhara Regional State. Garado is derived from *garad*, a title similar to governor, "which was common throughout Muslim-dominated eastern Ethiopia" in the sixteenth century (Braukämper, 2002: 48). There are also places with the same name scattered in other parts of highland Wallo such as Qolla Garado.

Similarly, near the town of Kombolcha, on the road to Dessie, there is a small settlement consisting of only a few hamlets that is known as Shāshabir, a corruption of the Harari Shaykh Sabir, who is believed to have accompanied General Ahmad b. Ibrahim and to have remained in the locality, which was subsequently named after him. Nearby is the settlement of Dawudo, possibly derived from the name Dawud. Another common toponym that recalls the influence of Harar after the end of the military conflicts is Gragn or Gragn Meda, from the moniker of General Ahmad b. Ibrahim: Gragn or "the left-handed."

Although during the Oromo expansion years of the sixteenth century the old links between the two regions was temporarily disrupted, commercial and other contacts persisted especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the course of my research on Islam in Wallo in the nineteenth century, which I conducted in the early 1980s,<sup>(4)</sup> I came across oral traditions and written sources which point to the city-state of Harar as the centre from which Sufism in the form of the Qadiri order was introduced into Wallo, and to the existence of regular contacts and relations between the two regions in the fields of higher

Islamic education and long-distance trade.

In fact, Qadiriya was among the earliest and most influential transfers of Islamic teaching between the pertinent regions. The Qadiri order, first introduced into Harar in the late fifteenth century by the Yemeni mystic, Abu Bakr Abdallah al-Aydarus (d.1503), was brought to Wallo from Harar. Wallo Muslim traditions speak of a chain of mystical transmission (*silsila*) according to which Faqih Hashim b. Abd al-Aziz (d.1765)<sup>(5)</sup> (a cleric originally from Gondär who settled in Harar) initiated Sayid Musafir and Ahmad b. Salih (a student of Faqih Hashim)—both of undetermined origin—who in turn initiated Faqih Zubayr b. Ala of Yajju. From that point, Faqih Zubayr is believed to have initiated Shaykh Muhammad Shafi b. Muhammad (1743–1806/1807) who transmitted the Qadiri *wird* (litany) to Shaykh Muhammad Nur b. Zubayr, who initiated Shaykh Jamal al-Din Muhammad of Anna (d.1882).

Not only was religious learning and culture being transferred from Harar to Wallo, but merchant activity was also connecting the inhabitants of both places. For example, there were also close commercial contacts between Harar and eastern Shewa, in general (Ahmed, 2001). There are many references in the written sources to the presence of Harari merchants in Ifat and possibly in the markets of neighbouring Dawway in southeast Wallo. We know that one of the two important trade routes from Harar led northwards to the markets of Aleyyu Amba, Abd al-Rasal and Tajura on the coast and in Ifat, at a locality called Endod, there was a resident Harari merchant community (Abbas, 1992: 20, 62).

According to Richard Caulk, “The export of cloth to [Ifat] in eastern Shewa by the town’s merchants still remained important to Harar’s commerce in the decade before the Turco-Egyptian occupation” (1977: 375). He also noted that “Closer to the town, the Maya section of the Alla agree that Islam had already been introduced from Dawe in Wallo, where a few of the Harar Oromo went for rudimentary training, and whence they returned to the valley of the upper Maya and to Gara Mullata, teaching without books”; and “The Abado Alla, just west of the Maya and the Nole, claim to have had some contact with the Muslim Oromo of Dawe before the Egyptians coerced all the Afran-Qallu into becoming Muslims. Some Abado went to Dawe for education ...” (Caulk, 1977: 381).

But the transfer was not only from south, northward; there are also references to the educational training which Harari students received at centres of Islamic learning in south Wallo (Al-Hajj Umar Ibrahim, 1973; Abd al-Aziz, 1994). In a recent Arabic hagiographical account of Shaykh Umar b. Ali, a Harari cleric, mention is made of his travel to Dawway in order to study advanced Islamic religious sciences under a local shaykh there (1973: 8).<sup>(6)</sup>

It is worth noting that Harar and Wallo were and are centres of advanced Islamic studies and the sites of numerous shrines that have attracted scholars and pilgrims from all over the country and beyond. The flow of shrine patrons from one locale to the other can certainly be considered an integral component to the historical Harar-Wallo relations.

It is also likely that civil conflict may have propagated the movement of people between Harar and Wallo. As a result of the persecution of the Wallo Muslims in the reign of the Christian Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889), for example,

some of the victims would certainly have fled to, and settled in the Muslim stronghold of Harar and its environs in order to practice their faith in peace. In this connection it is relevant to raise and answer the following questions: Did the Harari *ulama*<sup>(7)</sup> and people react in any way to the plight of the Muslims of Wallo? If they did not, what was (were) the reason(s)? It should also be remembered that Shaykh Talha b. Jafar, the leader of the Wallo Muslim resistance in the 1880s, left Ifat in 1896/1897 and settled in Charchar, not too distant from Harar, where he died in 1936.<sup>(8)</sup>

I believe that it is important to question the degree to which the Harari people were aware of the persecution of the Wallo Muslims during the 1880s, including the campaigns to suppress the rebellions in eastern Wallo and Shewa (in which the forces of emperors Yohannes and Menilek, and those of Ras Mikael fought) and also whether the Harari *ulama* reacted or expressed their solidarity with their coreligionists in Wallo. These queries, however, did not elicit a convincing answer from especially the Harari participants of a previous conference held in Harar in 2002. Instead the responses appeared rather evasive and dismissive. The silence and indifference of the local Harari community and leadership was explained by some in terms of total ignorance about the event, not a plausible argument in view of the geographical proximity of Harar to southern Wallo and the dissemination of news through long-distance merchants, travelers and itinerant students. It was also asserted that some Wallo Muslims joined the Shewan Christian army during the campaign of conquest of Harar in 1887.<sup>(9)</sup>

One might expect that the people of Harar were in a better position to know what was going on in Wallo especially since they were then under Egyptian occupation. Egypt had just been defeated in two decisive battles by the army of Yohannes in 1875 and 1876. Thus the Egyptian administration would have been alert to the encroachment of imperial forces in the nearby regions. Perhaps the occupying Egyptians would have allowed the Harari to express their condemnation of Yohannes's measures against the Muslims of Wallo and even provided material assistance to the Harari if they were to volunteer to fight on the side of the Muslims.

In the 2000 conference of the Friends of Harar, there was also reluctance on the part of the Harari participants to recognize the cultural and religious interactions and connections between Harar and Wallo in spite of the existence of oral and written evidence that testifies to those links. Then, after some discussion, a consensus was reached: the matter needed further scrutiny and research before a conclusive answer to the question can be put forward.

Putting aside consideration of interregional knowledge of conflict escalation between the area Muslims and the Christian army, let us now consider other types of exchanges between the regions. At the popular level, Wallo Muslims invoke the names and revere a number of Harari saints, the most prominent of whom is Shaykh Aw Abadir (also known as Umar al-Rida) (Wagner, 2003). As previously mentioned, in both Harar and Wallo, the Qadiri order is predominant as is the veneration of saints and visitation to their shrines. Wallo Muslims, both scholars and laypersons, have always paid homage to Harari holy men by visiting their shrines. Likewise, in recent times, many Harari residents of Addis Ababa flock

to see and receive the blessings of Al-Hajj Muhyi al-Din Ahmad, the direct descendant of Al-Hajj Bushra Ay Muhammad (d.1863)—the nineteenth century scholar and saint from Wallo and the present guardian of the shrine of Gata (Hussein, 2003).<sup>(10)</sup> Residents of Harar do the same pilgrimage when Al-Hajj Muhyi al-Din occasionally visits the town in Wallo. Moreover, Arabic pious literature on faith, mysticism and Islamic law produced by Harari scholars is widely read in Wallo, including Faqih Hashim's *Fath al-Rahmānī*. Similarly, the panegyrics of Shaykh Ahmad b. Adam of Dana (d.1903)<sup>(11)</sup> of Yajju (in Wallo) is recited at the beginning of solemn religious occasions, as is done throughout the country. Similarly, the poems of Shaykh Ibrahim Yasin of Chale of Warra Babbo are also popular as are those of Shaykh Sayid (d.1956), the former's illustrious son and a prolific composer of numerous panegyric poems in praise of God, the Prophet and indigenous Muslim saints.

## SUMMARY

This research has shown that the historical, religious and cultural links between Harar and Wallo have a long history. Based on written sources and oral traditions that were gathered, the sections above highlighted the following issues:

- 1) various Muslim communities in Ethiopia and the Horn have maintained close and mutually beneficial links in the religious and economic spheres for centuries
- 2) there was regular mobility of peoples, goods and ideas proving that the two communities were isolated neither from each other nor from the wider Muslim world, and
- 3) Muslim scholars of Harar and Wallo (for example, Shaykh Hamid b. Siddiq in the eighteenth century<sup>(12)</sup> and Al-Hajj Bushra in the following century), and others, were not only prolific writers of religious treatises but also had a reputation for piety and sanctity, and played a crucial role in Islamic revival and reformism.

The present research offers insights, however the investigation into the relationship between Harar and Wallo is important and demands further consideration. Important areas for future comparative research on the subject under discussion include:

- 1) The relations between the Emirate of Harar and the Muslim dynasties of Wallo, with special emphasis on the role of clerics, traders and members of their respective ruling classes in the dissemination and consolidation of Islam in Harar and Wallo
- 2) Use of the vernacular in the teaching of Islam and the composition of literary works, particularly in *'ajamī*
- 3) The contributions of Wallo and Harari scholars to the cultivation, propagation and consolidation of Islam in other parts of Ethiopia
- 4) Collection and compilation of manuscripts on Islamic literature and local/regional history produced by indigenous scholars, and works published in and outside the country

## CONCLUSION

Muslim Harar and Wallo were historically, and still are, linked by six types of system units that interact and become a complex network of associations. These units may be categorised as scriptural and institutional Islam; mystical Islam: religious orders, rituals and visits to shrines; long-distance trade and trade-routes; system of Islamic education and scholarship; migration and settlement of scholars and merchants; and intermarriage between Harari and Wallo Muslim families. A detailed study of these system units will broaden our knowledge, and offer fresh insights into, and perspectives on, the internal dynamism of regional Islam in Ethiopia as well into the nature and extent of the interactions between the various Muslim communities and cultures of the country.

Finally, research by Ethiopian graduate students from Harar and Wallo on the cultural and economic interactions between the Muslim communities of the two regions should be encouraged, promoted and supported by the respective regional governments and the members of the communities who are able to offer financial and other support mechanisms. The publication and dissemination of the research findings may form the basis for a project on a general history of Islam in Ethiopia that can complement previous studies. Henceforth, scholarly research must focus on the relations between and among the various Ethiopian Muslim communities on the one hand, and their interaction with the wider Islamic world, on the other.

## NOTES

- (1) Even the substantial number of entries on Harar in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Uhlig, 2005: 1012–1031) do not make any reference to the connection between Harar and other parts of Ethiopia. The only two exceptions are the works of Caulk and Ahmed (see below for full bibliographical details).
- (2) Many preliminary ideas and reflections on the historical links between Harar and Wallo were developed while preparing a short paper that I read at the “Friends of Harar” workshop held in Harar on 13 November 2000 at the invitation of Dr. Bertrand Hirsch, the then director of the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes (CFEE) in Addis Ababa. I wish to thank CFEE’s present director, Dr. François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, for covering the cost of air travel from Addis Ababa to Dire Dawa that enabled me to attend the present conference, and the organizers for providing accommodation during my stay in Harar.
- (3) A large number of Argobba people also left Ifat to settle in Harar (Abbas, 1992: 8).
- (4) The findings were incorporated into *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction* (Hussein, 2001).
- (5) Ewald Wagner explores “Hāšim b. ‘Abdal‘azīz” in his entry for *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (2005: 1044).
- (6) On the *ulama* of Wallo who studied under Harari scholars, see Abd al-Aziz Abd al-Ghani Ibrahim (1994: 85).
- (7) In Arabic, *ulama* (also, *ulema*) refers to a group of scholars of Islamic law.
- (8) It should also be remembered that Shaykh Talha b. Jafar, the leader of the Wallo Muslim resistance in the 1880s, left Ifat in 1896/1897 and settled in Charchar, not too distant from Harar, where he died in 1936. On this, see my *The Life and Career of Shaykh Talha b. Ja’far* (c.1853–1936) (1989: 13–30).

- (9) On the campaign to Harar, see Caulk (1971: 1–20).
- (10) For a brief account of other Shaykhs in Wallo, see Hussein (2002: 26).
- (11) On Shaykh Ahmad, also known as the first shaykh of Dana (*daniyy al-awwal*), see Al-Shaykh Muhammad Wale b. Al-Hajj Ahmad b. Umar, (n.d.: 78–85).
- (12) Further information on Shaykh Hamid b. Siddiq can be found in Robert Brunschvig's work (1974: 445–454).

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