

Paths toward the Nation: Islamic Identity, the Eritrean Muslim League and Nationalist  
Mobilization, 1941-61

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This dissertation titled  
Paths toward the Nation: Islamic Identity, the Eritrean Muslim League and Nationalist  
Mobilization, 1941-61

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## ABSTRACT

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Paths toward the Nation: Islamic Identity, the Eritrean Muslim League and Nationalist Mobilization, 1941-61

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This dissertation examines the trajectory of nationalism within Eritrea's Muslim communities during the two decades between the end of Italian colonial rule and the beginning of Eritrea's war of independence against Ethiopia. Specifically, this study looks at how varying ideas about "Muslim identity" within Eritrea's Islamic intelligentsia influenced the wider nationalist mobilization among activists who rejected any form of political union with Ethiopia even as international pressure to support "unionism" increased. The study also investigates how shifting ideas of Eritrean national consciousness developed alongside external trends such as pan-Islam and Nasserism. Anchored in Arabic and Tigrinya language sources, oral testimonies, and often overlooked British colonial archives, the contributions of Muslim intellectual activists are examined in relation to their significance within the Eritrean Muslim League, the largest and most prominent nationalist organization that emerged during the period.

By using the Eritrean Muslim League as the primary lens of analysis, my study addresses the various ways in which League leaders worked to build the organization as a truly "national" party irrespective of religion. Indeed, one of the major underlying themes in the study is the importance of inter-religious cooperation between Muslim and Christian nationalists. This dissertation thus illustrates the various ways in which

Eritrea's Muslim leaders used the legacy of Islam as a vehicle to build cooperation with like-minded Christian nationalists across the country. Consequently, the study combines elements of political, social and intellectual history to examine the often complex relationship between religious and national identity in post-World War II Eritrean society.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Nicholas M. Creary

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## DEDICATION

*To my parents, Louis Venosa and Francine Galati Venosa*

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By far the biggest thank you owed is to my wife Sabrina Amanuel Sahle, who has been kind enough to suffer along with the sometimes incoherent rants of a frustrated history student. This project, and more importantly the life outside of it, would not have been possible without her...

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BMA	British Military Administration
BA	British Administration
CAE	Comitato Assistenza Eritrei
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front
IML	Independent Muslim League
LPP	Liberal Progressive Party
MFH	Mahber Fikri Hager (Party for the Love of Country)
MLWP	Muslim League of the Western Province
NEPIP	New Eritrea Pro-Italy Party
SCAO	Senior Civil Affairs Officer
SDF	Sudan Defense Force

## NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

In general, transliterated Arabic terms have followed the most recent guidelines set forth by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) while Tigrinya terms have adhered to the most common versions found within the previous English language literature. Additionally, traditional Eritrean honorific titles cited within this dissertation have followed their most common English form. Likewise, individual names, places and technical terms originating among Eritrea's Tigre-speaking communities have been rendered in the standardized form most familiar to English speakers. In the context of this study, the term *tigre* in a lower case refers to the traditional marker for those Tigre-speaking peoples of vassal or "serf" origins across western Eritrea rather than as a broad ethno-linguistic designation.

It is not my intention to disregard or disrespect the realities of linguistic diversity found across modern-day Eritrea or to infer the supremacy of common English spelling of these indigenous terms and concepts. Rather, my goal has been to achieve a basic level of continuity that can also allow for a more inclusive representation of these often complex terms for a wider, non-specialist audience.

## GLOSSARY

degia	Honorific military title, roughly translating as “Commander or General of the Gate”; derived from the Amharic term <i>dejizmatch</i> .
Haraka	“Movement” in Arabic. Term used to describe the activities and membership of the ELM .
Jabarti	Tigrinya-speaking Muslims residing mainly in the Eritrean highlands.
khalifa	Representative of a Sufi brotherhood.
Khatmiyya	The largest and most political influential Sufi brotherhood across western and northern Eritrea.
qadi	Islamic judge.
sayyid	Honorific title, reserved for males regarded as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.
shifta	Bandit or raider.
shumagulle	Land-owning class and political elites across much of the Tigre-speaking territories in western and northern Eritrea.
tariqa	Islamic Sufi Brotherhood
tigre	Tigre-speaking residents in western Eritrea with vassal or “serf” origins.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: ISLAM, IDENTITY AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ERITREAN NATIONALISM

On June 10, 1947 the various branches of the Eritrean Muslim League organized demonstrations in almost every major city and town across the country. Unprecedented in scale, the protests represented one of the high points of nationalist momentum in then British-occupied Eritrea. One of the largest demonstrations, held in Asmara's ma'kel ketema section, saw members from the local League office lead a march through the city. In a widely circulated speech that the organization later published, shaykh Abdelkadir Kebire, the League's president of the Asmara branch, elaborated on the significance of the demonstrations taking place across the country.

Freedom is a natural right for all nations and something of value even for animals let alone for the human beings who follow after it, make every effort to achieve it and are willing to pay a high price to protect it. Therefore, it is no wonder that today this crowd and this nation are calling for freedom and wanting to destroy their chains. They raise their voices calling for it [freedom] and walking toward it, they are guided by the light of this noble torch with which Allah has blessed Eritrea's heart. This torch is independence.<sup>1</sup>

Kebire's speech represented one of the earliest attempts among Eritrea's nationalist leaders to frame the case for self-determination as both a moral imperative and an issue of particular urgency within the wider Muslim community.

In February 2010, more than six decades after Kebire first delivered his declaration, a group consisting of many of the descendents of this generation of Muslim activists issued a public call for rejuvenation in the political discourse within Eritrea and throughout the global Eritrean diaspora. Harkening back to the "long tradition of Eritrean

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<sup>1</sup> "Speech of the President of the Muslim League in Asmara." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 24, 1947: 1.

Muslims in resisting oppression and domination,” the group, referring to itself as *Mejlis Ibrahim Mukhtar*, issued a manifesto for its new political programme.<sup>2</sup> Entitled “The Eritrean Covenant: Towards Sustainable Justice And Peace,” the document addressed both the current human rights situation in Eritrea and the often-overlooked role of Islamic authorities and community leaders in leading past movements for political reform and social justice.

In looking at recent Eritrean history with an emphasis on how activists used religion to mobilize the early nationalist movement, one is struck not only by the contributions of Islamic leaders in developing greater political awareness, but also the considerable silence within the scholarship in addressing how indigenous articulations of Muslim identity influenced the emergence of a wider Eritrean nationalism. As both the 1947 protests and the release of “The Eritrean Covenant” illustrate, the broad though sometimes ambiguous idea of an Eritrean “Islamic identity” has had significant ramifications not only within the scholarship but also on the current political debates taking place across the diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

However, the growth of the Eritrean Muslim League during the early stages of the independence movement represents far more than a political narrative of one specific organization. As this study will illustrate, the experience of the League, including both its principal organizers and wider membership, was tied to larger cultural, social and religious transformations. These changes took place among Muslim communities in Eritrea during the crucial period from the end of Italian colonialism to the eve of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Arabic world *Mejlis* translates in English as committee.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/5491/11/> (accessed April 15, 2010).

armed independence movement (1941-1961). Viewed in this context, the Muslim League represented one of the most significant vehicles, although certainly not the only one, for developing new perspectives on regional Islamic identity and contributing to wider interpretations about what it meant to be “Eritrean.” By examining the intersection of Islam, culture and nationalist politics of the League throughout the 1940s and 1950s, this study aims to produce new understandings about the culture of Eritrean nationalism in a broader context than previous scholars have done. Its principal argument rests on the idea that the Eritrean Muslim League, beyond simply being the largest and most influential nationalist organization of the era, represented an integral part of the intellectual foundations from which a national Eritrean identity emerged. Consequently, many of the most substantive debates that took place within the organization about concerns over Muslim rights, responsibilities and community solidarity served as the template from which the wider nationalist movement later developed.

### **The Italian Colonial Context**

When Italy’s East African Empire crumbled under the weight of British-allied forces in early 1941, questions about the future of the Italian colonies emerged even before Britain had secured complete control over most of the territory. Like many regions across post-World War II Africa, the challenge posed by Eritrea’s political future was fundamentally linked to the legacy of European colonialism.

The area now recognized as Eritrea was forged out of nearly two decades of Italian economic and military infiltration throughout the Red Sea coastal region (1869-1889) and by more than fifty years of official colonial administration (1890-1941).



Originally wielding protectorate authority over the various pastoralist peoples across the coastal lowlands, Italian authorities secured sections of the Semhar and Sahel regions before acquiring part of the interior extending to the Mareb River, which Ethiopian authorities ceded to Italy through the treaty of Wichale in May 1889.<sup>4</sup> Italy's failed attempts to extend its influence further into the Ethiopian highlands, best illustrated by the Italian army's dramatic loss to Ethiopian forces at the Battle of Adowa in October 1896, relegated Italian colonial authority to the previous boundaries demarcated in 1889. The Italian government nevertheless emerged after 1896 with renewed investment in Eritrea under the administration of Colonial Governor Fernando Martini (1897-1907) who, according to Tekeste Negash, "succeeded admirably well in laying down the foundations of a colonial government more or less along the lines used by Britain and France."<sup>5</sup>

Serving as largely a source of manpower for conscripted soldiers used in Italy's war to secure Libya and as a base for trade with Ethiopia, Eritrea remained an understaffed and largely marginal colony until the Italian government increased full scale industrialization during the 1930s as Italy prepared for its invasion of Ethiopia. Capital investment, industrialization and rapid urbanization throughout the mid-1930s had the effect of increasing the Italian settler population dramatically in a short period of time, swelling from less than five thousand resident Italians in 1934 to more than fifty thousand by the end of 1935.<sup>6</sup> By the time that the British Military Administration (BMA)

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<sup>4</sup> Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

solidified its rule over Eritrea in April and May 1941, the colony's Italian population grew to approximately 70,000, with most residents living in or around the capital city Asmara.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the considerable increase in resident Italians by the late 1930s, Eritrea's indigenous population of more than 600,000 was composed overwhelmingly of inhabitants from the nine indigenous ethnic groups, including the Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Nara, Kunama, Hedharab (Beja) and Rashaida. With the mainly agricultural, Tewahado Coptic Tigrinya representing more than half of the indigenous population, the bulk of the remaining groups, with some exceptions, lived as pastoralists and practiced Islam. Although they shared a common experience under Italian colonial authority, Eritrea's indigenous inhabitants lacked any previous political or territorial cohesion. BMA administrator Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis provided a lucid summation of the relatively fractured relations between the colony's various groups.

The capricious manner of Eritrea's creation, its long history of immigrations, invasions, and partition between alien rulers, and the physical diversity of its terrain have left their stamp on the inhabitants. They are not in any accepted sense a single people but a conglomerate of different communities which were themselves in most cases akin by culture and blood to their neighbors in Ethiopia, the Sudan, and French Somaliland.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the diverse ethnic milieu, the mainly urban Italian population and the Italian government's still well entrenched colonial administration running the day to day operations while under British supervision, BMA officials did not presume in early 1941 that indigenous community leaders would be inclined to participate in the

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<sup>7</sup> G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-52* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, 11.

discussions about local political affairs. Yet following the establishment of the British Military Administration in 1941, a small group of activists based mainly in Asmara began engaging in the dialogue on Eritrea's fate in the post-Italian period. In May 1941, the group founded Mahber Fikri Hager (Party for the Love of Country), the first sizeable association to emerge from among Eritrea's small intellectual class.<sup>9</sup> From its inception, the organization featured a diverse membership that included both those who called for political union between Eritrea and Ethiopia and members who argued that Eritrea's distinct ethno-cultural makeup and its recent history entitled it to autonomy.

Although many of the earliest studies on Eritrean nationalist politics have argued that the organization espoused an inherently "unionist" stance, the more complicated reality suggests otherwise.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that some activists argued for complete union between Eritrea and Ethiopia, other members of MFH hoped that Eritrea should be "reunited" with the mainly Tigrinya-speaking peoples across the border in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> While most of the organizations' highland-based, Tigrinya-speaking members supported this push for a "greater Tigray" and others expressed wholehearted support for Eritrea's complete political union with the Ethiopian state, the small group of Muslim activists within the MFH initially failed to articulate a cohesive message on Eritrean independence.<sup>12</sup> Well before the end of World War II, as

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<sup>9</sup> Henceforth noted as MFH. See Amare Tekle, "The Creation of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation: A Case of Post-War International Relations (1945-50)," (PhD diss., University of Denver, 1964), 71.

<sup>10</sup> See Trevaskis, *Eritrea: a Colony in Transition*; Lloyd Ellingson, "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950," *Journal of African History* 18, no. 2 (1977): 261-281.

<sup>11</sup> See Shumet Sishagne, *Unionists & Separatists: The Vagaries of Ethio-Eritrean Relation 1941-1991* (Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2007), 22-29. For more on the "Greater Tigray" movement, see Alemseged Abbay, "The Trans-Mareb Past in the Present," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (1997): 321-334.

<sup>12</sup> Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynfelale: 1941-1950* (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2002), 79-102.

political differences between unionist and nationalist members intensified, the Ethiopian government also pressed its claims on Eritrea to the international community. The political fracturing unfolded as administrators within the occupying BMA established day-to-day control over the region, while the independence debate was yet to be taken up by the newly-created United Nations General Assembly.

Only in late 1946 did the nationalist impetus, in the form of the Eritrean Muslim League, finally materialize as a political entity. Comprised initially of a diverse constituency of clan chiefs, traders, Islamic clerics, disaffected peasants and urban-based civil servants, the League espoused a broad nationalist platform that initially came to mean different things to each respective group. Later in the decade the League leadership, consisting largely of former colonial civil servants and Islamic clerics, began to make the case for independence in a more forceful manner; its program veered increasingly toward a populist agenda that linked the nationalist movement with the need for broader social and cultural reforms. As this study will illustrate, this agenda included support for religious and educational reform across Muslim communities, addressing the concerns of the largely peasant population in Eritrean lowlands and building camaraderie with non-Muslims in the independence movement. Although the creation and later dismantling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Federation during the 1950s altered the political dynamics and direction of the League, many of its leaders continued to exert influence in activist circles until the start of the armed independence movement. This study thus places the League at the center of the wider Muslim community and religious activism to better understand how local interpretations of Muslim identity contributed to the growth

of a discernable ‘Eritrean’ political consciousness. However, because much of their activism challenged many of the central tenets of Islamic life and social organization, particularly among the Tigre-speaking Muslim communities across western Eritrea, both the League’s and the wider nationalist movement’s emergence require a brief discussion of the diffusion of Islam and Muslim authority across the region.

### **The Diffusion of Islam in Eritrea**

Taking stock of the inherent cultural and linguistic pluralism across Eritrea, Jonathan Miran observed that historically, the country’s heterogeneous Muslim communities reflected a truly “kaleidoscopic historical configuration” of peoples from multiple ethnicities, speaking a variety of Semitic, Cushitic, and Nilo-Saharan languages; and living in diverse social and political organizations.<sup>13</sup> In light of the fact that this study examines the transformation of Islamic identity and the role of the Muslim League in the major cities and especially among the Tigre-speaking peoples of northern and western Eritrea, the significance of the regional social structures and clan organization requires some clarification. In summarizing the relatively complex social and territorial organization of the various Tigre-speaking peoples, Miran also observed that they were historically divided “into a number of tribes and tribal confederations” and included groups such as the Beni-Amer of the western lowlands; the Marya, Bet Juk, and a large part of the Mensa’ group all residing in the area around Keren, groups such as the Habab,

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 169.

‘Ad Takles, ‘Ad Temaryam and the ‘Ad Mu’allim of the northern highlands, and other small groups inhabiting the Semhar region of Massawa’s close interior.”<sup>14</sup>

The region comprising the heart of Tigre-speaking Eritrea also experienced several waves of Islamic diffusion since the first half of the eighth century, with the majority of residents of the western lowlands and the affiliated coastal region having become Muslims during the thirteenth century. This conversion occurred mainly due to the growth of the regional sea-based trade routes and the accompanying “circulation of holy men” from across the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>15</sup> Although the early spread of Islam established the first Muslim communities, it was not until the nineteenth century with the emergence of several Islamic “revivalist movements” in the greater Red Sea area that brought travelling Muslim preachers and later encouraged the establishment of Sufi brotherhoods. Across the region, “the energetic *turuq* and holy families fostered widespread spatial networks, or webs of connections, straddling the area between the Red Sea coasts and the inland regions in the eastern Sudan.”<sup>16</sup>

Aiming both to deepen Islamic practices among Muslims and to gain new converts, the revivalist momentum was propelled in particular by two regional Islamic entities, the ‘Ad Shaykh holy family and the Khatmiyya tariqa.<sup>17</sup> Originally of Meccan origin, the members of the ‘Ad Shaykh family established operations in Eritrea during the early nineteenth century and successfully won over large segments of the Tigre-speaking population in eastern and northern Eritrea and together with their *na’ib* allies along the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” *Des Welt des Islams* 45, no. 1 (2005): 192

<sup>17</sup> Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 172.

Eritrean coast, helped bring locals into their ranks as members of the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood.<sup>18</sup> While the ‘Ad Shaykh’s success continued throughout much of the coastal region, western Eritrea experienced an equally significant diffusion of Islamic revivalism from the growing influence of the Khatmiyya under the leadership of the al-Mirghani family. Founded by Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani (1793-1852), the Khatmiyya’s success in developing their membership and allegiance with local communities has been attributed to brotherhood’s ability to incorporate the “preexisting religious formations (notables and holy lineages) into a supra-community network” that had far reaching social consequences.<sup>19</sup> The Khatmiyya’s influence thus extended beyond the traditional realm of religious authority and extended well into the social and economic fabric of life for many Muslim communities across Eritrea. Ultimately these developments solidified Islam among the majority of the lowland population to a point where by the nineteenth century, virtually all of Tigre-speaking groups adopted Islam.<sup>20</sup> The intensification of proselytization activity among the Sufi groups and holy families within the various segments of Tigre-speaking society effectively created an “Islamic

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<sup>18</sup> Na’ib, or “deputy,” refers to the historical group of Beja-descended Balaw authorities that developed widespread influence over local Muslim authorities and extended their power in the area between Eritrea’s Red Sea Coast and the highland plateau until the mid-nineteenth century. See Jonathan Miran, “Power without Pashas: The Anatomy of Na’ib Autonomy in Ottoman Eritrea (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> C.),” *Eritrean Studies Review* 5, no.1 (2007): 33-88; Jonathan Miran and Emeri van Donzel, “Nā’ib,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Ed. S. Uhlig, Volume III (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 1116-1118.

<sup>19</sup> Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 178. Miran noted that in addition to the Khatmiyya and the ‘Ad Shaykh other “Tigre holy families and clans” including the ‘Ad Darqi, ‘Ad Mu’allim and other groups transmitted their own forms of “Islamic education and religious expertise within essentially recently-converted Tigre-speaking societies.” See Jonathan Miran, “Constructing and deconstructing the Tigre frontier space in the long nineteenth century,” in Gianfrancesco Lusini (ed.) *History and Language of the Tigre-Speaking Peoples* (Napoli: Università Degli Studi Di Napoli “L’orientale”, 2010), 44. See also John O. Voll, “A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah in the Sudan,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 30.

Space” throughout much of western, northern and eastern Eritrea.<sup>21</sup> As will be discussed, these developments would later have a profound influence on the course of Eritrean nationalism, as shifting ideas about Islam, social organization and authority all contributed to the wider political transformations during the 1940s and 1950s.

### **Problems in the Eritrean Nationalist Historiography: Conceptual Silences**

In *Silences in African History*, Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin cautioned that African history has long experienced a crisis in which “the process of commodification or standardization” has reinforced paradigmatic silences within the production of knowledge by perpetuating the hegemony of western intellectual thought.<sup>22</sup> With few exceptions, this crisis in the basic epistemology has applied to the majority of scholarship that has framed the debate and the study of Eritrea’s independence movement. At a fundamental level, the historiography has suffered from two of the most paralytic dilemmas related to Depelchin’s theory of conceptual silences: compartmentalization and periodization.

The longstanding question about precisely when and how an Eritrean national identity first emerged remains a major conceptual controversy that engenders strong debate among scholars. When former BMA official Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis authored *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* in 1960, it represented the first of many accounts that attempted to quantify Eritrean nationalism by looking at its origins during the political

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<sup>21</sup> Miran, “History and Language of the Tigre-Speaking Peoples,” 43. Miran also argues that in spite of the regional Islamization and consolidation of the various Sufi *taruq*, the political dynamics within much of Tigre society remained “multifaceted and protean.” Ibid., 50. See also Abba Isaak Ghebre Iyesus, *Arguments for Shedding Some Light on the Tigré Phenomenon* (Asmara, MBY Pressing Press, 1996); Hussein Ahmed and Jonathan Miran, “Islamic brotherhoods” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 212-216.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the syndromes of discovery and abolition* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki Na Nyota Publishers, 2004), 17.



debates of the 1940s. Yet ultimately the outbreak of Eritrea's war of independence against Ethiopia (1961-1991) tied much of the scholarship to the fortunes of the armed struggle, resulting in the emergence of several narratives that each reflected the political trends taking place within the revolution, and later, within Eritrea's government. Sara Rich Dorman argues that these competing narratives of nationalism have now extended to the very function and positioning of the Eritrean state itself.<sup>23</sup> Consequently,

The emergence of alternative narratives, however subterranean and suppressed, is thus at the heart of Eritrean political battles-fought by the regime through the state's myriad institutions, and by non-state actors through research, publication and the internet.<sup>24</sup>

Historian Alemseged Tesfai alluded to this dilemma when he noted that much of the historiography has failed to explore the complexities of the "Eritrean social fabric" in relation to nationalist development.<sup>25</sup> Scholars as well as political actors thus have misconceived the nature of nationalism generally along western-defined terms. Specifically, many studies have presented false dichotomies such as the emergence of a rigid 'nationalist' vs. 'unionist' rivalry or the growth of discord between 'Muslim' and 'Christian' factions. Likewise, the fixation on Eritrea's thirty-year war for independence has positioned much of the scholarship within the context of an anti-colonial, guerilla-based movement for national liberation.<sup>26</sup> Similarly to how Tekle Woldemikael argued that the present-day Eritrean government has merged the one-party state's political

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<sup>23</sup> Sara Rich Dorman, "Narratives of Nationalism in Eritrea: Research and Revisionism," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 2 (2005): 218.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Alemseged Tesfai, interview with author. March 21, 2010, Athens, Ohio.

<sup>26</sup> At a deeper level, this misconception of Eritrean independence also echoes Basil Davidson's broader observation that rather than idealistically embracing the nation-state for its own sake, many nationalists understood that the nation state framework represented the most effective means to "strike away the chains of foreign rule." See *Basil Davidson, The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State* (New York: Random House, 1993), 164.

ideology with the commemoration of independence, the scholarship has also fallen victim to the militarization of Eritrean national identity.<sup>27</sup> This concretization of “nation-history,” according to Tricia Hepner, implies that the very criteria for interpreting and understanding the progression of Eritrean history is rooted in the ideological foundations first erected during the armed struggle.<sup>28</sup>

At the heart of this Eritrean “nation-history” has been a discourse promoting a collective experience of the simultaneous “liberation war and the nationalist revolution” that has prevented the emergence of alternate narratives seeking to understand the growth of Eritrean identity away from the battlefield. In the years immediately before and after Eritrea’s victory over Ethiopia, a flood of publications appeared that either provided an elementary overview of nationalism in relation to the military struggle or gave pseudo-journalistic coverage to the revolution’s dominant political entity, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).<sup>29</sup> Even when more substantial studies that have focused on the broader dimensions of Eritrean national identity have appeared, including Ruth Iyob’s

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<sup>27</sup> See Tekle M. Woldemikael, “Pitfalls of Nationalism in Eritrea,” in *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. David O’Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009): 1-16.

<sup>28</sup> Tricia Hepner, “Collective Memories and Embodied Events: Eritrean ‘Nation History,’” *Journal of Imperial and Postcolonial Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 67. See Richard Reid, “The Challenge of the Past: The Quest for Historical Legitimacy in Independent Eritrea,” *History of Africa* 28 (2001): 239-272.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980); David Pool, *Eritrea, Africa’s Longest War* (London: Anti-Slavery Society, 1982); Haggai Erlich, *The struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978: war and revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1983); Proceedings of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples. *The Eritrean Case* (Milan: Research and Information Center on Eritrea, 1984); James Firebrace with Stuart Holl, *Never kneel down: drought, development and liberation in Eritrea* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1985); Peter With, *Politics and Liberation: The Eritrean Struggle, 1961-1986* (Aarhus: University of Aarhus, 1987); Robert Machida, *Eritrea: The Struggle for Independence* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1987). In the past decade this view has continued to some extent with more recent publications that have centered on various aspects of the armed struggle. See David Pool, *From Guerillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001); Michela Wrong, *I Didn’t do It for You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005.)

*The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance and Nationalism, 1941-1993* and Redie Bereketeab's *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation 1890-1991*, they have often provided a cursory overview of the pre-1961 period in regards to how indigenous intellectual and political discourse shaped the ideological trajectory of nationalism prior to the war of independence.<sup>30</sup>

Within much of the scholarship, this trend of latching onto the new statist narrative of Eritrea's "revolutionary nationalist project" complicated the discourse in two major ways.<sup>31</sup> First, the privileging of the period of the armed struggle subsumed and neglected much of the record on the pre-1961 independence movement. Secondly, the EPLF's armed victory over the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) by 1982 for control of the revolution succeeded in framing the nationalist struggle largely along class and ethnic lines and simultaneously deemphasized religious identity as a factor in the movement. Although much of the EPLF-sanctioned narrative alluded to the early development of political activism during the 1940s, the thorny issue of religion and especially Islamic identity within the movement received little mention. This was chiefly the result of the EPLF's attempts to counter the perceived "Islamist" tendencies within the previous vanguard organization of the armed revolution, the ELF. Framing the organization's ideological base as an uneasy mixture of Islamic zealotry and calculative pan-Arabism led by "peasant chieftains and reactionary petty bourgeois intellectuals," the shift against

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<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Tekeste Negash has argued that much of the scholarship produced by "nationalist historians" throughout the 1980s and 1990s amidst the war of independence selectively utilized "the nationalist discourse of the 1940s" to offset the supposed dearth of evidence concerning the actual legitimacy of nationalism during the decade in question. See Tekeste Negash, "Italy and its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-1950," *Africa (Roma)* 59, no. 3/4 (2004): 420.

<sup>31</sup> Hepner, "Collective, Memories and Embodies Events: Eritrean 'Nation-History,'" 50.

the ELF succeeded in omitting any mention of the legacy of Islam or Muslim identity as legitimate sources of national consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the consensus that began to take hold during the early 1980s eventually crystallized as the state-sanctioned “nation-history.” According to Hepner, the “dissemination of nation-history” served as a key aspect of the “political aims and social transformations the revolution sought to bring about,” as well as a key reason for supporting the continuation of the fighting and the need for all Eritreans to share the burdens of the war.<sup>33</sup> Commenting on this ongoing debate about the crystallization of Eritrean consciousness, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar has proposed that at a fundamental level scholars need to begin approaching the topic with an emphasis on how the “role of modernity in the Eritrean colonial context” contributed to such formations.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the development of a more comprehensive critical framework must also seriously take into account the “complex interplay of colonial and indigenous strategies” in regional power relations.<sup>35</sup>

Curiously, one of the major obstacles in addressing these processes has been the fact that with few exceptions, much of the previously discussed scholarship on the history of Eritrean nationalism in both the pre and post-1961 period has been approached by non-historians who have not investigated these ideological developments in their own particular historical context. This gap in the literature among has thus resulted, at times, in broad theorizations about the development of early Eritrean national identity which

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<sup>32</sup> Eritreans for Liberation in North America, “Our Struggle and its Goals,” *Harnet* 2, no. 3 (1973): 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, “Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): 269.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

have often lacked sufficient evidence to illustrate the actual substance of Eritrean nationalist discourse on its own terms.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Modernity Dilemma: Colonialism, Nationalism, Modernity, Culture**

In examining the Muslim League's actions and the related activities among nationalists between 1941 and 1961, problematizing Islamic identity and its significance in articulating a 'modern' Eritrean identity through local channels of power and knowledge becomes increasingly necessary. Reassessing the many ways that Islam and Muslim identity contributed to the early nationalist movement, therefore, not only allows observers to reinvigorate the debate about Eritrean identity by taking it beyond the bounds of statist knowledge production and the ideological constraints of the "post-colony," but it also addresses the larger dilemma of the commodification of historical knowledge by allowing for indigenous, subaltern perspectives to emerge and serve as correctives to previous narratives.<sup>37</sup>

Discerning the various ways in which Muslim League activists worked to further indigenous understandings of a shared Eritrean identity also requires an ability to confront the seemingly blatant contradiction that the League leadership promoted the idea of a shared 'traditional' regional Islamic cultural history while embracing and striving for a 'modern' nation-state. Yet, as James McDougall has illustrated, the simultaneous embrace of a national identity within a broader Islamic cultural continuity represents only

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<sup>36</sup> Tekeste Negash, "Italy and its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-1950," 420.

<sup>37</sup> See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

one outgrowth of the “dialogical discursive practices” of colonial modernity.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this exposure to imperial discourse

the development of nationalism and contemporary forms of Islam cannot be understood as integrally oppositional resistance to the imposition of ‘modern, western civilization.’ On the contrary, contemporary cultures of nationalism and Islam are themselves the products of the profound, global transformations effected in the imperial interrelationships of societies and cultures throughout the modern world.<sup>39</sup>

Key to understanding McDougall’s point is his emphasis that rather than being European or western in origin, modernity itself was “inherently colonial,” a byproduct of global “capitalist penetration, extraction, production and circulation.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, within Muslim societies under colonial rule, varying forms of “vernacular modernism” developed among the nearby power structures that articulated new and meaningful historical imaginations by channeling the “interrelated fields of culture, religion and history.”<sup>41</sup>

Although McDougall’s study focused specifically on the Algerian case and involved what the author termed the “seizure of symbolic power in the cultural realm,” the wider process involving Islamic interpretations of modernity offers a useful framework to revisit Dirar’s assertion about how the growth of Eritrean identity involved an assimilation of colonial discourse mainly through the small but influential class of elites.<sup>42</sup> According to Dirar and Tesfai these elites emerged principally from the colonial

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<sup>38</sup> James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>42</sup> This concern for the precarious situation of the nationalist elite echoes the earlier observations of both Frantz Fanon and later Amílcar Cabral. In particular, Cabral’s placed great importance on the idea that national liberation movements did not give sufficient attention to the “common struggle” among the masses

civil service and came of age by maneuvering through the ranks of the Italian colonial system (1890-1941), particularly during the mid and late 1930s. This generation of Eritreans working at “the lower levels of the civil service as interpreters, telegraph and telephone operators, and clerks” as well as the “urban *petit bourgeoisie* linked to trade and land concessions” helped fill a vital social space between colonial authorities and the broader indigenous population.<sup>43</sup> Seen in this light, the dynamic influence that many of the Muslim League’s most prominent organizers wielded during the late 1940s and 1950s also complicates the debate about why their organization so feverishly rallied under its own interpretation of modernity.

Moreover, the experiences of this first legitimate generation of Muslim nationalist leaders ran parallel with many of the wider transformations among activists across the African continent who concerned themselves with the need to modernize the former colonies and thus eagerly deployed “the rhetoric on which colonial rulers depended for their legitimacy and self-image.”<sup>44</sup> According to Frederick Cooper, one of the most acute perils of hindsight among historians has been that the “gaze backward from the era of independence” has dismissed the idea that the ambiguous language of nationalism and modernization embraced by so many African leaders represented a movement “not to

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in fighting against imperialism because elites served as the “native agents” of neocolonialism. See Amílcar Cabral, “The Weapon of Theory.” Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Havana, January, 1966; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1963).

<sup>43</sup> Dirar, “Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea,” 268. See also Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, “From Warriors to Urban Dwellers: Ascari and the Military Factor in the Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea,” *Cahiers d’Études africaines* XLIV (3), no. 175 (2004): 533-574.

<sup>44</sup> Frederick Cooper, “Possibility and Constraint: African Independent in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of African History* 49 (2008): 173.

escape empire, but to transform it.”<sup>45</sup> Taking Depelchin’s claim about compartmentalization at face value, it follows that our understanding of modernity can not be essentialized when seeking to bring greater nuance and understanding about how elements within an African society used colonial discourses to fashion new ‘indigenous,’ national identities. The apparent ambiguity around the idea of modernity among the early generations of Eritrean political elites needs to be reassessed by understanding how, at least in the context of the Muslim League, religion and Islamic cultural continuity served as integral “indigenous strategies” in the imagining of an Eritrean nation.<sup>46</sup> This approach thus concurs with Cooper’s position that in dismissing modernity as a process rooted exclusively in “capitalism and imperialism,” critics of modernity have looked away from “the importance of debate and struggle in shaping what reason, liberalism, equality, and rights can be claimed to mean,” particularly in the context of post-World War II African nationalism.<sup>47</sup>

Looking at Eritrea’s colonial legacies (both Italian and British) and the increasingly self-conscious network of Muslim intellectual activists, it seems less surprising that through the League’s publications, political reports, sponsored lectures and public events that its leaders espoused a vision of an independent Eritrea that, on one level, spoke the language of a nationalist movement that embraced policies lauded by European colonial powers. Most significantly, this included several of its major policies

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>46</sup> Dirar, “Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea,” 270.

<sup>47</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 148. Cooper’s observation also echoes Mbembe in warning against categorizing such historical movements because African social formations “are not necessarily converging toward a single point, trend, or cycle. They harbor the possibility of a variety of trajectories neither convergent nor divergent but interlocked, paradoxical.” Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 16.



such as retaining the colonial boundaries, “modernizing” and “advancing” the indigenous population to prepare for self-rule and looking to internationally-sanctioned bodies such as the United Nations to delineate a period of European trusteeship prior to actual independence.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the language of nationalism within the League involved a complex discourse that not only countered arguments that Eritrea and Ethiopia should be united or that Eritrea be partitioned, but that also addressed many of the cultural, religious, linguistic, economic and educational concerns raised by segments of the Muslim population during the late 1940s and 1950s. This sometimes ephemeral character in the League’s communications illustrates McDougall’s point that at the heart of such nationalist dialogues, the very concept of the nation “*exists in the contests over meaning* engaged in by specifiable social actors,” and within in a particular historical context which involves the “specific symbolic, linguistic and material sources present in the social world at a given moment in time.”<sup>49</sup> As a result, the League’s basic political objectives existed as only one facet of a broader program in which religious, cultural and social discourses were being used to mobilize residents in their nationalist project.

### **Muslim intellectuals in the “Nationalist Contact Zone”**

Following a diplomatic tour of Eritrea in 1949, British official Frank Stafford published his observations on the former Italian colony.

There is very little evidence of an Eritrean nationhood. There is, too, a well informed school of thought which regards Eritrea as being merely a fortuitous geographical and ethnical patchwork with no claim to be

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<sup>48</sup> “This is the Muslim League.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, February 25, 1947: 2; Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, 9.

regarded as a natural unit in any respect. The diversity of peoples, languages, and geographical features is certainly very striking.<sup>50</sup>

While Stafford's remarks are illustrative of the basic inability of colonial authorities during the BMA period to measure the extent of any feasible Eritrean identity, they encapsulate some of the more concrete arguments used against nationalists' claims of legitimacy. Yet beyond criticisms of Eritrea's artificial territorial construction or its heterogeneous cultural makeup, arguments against an Eritrean "nationhood" also emerged in the context of a genuine irredentist movement taking place across the country.

The genuine movement among many Eritreans who believed in the cultural and historical links between Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly among the Tigrinya-speaking Christian residents in the highlands, should not be overlooked when analyzing the nationalist issue. Tekeste Negash's observation that "the Italians had failed to create loyal subjects of the Christian Eritreans" needs to be appreciated to understand how unionist political leaders were able to mobilize the irredentist movement fairly rapidly in the wake of Italy's defeat in 1941.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the well-known institutional links between the Eritrean Tewahado Coptic Church and Ethiopian religious authorities, coupled with the Ethiopian government's support for the church's activities and the long history of mobility across the Eritrea-Ethiopia border in Tigray all contributed to steady growth of a strong unionist political program throughout the early and mid-1940s. Thus a significant and complex dialectic developed that witnessed the rapid politicization of religion, as each camp articulated competing definitions of "Eritrean" identity; one stressed the country's Islamic legacy and its unique status as a separate entity forged out of Italian

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<sup>50</sup> Frank E. Stafford, "The Ex-Italian Colonies," *International Affairs* 25, no.4 (1949): 49.

<sup>51</sup> Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 26.

colonialism and the other emphasized the inherent historical connections to Ethiopia mainly through the legacy of the Tewahado Church and the region's "pre-colonial" past.<sup>52</sup> In the context of this politicization of religion, Eritrea's Muslim nationalist leaders first emerged and refined their arguments in what became a virtual nationalist contact zone of political discourse.

The most significant analyses to address Eritrea's early nationalist impetus have all contributed to a basic consensus that points to the political dialogue among the indigenous intellectual and community elites of the 1940s. While the "outlines of an Eritrean consciousness" emerged only gradually from the shared experience of Italian rule between 1890 and 1941, this growing self awareness fully materialized under BMA rule and forced the presiding colonial authorities to cope with increasingly proactive intellectual and community leaders.<sup>53</sup> Combined with the increased rate of urbanization throughout Eritrea that began during the mid-1930s and continued through the end of Fascist rule, political activism developed as BMA authorities continually recruited Eritreans into the new fold as "clerks, accountants, medical orderlies, telephone operators and assistants in the public works and railway departments."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See Sishagne, *Unionists & Separatists*.

<sup>53</sup> Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence; Domination, resistance, nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4. Although Iyob's book represented one of the few studies to address the growth of nationalism both before and after the start of armed hostilities, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* took a generalized view of how "religious camaraderie" became one of the hallmarks of the early nationalist period.

<sup>54</sup> John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61. Arguing that "religious enmity" was a well-established tradition between Muslim and Christian leaders by the late 1940s, Markakis proposed that religious identity was a relevant factor in early nationalist politics even though there were clear "material interests" among those involved in both the independence and unionist cause. Unlike all other studies produced during this period, Markakis illustrated how the religious rivalries of the 1940s and early 1950s were connected to the later conflict that engulfed members of the ELF leadership, who saw themselves as waging a Muslim movement. According to Markakis, ELF leaders "could not resist the flattery of seeing Eritrea portrayed as part of the Arab world."

Gaim Kibreab has emphasized that this political consciousness emerged as result of community elites tapping into the extensive social capital brought on by the “associational life” during the British mandate period.<sup>55</sup> Within the confines of Eritrea’s diverse multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Muslim population, members of the ‘ulama’ and other Muslim community leaders facilitated early notions of civil society that correlated to the continued urbanization. These transformations included several local initiatives to instill greater continuity within the Muslim population. Leaders achieved this mainly by facilitating increased Arabic language education along with supporting the construction of new schools for Muslim students. These institutional changes were part of the “spectacular organization, reform and centralization of Eritrean Islamic institutions” during the 1940s and coupled with the growing political debates, helped forge a vague but increasingly relevant Islamic communal awareness.<sup>56</sup> The use of Arabic in influencing perceptions of “shared religio-cultural, social-political and intellectual experiences” between Eritrean Muslims thus established the discursive anchor for the emerging debates.<sup>57</sup>

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John Markakis, “The National Revolution in Eritrea,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26, no.1 (1988): 57. For more information on Italian colonial education in Eritrea see R.R. De Marco, *Native Education in Italian Colonies* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University Publication, 1943); Berhane Teklehaimanot, “Education in Eritrea during the European Colonial Period,” *Eritrean Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (1996): 1-22; FO 371/27583, “Future of government schools in Eritrea and Somalia.”

<sup>55</sup> Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence: Social Capital, Associational Life, Religion, Ethnicity and Sowing the Seeds of Dictatorship* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 2008), 88. Unlike Dirar and Negash, Kibreab downplayed the significance of intellectuals in the period before British intervention because, in his analysis, “the scale of educational opportunities provided by the Italians was extremely small” and thus minimized the growth of any legitimate civil society prior to the early 1940s. Ibid., 99.

<sup>56</sup> Miran, “A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea,” 205.

<sup>57</sup> Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature: The Oral and the Written, 1890-1991* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, 1999), 55.

Concurrent with the overall cultural coalescence of different Muslim groups, the League's experience in nationalist politics illustrates how a diverse group of indigenous intellectuals waged a broad African nationalist struggle to build what Frantz Fanon termed a tenable political party as a "tool in the hands of the people."<sup>58</sup> Yet activism within the League also reflected how the local Muslim intelligentsia was, politically and culturally, influenced by Eritrea's position as a convergence zone of nationalist thought from both sub-Saharan Africa and the especially wider Arabic-speaking world. Muslim Leaders looked to movements across the Arab-Islamic world to formulate their nationalist agenda and often discussed the broader international developments to address their own concerns.<sup>59</sup> Beyond merely embracing the idea of an Eritrean nation-state to counter the perceived backwardness of Ethiopia and its feudal legacy, Muslim intellectuals sustained their argument that Eritrea's sovereignty depended on strengthening education through developing local institutions and promoting the use of Arabic and other local languages within such educational settings.

The Islamic intelligentsia's attempts at resisting threats of external domination during the 1940s echoed the earlier encounters that the previous generation of Eritreans confronted during the early 1920s and 1930s. Within the limits of a rigid Italian colonialism that had installed a *de facto* apartheid-like system and limited education to the fourth grade level, indigenous measures to negotiate and secure a degree of cultural

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<sup>58</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 148. See Ghirmai Negash, "Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone: African Responses to Italian Colonialism in Tigrinya Literature," *Biography* 32, no. 1 (2009): 73-87.

<sup>59</sup> Redie Bereketeab noted that the founders of the Eritrean Muslim League sought to create their organization in the same vein as Pakistan's Muslim League. See Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation 1890-1991* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 2007), 270.

and intellectual space proved difficult.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the development of a comprehensive cultural contact zone, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as a social space where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,” characterized the intellectual debates and activities of the Muslim League and other nationalist supporters.<sup>61</sup> As Ghirmai Negash translates Pratt's concepts into the Eritrean context, the awakening of anti-colonial consciousness, and the early use of indigenous languages in print to critique the mechanisms of Italian rule in colonial Eritrea helped establish the early intellectual parameters which, by the 1940s, had been extended and provided a significant degree of “political and cultural space” against both Ethiopian and European hegemony.<sup>62</sup>

Yet unlike the earlier incarnation of the Italian-era contact zone as discussed by Ghirmai Negash, the nationalist contact zone that developed during the early 1940s did not pertain exclusively to a colonizer-subject dichotomy, but instead denoted a more multifaceted space of political interaction and dialogue within Eritrea's diverse social communities. Moreover, this space of intellectual and political discussion carried far beyond the realm of the written word of local newspapers and periodicals. If anything, according to Alemseged Tesfai, the activists of the early nationalist movement fell short of articulating a cohesive vision of independence because their leaders “acted out” their history rather than engaging in creating their own historical narratives for wider

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<sup>60</sup> See Guilia Barrera, “Mussolini's colonial race laws and state-settler relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935-41),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 425-443.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33.

<sup>62</sup> Negash, “Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone: African Responses to Italian Colonialism in Tigrinya Literature,” 75.

consumption.<sup>63</sup> The nationalist contact zone among League supporters thus developed as part of the public discussions within mosques, private homes and in the daily routines of urban life among activists.

As this study will show, the Muslim League used these tools not only to develop a multifaceted political program, but its leadership held a practical and often progressive understanding about the need to address Eritrea's *weshtawi buzhenet* (intrinsic diversity) as a means of strengthening its overall agenda. The nationalist contact zone thus grew out of the sudden and, at times, haphazard social dilemmas that materialized in BMA-occupied Eritrea. If, as Astier M. Almedom argued, many of Eritrea's intellectual activists clearly viewed the British authorities as being "worse than the Italians" for their deceptiveness, they nevertheless took swift advantage of the BMA's liberalization of political and media activity for the region's (indigenous) population.<sup>64</sup> Having arisen during the previous Italian era, many members of the indigenous elite easily "integrated" into the BMA in similar colonially defined positions, albeit with much greater leverage than under Italian rule.<sup>65</sup> Thus while the parameters of the intellectual and cultural dialogue within this zone of interaction were not dictated by the British authorities the BMA's policies did, initially, provide the setting for Eritreans of all political and ideological stripes to articulate their messages.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Alemseged Tesfai, interview.

<sup>64</sup> Astier M. Almedom, "Re-reading the Short and Long-Rigged History of Eritrea 1941-1952: Back to the Future?," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 116.

<sup>65</sup> Dirar, "Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea," 268.

<sup>66</sup> The early coalescence of this intellectual and political activity under British authority is a running theme within the early chapters of Alemseged Tesfai's study. See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 1-48.

This framework of a nationalist contact zone does not imply though that the political debates of the 1940s and 1950s excluded impute from activists who perceived some form of union with Ethiopia as one possible means of protecting and even strengthening an independent Eritrea. Because “their interpretation of the notion of nationalism went many ways,” the nature of the independence debate and the activities of many leaders was dynamic rather than static.<sup>67</sup> Because of this, scholars who have portrayed some activists as being inherently “pro-independence” or “unionist” or have accused nationalist figures of harboring initial ‘unionist’ sympathies have missed a key point.<sup>68</sup> Because the growth of Eritrean identity and the corresponding independence movement were neither clear-cut nor politically defined at the outset of the BMA period, participants within this intellectually-driven nationalist contact zone often fluctuated between positions that only with the benefit of hindsight can be categorized as “pro-Independence” or “Unionist.” Thus when examining the rhetoric and actions of the Muslim League and its allies, Dirar’s previous argument becomes increasingly tenable because the “contradictions” implicit in the early nationalist impetus do not simply discount the existence of a legitimate independence movement.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, many of the internal conflicts that eventually plagued the League leadership over its very direction should be seen as confirmation of the substantive nature of the ideological debates within

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<sup>67</sup> Alemseged Tesfai. Lecture presented at Ohio University, March 22, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Dirar, “Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea,” 268



the wider nationalist discourse rather than being dismissed simply as evidence that the organization was both inherently weak and pliable to the outside influences.<sup>70</sup>

This study argues that within the nationalist contact zone, Muslim leaders and activists argued for the existence of an independent Eritrean culture and historical experience. While the concept of nationhood among the majority of Eritreans may have indeed only come about after the shared experiences from the decades of armed struggle, important factions within Muslim communities began generating their particular sense of a shared history and people-hood, based largely on their shared cultural legacy and their relationship to the wider Islamic world, in effect establishing their own “nation language” by the late 1940s.<sup>71</sup> The primary goal of this study, to contextualize these social and political transformations that spawned this nation language, requires a fresh analysis and reinvestment into many of the overlooked documents and primary sources that have been forgotten from this period in Eritrea’s nationalist history.

### **Sources for the Study of Early Eritrean Nationalism**

Overall, this study builds on three categories of sources. First, the project relies heavily on a comprehensive analysis of the Arabic and (to a lesser extent) Tigrinya language newspapers, reports and commentaries that activists produced within the confines of the nationalist contact zone from the mid-1940s to the beginning of the armed revolution in 1961. With few exceptions, the Muslim League’s publications and related

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<sup>70</sup> Tekeste Negash argued that the shifting political programs of many pro-Independence groups, including the Muslim League, demonstrated how such organizations were supposedly the creation of the Italian government in collaboration with Eritrea’s Italian settler community. See Negash, “Italy and its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-50,” 445.

<sup>71</sup> For additional information on the broader concept of “nation-language” as a component within religious institutions see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

literature have remained neglected in much of the scholarship and has thus obscured the organization's ideological as well as political relevance during the period in question. This study thus engages materials written in local languages to gain greater understanding about the paths toward Eritrean identity formation as viewed from the perspectives of those involved in the movement.<sup>72</sup>

Secondly, as a means of putting the League and Muslim political dynamics in a broader historical context, this study employs the use of documents produced mainly by officials within the BMA (1941-1952) and later by American observers stationed in Eritrea during the later period of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Federation. Utilizing the extensive intelligence reports, memoranda and private correspondence of British and American officials also provides unique perspectives not only on how activists shaped Muslim identity, but also on how the colonial authorities interpreted such developments on a macro or regional level. Lastly, this project relies on the oral testimonies of former activists and many of their descendents as a means of measuring not only the various ways in which Muslim identity crystallized but to access previously silenced narratives that have either been ignored or avoided in the construction of Eritrean 'nation-history.'

In many ways, this project reflects the ever-increasing "diasporization" of Eritrean studies by coalescing materials and testimonies from locations across Africa, Europe and North America. It contributes to the current scholarship by examining and raising additional questions about how the Islamic faith and local interpretations of 'Muslim identity' progressed in the twenty years before Eritreans took up arms against

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<sup>72</sup> For a broader discussion on the role of African languages and knowledge production, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (New York: Heinemann, 1986).

Ethiopia. It does not presume that Eritrea's diverse and multifaceted movement toward independence was inherently "Islamic" or exclusively the domain of regional Muslim intellectual leaders. Furthermore, as the chapters herein will illustrate, the Muslim League and its senior leadership in particular recognized that an independent Eritrea could not be achieved without the participation of a broad range of social and religious segments of society. Thus while this work argues that the League served as the primary political engine driving nationalist dialogue and the related cultural activism among pro-independence Muslims, it also recognizes that a deeper process of social transformation took place in many communities that nourished a truly national consciousness beyond the confines of Eritrea's Muslim communities.

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter 1 examines the major social and political transformations that took place during the first five and a half years of BMA rule to illustrate the origins and social context of the Muslim League's establishment. It argues that the movement for tigre emancipation in western Eritrea, the growth of greater Islamic institutional cohesion and the actions of the small, urban-based Muslim intelligentsia all contributed to the League's ideological underpinning and its initial strengths as both a political and social movement. Chapter 2 looks specifically at how the League and its leadership worked to build the political and intellectual base of the organization during its crucial first year of existence from December 1946 to December 1947. It addresses the various ways in which the organization contributed to the concerns within Eritrea's nationalist contact zone and how the leaders worked to build the organization as a truly "national" party irrespective of

religion. In addition, it argues that one of the major strengths of the League was the success of Muslim intellectuals and writers in presenting their organization to colonial authorities as an entity which supported the creation of a “modern” nation-state in opposition to the “uncivilized” feudal kingdom in Ethiopia.

Chapter 3 examines how the League and its nationalist allies responded to both the political pressures surrounding the Eritrean independence movement as well as the crisis brought on by Ethiopian intervention and the rise of armed aggression against independence supporters (1948-49). Building on these developments, chapter 4 investigates how the League responded to the rise of rival “Muslim” political organizations that challenged its primacy in the independence movement throughout 1950. Examining the transitional period between the UN General Assembly’s decision to Federate Eritrea with Ethiopia from December 1950 to its actual implementation in September 1952, chapter 5 looks at how the League’s intellectual base negotiated their political agenda and nationalist discourse with the coming of the Federation Government. Chapter 6 discusses how the construction of Muslim identity and political action became even more intertwined as the perceived oppression by the Ethiopian government increased through the Federation from 1952 through rise of mass civil discontent in 1958. Consequently, the protection and autonomy of Islamic institutions became one of the major rallying points for activists as the decade progressed. It also looks at the relationship between Islamic identity within Eritrea and the larger political forces of pan-Arabism and Nasserism. Chapter 7 looks at the crucial three year period prior to the outbreak of the armed revolution (1958-61) to examine the various competing ideologies

that emerged among Muslim activists. It illustrates that this period witnessed a final break from the previous two decades of Muslim activism and the influence of the Muslim League. This chapter also demonstrates some of the ways in which the League and its leaders, despite the new circumstances and change in ideology, managed to maintain a significant influence among the first generation of activists in the ELF.

Finally, several conclusions are drawn about the significance of the construction of Muslim identity in relation to the early period of Eritrean nationalism. It will be argued that the Muslim League's experience represented the first significant articulation of a collective Muslim consciousness in a specifically nationalist (i.e. Eritrean) context. Ultimately, explaining how the League and its various offshoots contributed the idea of a separate Eritrean national identity from Ethiopia will provide a new approach to better understand how the initial trajectory of the independence movement was articulated by members of the intelligentsia largely in terms of addressing local Islamic interests and the supposed concerns of all the region's Muslim residents.

CHAPTER 2: ‘SERFS,’ SCHOLARS AND CIVICS:  
THE DYNAMICS OF MUSLIM IDENTITY IN BRITISH-OCCUPIED ERITREA,  
APRIL 1941-NOVEMBER 1946

With the coming of joint British-Sudanese forces in April 1941 Eritreans found themselves living within the confines of a new colonial authority. For the next five and a half years, communities across Eritrea adapted to the new realities, and opportunities, as a mandated territory under the BMA. This chapter will discuss how three major social processes took place during this period specifically within the Muslim communities across the Tigre-speaking Sahel in northern and western Eritrea as well as in the major cities. Each of these processes of transformation among the different cultural and social groups had important consequences on the formation of a growing sense of Islamic consciousness across the country.

By the mid-1940s, a grassroots movement in the Tigre-speaking clans of northern and western Eritrea began to take shape. Refusing to comply with the traditional payment of customary dues and taxes to the local landlords (shumagulle), disenfranchised tigre “serfs” pressed their claims for their own economic independence from the traditional system. However, the overall success of the tigre movement depended not only on grass roots activism but also on the ability of Muslim professionals to harness the public discontent. The movement for tigre emancipation dovetailed with another critical movement in which increased efforts for religious standardization -meaning the creation of uniformity of Islamic practices and institutions across Eritrea- and the spread of Islamic education allowed the ‘ulama’ to help shape ideas about a singular Muslim

community across Eritrea. While efforts for establishing Islamic standardization and tigre emancipation gained momentum, the period also witnessed the emergence of an engaged, politically-active intelligentsia from among the mainly Asmara and Keren-based professionals who began advocating for Muslim interests.

### **Social and Political Unrest Among the tigre**

The serfs or ‘Tigre’, as they were commonly known, were as much the property of their masters, the ‘Shumagulle,’ as their camels or goats. Each ‘Tigre’ was bound to an individual ‘Shumagulle’; he and his songs passed in inheritance to the descendents of his Shumagulle; and at the will of his Shumagulle he could be sold, given away, punished by flogging, or put to death.<sup>73</sup>

The subservient relationship between tigre and their shumagulle “masters” stood at the heart of economic life in Tigre-speaking society.<sup>74</sup> Although the relationship between a tigre and shumagulle depended upon the latter’s position as the proprietor of the land and its resources, relations between the two groups also varied according to clan, community size and the given nature of the local subsistence economy. Nevertheless, a basic continuity throughout the Tigre-speaking region had solidified well before the advent of European colonialism. Although the major clans or *qebelaat* identified both the shumagulle and tigre as belonging to the group, the tigre generally viewed themselves as belonging to a series of smaller sub-clans or “races” that lived in proximity to one

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<sup>73</sup> *Papers of Sir Kennedy Trevaskis*, MSS Brit Emp S. 367, Box 1 (b), “The Tigre-speaking peoples,” 126. Henceforth noted as *Trevaskis Papers*. While the term “tigre” served as a pejorative for someone of servant status, it also developed into a marker for the wider ethno-cultural identity of all those, vassal and shumagulle alike, who came from the Tigre-speaking areas. In the context of this study, “tigre” refers to those Tigre-speaking peoples of vassal or “serf” origins.

<sup>74</sup> For information about the origins of “tigre” as a marker for vassal status, see Abba Isaak Ghebre Iyesus, *Arguments for Shedding Some Light on the Tigré Phenomenon*, 30-37; Alberto Pollera, *Le Popolazioni Indigene Dell ‘Eritrea* (Bologna: 1935), 196-197; 226-227; Carlo Conti Rossini, *Principi di Diritto Consuetudinario Dell ‘Eritrea* (Rome: Tipografia Dell ‘Unione Editrice, 1916), 541-721.

another and under the larger clan markers such as the Bet Asghede, ‘Ad Takles, Bet Jut and others.<sup>75</sup>

For the majority of Tigre-speaking communities across Eritrea’s northern highlands, the transition from Italian to British rule in April 1941 presented an opportunity to rework the traditional social and economic constraints under which most residents had lived under for nearly three centuries. Although Eritreans as a whole found themselves living within the confines of a new colonial authority with the coming of joint British-Sudanese forces in April 1941, tigre communities in particular adapted to the new realities, and opportunities, as a mandated territory under the temporary rule of the British Military Administration (BMA). While tigre discontent toward the shumagulle had surfaced with varying intensity during the earlier periods of Turko-Egyptian and Italian rule, the transition to BMA authority marked the beginning of a greater crystallization in tigre-peasant identity.

This broad movement among tigre communities during the early and mid-1940s represented the first major thrust in Eritrea’s movement toward decolonization, as activists simultaneously challenged both the “traditional” landlord-serf dynamic and the longstanding colonial acquaintance of the exploitative, quasi-feudal system. Ultimately, many of the leaders in the tigre emancipation movement helped articulate new understandings of tigre identity that stressed the righteousness of their cause as a Muslim

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<sup>75</sup> At the height of tigre discontent, representatives claimed that more than one hundred sub-groups existed across the territory. *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A), *Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies*, Report on Eritrea, “Letter of Tigré Representatives,” Appendix 18, 3. Henceforth cited as *Four Power Commission*.



people and the necessity of breaking away from the apparent “primitive” feudalism of the shumagulle.

### **The Historical tigre-shumagulle Divide**

In addition to paying the customary dues of locally harvested foodstuffs, a tigre could not engage in debate or an argument with his respective shumagulle or discuss the terms of the traditional land “contract.” Most shumagulle could also expect their tigre vassals to provide unpaid supplemental labor when needed. Usually this included agricultural work, the milking of animals, fetching firewood and other supplies. The shumagulle also reserved the right to use tigre livestock for cultivation and the use of other animals, such as camels and mules, for their own transportation needs.<sup>76</sup> “Even where the relationship between tigre and shumagulle was reasonably cordial,” Kennedy Trevaskis observed, “the two classes remained castes immutably divided from each other.”<sup>77</sup> The divide between tigre and shumagulle also involved a complex system of political authority within the communities. While historically many of the tigre groups had been served by a council of elders or *mahaber* that had tied many of the kinship groups together, the *shum* (chief) and the subordinate ranks of *hisset* and *badanna* also developed into positions of respect despite the fact that legislative and judicial authority “lay with the ‘mahaber’ and not with the Shum personally, although he would act as its spokesmen and leader.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 69.

<sup>77</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1(B), “The Tigre-speaking Peoples,” 128.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 1(B), “The Tigre Speaking Population,” 137. The term “Kantibay” also designated the status of the ruling chief recognized within most Tigre-speaking clans. See Anthony D’Avray, *The Nakfa documents: the despatches, memoranda, reports, and correspondence describing and explaining the stories of the feudal societies of the Red Sea Littoral from the Christian-Muslim wars of the sixteenth century to the establishment 1885-1901 of the Italian colony of Eritrea* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 2.

Although uprisings against the landowners occurred during Italian rule and surfaced with greater intensity during the 1920s and 1930s, the situation of most tigre had worsened by 1941. According to Alemseged Tesfai, this came about partially as a result of the increased economic burdens in rural Eritrea brought on by World War II. The conditions only exacerbated the traditional landlord-serf dynamic that the majority of the Tigre-speaking communities had lived under since the seventeenth century.<sup>79</sup> Set against the stresses of the war-time economy and the power vacuum brought on by the end of formal Italian rule, many tigre again began refusing to pay the customary dues to their respective shumagulle.

### **BMA Responses to tigre Resistance**

Initially, tigre mainly from the Bet Asghede clan in the Keren Division petitioned BMA authorities in the spring of 1941 for their “support in the enforcement of their rights” against the landowners.<sup>80</sup> For their part, shumagulle representatives also approached the British claiming that the refusals to pay tribute had prevented them from executing their traditional duties as clan chiefs. Many shumagulle also claimed that their very livelihood depended on receiving the customary tribute.<sup>81</sup> At first, BMA officials attempted to maneuver carefully between both groups so as to not risk any major social disruption. By December 1941 however, the situation worsened as tigre representatives announced they would refuse to give the traditional payment (*magasa*) of one fourth of

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<sup>79</sup> See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 69-74.

<sup>80</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/62. Kennedy Trevaskis, “Dispute between the Shumagulle and Tigre of the Ad Takles,” 1.

<sup>81</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/1, Major Lea to the Military Administrator, O.E.T.A, Eritrea, 4.

the coming harvest to the shumagulle.<sup>82</sup> In February 1942, BMA officials met with shumagulle and tigre representatives and informed the interested parties that because British administrators believed that the land “was vested in the Government,” the administration would not legally recognize or enforce the collection of traditional dues by the shumagulle. In response, shumagulle from the Bet Asghede threatened to evict all tigre from their land if they refused to make their payments.<sup>83</sup>

Refusals to pay customary dues presented British administrators with a serious problem. While administrators recognized their own reliance on the shumagulle as instruments of revenue collection and authority, the prospect of mass civil disobedience by the tigre encouraged BMA authorities to seek a compromise. Rejecting suggestions that the traditional land dues be declared illegal and that all “tribal land” instead be considered government land, Keren’s Civil Affairs Officer Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis supported a more moderate policy of allowing the customary payments of one fourth of their harvest and that additional payments continue if “rendered voluntarily by a tigre to his Shamagulle.” Trevaskis also argued that the BMA should “sanction no change of individual ownership” of traditional shumagulle lands and added that no tigre could be evicted from the residence unless approved by the presiding Civil Affairs Officer.<sup>84</sup> In trying to contain tigre discontent by promising greater oversight for the payment of customary dues, Trevaskis’ plan won the support of Eritrea’s then Chief Administrator,

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>83</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/62. Kennedy Trevaskis, “Dispute between the Shumagulle and Tigre of the Ad Takles,” 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. See Federica Guazzini, “Gerald Kennedy Nicholas Trevaskis,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 983-984.

Brigadier Stephen Longrigg. Having considered the range of possible actions on the tigre land issue, Longrigg summarized the need for a cautious policy.

The abolition by a ‘stroke of the pen’ of all feudal dues, much as we may recommend it on general grounds, cannot be upheld. Such a change, which would have far reaching repercussions, must go hand in hand with a general re-organization of tribal society-its tributary system, political representation etc. The present time is hardly suitable for such far-reaching schemes.<sup>85</sup>

Although by June 1943 the BMA had fully articulated a policy that recognized shumagulle authority while promising to increase oversight to guarantee the tigre’s “protection and security of tenure” against possible abuse, the movement to sever the traditional subservience proved inadequate. Rather than petitioning to simply redress the terms of the traditional payments, activists sought nothing short of guaranteeing their independence from conditions many viewed as nothing short of slavery.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the BMA’s initial success in holding a public assembly for shumagulle and tigre representatives in Keren in late June, the possibility that some of the most influential tigre activists would not be willing to compromise stoked administrative fears. In particular they worried about the actions of Keren resident Mohamed Hamid Tahgé and his group of supporters from the ‘Ad Takles clan. While British reports alleged that Tahgé himself did not cultivate land due to his job as a trader, he gained a loyal following among the ‘Ad Takles and his bold public assertions that he would “rather die than allow a single rubaiya of dura to be paid over to the Bet Asghede (Shamagulle).”<sup>87</sup> Tahgé’s early activism as a spokesmen for ‘Ad Takles set a precedent within the larger tigre

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<sup>85</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957, Stephen Longrigg, “Dispute between Shumagulle and Tigre,” 7.

<sup>86</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/68, “Tigre-Shumagalle Dispute.”

<sup>87</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/15, “Land disputes (Shumagulle V. Tigre: Ad Takles), 1. He is also listed in BMA records as Hamed Humid Tahge and Hamid Humed Tei.

movement; while many of the emancipation leaders came from the ranks of the local tigre communities, most of the representatives who gained prominence as leaders often did not own lands themselves but were members of the urban intelligentsia.<sup>88</sup>

By the fall, as the shumagulle and tigre from the 'Ad Takles continued to feud, the BMA called for a meeting between Taghé's faction and shumagulle representatives to come to an agreement about the traditional payment of one fourth of the crops. Taghé and his colleagues not only refused to pay any portion of the allotted sum but they also told BMA officials that they had publically encouraged all of their fellow tigre to do the same. The British report of the meeting alleged that Taghé stated that he preferred to be exiled to the city of Assab as punishment for his actions rather than "pay one grain of dura to the Shumagallé [sic]."<sup>89</sup> For the next three years, Taghé and his group embodied both the resilience of tigre resolve as well as the basic dilemma for British officials in dealing with the growing unrest. Although Taghé and his colleagues were exiled for more than a year in Assab until mid-1945, officials had little success in establishing a truce between the remaining tigre and shumagulle representatives. By February of the following year, officials at the BMA station office in Keren suggested that Taghé, having violated his signed agreement to remain in Assab and allow land disputes settled by outside arbitration be again reprimanded for his role as the "leading agitator" in the local unrest.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In later years, Tahgé continued his political activities and became a leading representative of the Eritrean Muslim League's Keren branch.

<sup>89</sup> K/66/b/6, "Report on Ad Tacles & Shumagulle-Tigre Dispute," 1.

<sup>90</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/85, "Petition-Hamid Humed Ta'e and others," 1. The agreement, dated June 16, 1944, also included the signatures of colleagues Abdalla Ibrahim, Ali Tulug, Hamad Humed and Idris Omer.

In a February 1945 appeal to the Senior Civil Affairs Officer (SCAO) of the Keren Division, Tahgé and his colleagues Mohammed Ali Suleiman and Idris Fa'id Hummed continued to reject the BMA's ruling requiring tigre to pay one fourth of their harvest. They argued that "as this has never been practiced beforehand we are not prepared to do it now we ask Y.E. [your Excellency] for justice and consideration in this case."<sup>91</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, some elements within the BMA recognized that the fundamental conflict between tigre and landholders could not be resolved with reconciliatory measures or by attempting to institute modest payment proposals. Reflecting on the ongoing troubles with tigre exiles in Assab, the presiding district officer provided a lucid summation of the BMA's general attitude.

These men, with whom I have had a long and at time most irritating acquaintance, are leaders of the Ad Takles [sic] Tigre. They are local 'Wat Tylers' and rebels against a political and social system which can in no way recommend itself to an enlightened European. We are however obliged for reasons of administrative expediency to preserve this system and to prevent any 'Peasants' Revolt.'<sup>92</sup>

Ironically, in spite of the BMA's issuing of the exile order, the "Ad Takles Group" refused to discontinue its activities. In May 1945, officials noted that Taghé himself took up residence in Asmara between February and May where he was "frequenting the offices" of a local tigre lawyer for advice on the issue.<sup>93</sup> For his part, Idris Fa'ed Hummed continued his travels across the Sahel among the 'Ad Takles where

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<sup>91</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/86, "Appeal," 1.

<sup>92</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/105, "Ad Takles Exiles in Assab," 1.

<sup>93</sup> By all accounts, the lawyer in question was tigre activist Ibrahim Sultan Ali. Henceforth noted as Ibrahim Sultan.

he allegedly took an even more active role than before by “constantly preaching to the Tigre on their alleged oppression and the injustice of having to pay rent on the land.”<sup>94</sup>

Beyond the inability of administrators to come to terms with the complexities of levying appropriate customary dues, many officials believed that a substantial portion of the shumagulle themselves lived in conditions of abject poverty and therefore could not survive without the payment of tribute. A December 1941 report surmised that “the trouble in the Asgade tribes is that the Sciumagalle [sic] are mostly so miserably poor in animals that their customary dues are their livelihood.”<sup>95</sup> Nearly four years later, the SCAO of the Keren Division echoed this idea and claimed that the shumagulle’s apparent domination was largely inflated because many of the landowners worked the lands “side by side with the Tigre” and many were so poor that they were forced to sell some of their surplus land.<sup>96</sup> John Markakis also supports this claim, stating that the shumagulle’s vulnerable position developed partially as a result of the nature of the local agricultural economy. For several years the growth in the tigre population resulted in a large increase in livestock and overall agricultural capabilities that helped transform many of the supposedly subservient tigre into a group “often wealthier than the nobles.”<sup>97</sup> In a report issued in December 1945, one BMA administrator claimed that although he felt Mohamed Ali Suleiman and Idris Fa’id could return during the raining season [spring] of 1946, he cautioned against allowing Taghé to return because it could jeopardize BMA efforts at quelling the unrest. The memo also made reference to the apparent British

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<sup>94</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/94, “Tigre/Shumagalle Dispute-Ad Tekles,” 1.

<sup>95</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/1. Memo from Major Lea to Military Administrator, O.E.T.A, Eritrea, 4.

<sup>96</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/113. “Ad Takles Exiles,” 1.

<sup>97</sup> Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, 59.

sympathy for the shumagulle, whom they viewed as being “very poor” themselves and unable to subsist without the mandated payments.<sup>98</sup> Also problematic both to activists and administrations was the reality that the conditions of “serfs” varied from clan to clan. Consequently, while the movement for serf emancipation gained momentum across much of the tigre frontier, some tigre groups appeared willing to compromise.

One month after the BMA-‘Ad Takles meeting in Keren in June 1943, an official inquiry took place between shumagulle and tigre representatives from the Bet Juk clan. In the meeting, shumagulle and tigre representatives alike presented a more subdued arbitration about tigre objections to the customary payments. Arguing that the tigre had not rendered one fourth of their harvest to the clan leaders but instead provided only three payments of *ghilza* for “personal dues,” shumagulle representatives downplayed any purported cruelty or abuse against the tigre.<sup>99</sup> For their part, the tigre witnesses also testified to the fact that they had not been asked to pay one fourth of their harvest and only provide the shumagulle with the abovementioned *ghilza*. In response, British officials suggested that the BMA’s future policy include only the enforcement of the *ghilza* payments while discontinuing the mandate on any future payments of one fourth of local crops. Assessing the agreement, Civil Affairs Officer Anthony D’Avray surmised that such an arrangement “preserves the principle of Shumagulle proprietorship and does not iúpose [sic] a burden over-great on the Tigre.”<sup>100</sup> Although the dispute between the shumagulle and the tigre of the Bet Juk involved little intervention on the part of the British authorities, their resolution came to be the exception that proved the

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<sup>98</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/113. “Ad Takles Exiles,” 1.

<sup>99</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/30, “Bet Juk Shumagalle/Tigre Dispute,” 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 4.



rule about the general atmosphere of urgency and unrest that resulted from the social transformations taking place across the “tigre Frontier.”<sup>101</sup>

In contrast to the actions of the tigre of the Bet Juk, “serf” activism progressed throughout the region with increased vigor. One of the more dramatic episodes occurred in early 1943 when a member of the Rugbat clan, Humid Shentub, purportedly killed a shumagulle during a confrontation that began when landowners told Shentub to vacate his plot in the village of Tselim Dengel after he refused to pay tribute.<sup>102</sup> If some representatives thought that openly refusing payment could end tigre subservience, others believed that the best way to solve the crisis required creating new forms of social organization. In January 1944 the SCAO in Keren reported that authorities had imprisoned five tigre from the ‘Ad Takles on the grounds that they had illegally collected goats, durra and money from serf families while “inciting people to disobey the Administration by breaking away from their tribes and forming a tribe of their own under the name of Asghede.”<sup>103</sup> Commenting on the apparent widespread support for their actions, the report noted that all of the residents of the local tigre clans “have taken an oath that they will not give evidence in court against the five above-named accused.”<sup>104</sup> Concerned that the tigre of the ‘Ad Takles and other clans could realistically break away

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<sup>101</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/62. Kennedy Trevaskis, “Dispute between the Shumagulle and Tigre of the Ad Takles,” 1.

<sup>102</sup> While he was imprisoned and sentenced to pay compensation for his act, Ibrahim Sultan allegedly came to Shentub’s aid and launched a public campaign in his defense. See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 73-74.

<sup>103</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/32, Major R. Signals to Chief Secretary, “Mohammed Nur Mohammed Abdulla, Mohammed Suleiman Idris Nur, Ismael Sicap, Mohammed Adam Abdulla, Hamid Said Osman,” 1. Historically, the push to create new independent “tribes” among the different Tigre-speaking groups was not uncommon. Miran noted that during the nineteenth century the ‘Ad Shaykh attracted “entire families of tigre vassals to join their ranks by undermining the master/serf structure of the Tigre-speaking pastoralist and agro-pastoralist societies.” Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” 186.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. The author of the report, Major R. Signals, recommended that the five accused activists be sent into exile in Assab.

from the “Shumagelle-ruled tribes” and form their own “autonomous section,” the BMA looked to local religious authorities to try and end the turmoil. Ironically, the BMA’s strategy of attempting to use Khatmiyya authority reflected the brotherhood’s recent historical experience with other colonial authorities. Thus the Khatmiyya’s precise role in the tigre emancipation movement needs to be explained in light of its previous role as a useful tool of Italian interests in the period before BMA rule.

### **The Colonial Cooption of the “Eritrean” Khatmiyya**

With the advent of Italian colonialism, European authorities adopted an “initial favorable tendency towards Islam” that reflected Italy’s geopolitical concerns in the region.<sup>105</sup> Accordingly,

The foundations of early Italian colonial attitudes were shaped by the need to maintain stability among the ‘tribes,’ and inseparably, by the need to respond to the divided Mahdist and anti-Mahdist loyalties of the Khatmiyya and the ‘Ad Shaykh. The Italian authorities were deeply concerned by the spilling-over of the Mahdist rebellion from the Sudan into the colony and feared the destabilization of their control over occupied territories.<sup>106</sup>

In this context, the gradual privileging of the Khatmiyya over the ‘Ad Shaykh had major ramifications that ultimately weakened the latter’s influence and allowed Khatmiyya authorities to continue their religious and institutional expansion. Following the death of sayyid Hashim al-Mirghani, the head of the Eritrean branch of the al-Mirghani family, colonial governor Fernando Martini encouraged and eventually convinced Hashim’s newphew, sayyid Ja‘far b. Bakri b. Ja‘far al-Sadiq b. Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani to transfer his ruling seat in Kassala to Keren in 1903. The

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<sup>105</sup> Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” 195.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 196.

brotherhood's alliance with colonial authorities intensified and proved mutually beneficial throughout much of the early twentieth century.<sup>107</sup>

However, the growth of Khatmiyya influence was not simply a swift, uniform process of consolidation. Factionalism and rivalries within the al-Mirghani family also developed and had consequences for Italian administrators. The most striking illustration of this involved the rivalry between sayyid Ja'far and sharifa 'Alawiya, one of Hashim's daughters, for control of the brotherhood during the 1910s. While Italian authorities initially persuaded 'Alawiya to recognize sayyid Ja'far's authority as head of the Eritrean branch, she continued her opposition by attempting to appoint her own Khatmiyya representatives to local leadership positions. Beginning during the 1920s as the Italian Fascist colonial administration increased support for local Muslim institutions, 'Alawiya turned her attention to spreading Khatmiyya influence in Ethiopia. Although "the fascist propaganda tended to exalt the sarifa's [sic] role" and used her status as a means of further co-opting the brotherhood, the privileging of sayyid Ja'far's power base reflected the politicized nature of the brotherhood and its leadership's position in both religious and social life.<sup>108</sup>

Thus the coming of British authority in 1941 presented a dilemma for the Khatmiyya, as its previous, privileged position as a co-opted local authority under the Italian administrative support came to an end. Nevertheless, within Eritrea's Islamic

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 198. See also Silvia Bruzzi, "Il colonialismo italiana e la Hatmiyya in Eritrea (1890-1941): Sayyid Ga'fer al-Mirgani e Sarifa 'Alawiyya nelle fonti coloniali italiane." *Africa (Roma)*, no. 3/4 (2006): 435-453.

<sup>108</sup> Silvia Bruzzi, "Italian Colonialism and Muslim Woman Leadership: The Case of Sharīfa 'Alawiyya in Eritrea." Paper presented at the Conference "Negotiating the Sacred: Politics, Practice and Perceptions of Religion in Africa. Stanford University (USA), October 25, 2009, 4.

communities in general, the coming of the BMA represented an opportunity for engaged Muslim leaders to capitalize on what they had benefitted from during the previous decades.

Italian policies and practice towards Islam, the establishment of Islamic institutions, and the shared experiences of Eritrean Muslims under colonial rule, all worked towards the genesis and formation of an 'Eritrean' Muslim consciousness, at least among the growing urban elite.<sup>109</sup>

However, if the coming of British authority signaled an adverse change for some previously privileged groups such as the al-Mirghani family, the BMA's arrival also unleashed new possibilities for the majority of the communities living in the 'Tigre frontier' of western Eritrea.<sup>110</sup>

### **The al-Mirghani Family's Response to Tigre Resistance**

Echoing their earlier role in serving as an intermediate authority for Italian administrators, the Khatmiyya tariqa proved an important source of intermediary authority for BMA officials beginning in 1941. This influence reflected the significance of Sufi authorities, centered around the local lodges and schools, in "crystallizing spaces and circuits of religious and social confluence among Muslims chiefly in the Tigre region."<sup>111</sup> Ever mindful of the religious dynamics across the northern highlands, Trevaskis noted their influence early on during his tenure in Keren.

Today the whole of this bloc of Moslem, and Tigre speaking, communities are culturally united not only by the fact that they are almost all Moslem, but also by the fact that (together with many communities in the Sudan) they adhere to the Tariga al-Khatmia [sic], the religious 'path' or sect

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<sup>109</sup> Miran, "A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea," 203.

<sup>110</sup> Miran, "Constructing and deconstructing the Tigre frontier space in the long nineteenth century," 47.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 44.

founded by Said Mohammad Osman El Mirghani [sic], a descent of the Prophet, who died in the Northern Sudan in 1853.<sup>112</sup>

After the coming of British authority, Khatmiyya leaders used their influence to enforce political stability across Tigre-speaking society. This was particularly true with regard to the initial shifta crisis that took place in the Sahel during the early 1940s.<sup>113</sup> In the aftermath of Britain's military campaign in Italian East Africa, officials in eastern Sudan and western Eritrea initially struggled to quell armed banditry and cattle-raiding between the mainly Tigre-speaking Beni-Amer and the Hadendowa along the Sudan-Eritrea border. Writing about the local tensions, S.F. Nadel observed that the "mutual suspicion and easily evoked aggressiveness are rooted in the very livelihood of this roaming tribe, which is always in search of new grazing lands and remains intolerant of any restrictions of its freedom."<sup>114</sup> While stationed in Agordat in 1943, BMA official John Morley recalled that Beni-Amer shifta had aggravated the situation in the War's aftermath by "stealing camels, goats and, when they could get them, virgins from the Hadendowa [sic]."<sup>115</sup> Morley's concerns had been entertained even earlier by colonial administrators, particularly by officials stationed in Sudan.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1(B), "The Tigre-Speaking Peoples," 107.

<sup>113</sup> *Shifta* is a widespread term throughout Eritrea denoting a person's status as a thief or outlaw. In the context of this chapter, shifta refers narrowly to those involved in cattle-raiding and clan feuds along the Sudan-Eritrea border. See Fekadu Ogbasellassie, "Shifta Problems in the Kebessa Regions of Eritrea (1947-1952)" in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History*, ed. Tekeste Melake (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2007): 51-63.

<sup>114</sup> S.F. Nadel, "Notes on Beni Amir Society," *Sudan Notes and Records* 26, no. 1 (1951): 53.

<sup>115</sup> John A.E. Morley, *Colonial Postscript: Diary of a District Officer* (London: Radcliffe Press, 1992), 154. For information on the Beni-Amer-Hadendowa disputes, see Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 70-71; Sudan Archives at Durham, 730/3/17-18. P.J. Sanderson, "Note on the Beja and Red Sea Districts of Kassala." Henceforth noted as SAD; Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, 70-72.

<sup>116</sup> K.D.D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan: the life and letters of Sir Douglas Newbold, K.B.E., of the Sudan Political Service, Governor of Kordofan, 1932-1938, Civil Secretary, 1939-1945* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), 267.

British testimonies illustrate the importance of local Khatmiyya authorities in finally resolving the crisis. Morley explained that administrators decided to hold a conference with all concerned “tribal leaders” in Kassala around Christmas 1943. British, Beni-Amer, Hadendowa and al-Mirghani representatives met for several days in an attempt to reach a compromise to end the hostilities. Finally, the parties reached an agreement on the fourth day:

A grand balance sheet was struck of all the claims and counterclaims. This as foreseen was much in favor of the Hadendowa, to whom the Beni Amer had to accept an undertaking to pay, over the next twelve months, a considerable sum in compensation. Finally the chiefs and their followers adjourned to the tomb of the Said el Mirghani [sic], where they swore to accept the fact and live in amity in the future.<sup>117</sup>

John Voll also refers to the Khatmiyya influence in resolving the conflict. According to Voll, “the Mirghani family was of great help in settling the problems of Bani-Amir-Hadandowa [sic] fighting” and “took part in the negotiations as intermediaries and it was on the al-Mirghani guarantee of amnesty that the raiders surrendered.”<sup>118</sup> Far from being an imposed authority on the warring factions, the involvement of the Khatmiyya throughout the upheaval supports Nadel’s observation that Sufi holy men were regularly consulted to remedy disputes between clans or conflicts “affecting the tribe collectively” in Tigre-speaking society.<sup>119</sup> Although Khatmiyya leaders proved able to resolve the initial conflict between the Beni-Amer and Hadenoda, the growth of the rebellion among the tigre of the Bet Ashgede, ‘Ad Takles and other groups illustrated

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<sup>117</sup> Morley, *Colonial Postscript*, 55.

<sup>118</sup> John O. Voll, “A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah in the Sudan,” 253. See SAD, 478/10/2. K.D.D. Henderson, “Ali Mintai Amnesty,” 1.

<sup>119</sup> Nadel, “Notes on Beni Amir Society,” 65.

how even the hierarchy of the tariqa, including members of the al-Mirghani family, could not bring about a successful resolution to the unrest.

Khatmiyya leaders faced a major political dilemma as calls for tigre emancipation grew. Because the brotherhood's adherents stretched across the shumagulle-tigre divide, they provided a valued but fragile religious continuity across Tigre-speaking society that meant that its position on the issue could adversely affect its support among both segments of society.<sup>120</sup> Both the BMA and many proactive shumagulle made a point of reaching out early to the al-Mirghani family in resolving the matter, especially in dissuading activists from creating new 'independent' clan structures. According to BMA officers, the Assab exiles associated with Taghé who were responsible for the promoting the idea of forming new clans also "went around collecting money from poor credulous people promising they won't have to pay and squandered the money collected on food and drink."<sup>121</sup>

Following the death of sayyid Ja'far al-Mirghani in 1943, the BMA turned to his nephew sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani for help. In February 1944, sayyid Abu Bakr made an eight-day tour of the 'Ad Takles communities, after being asked by officials in Keren to convince some of the rebellious *hisset* (sub-chiefs) into paying their customary payments and to withdraw support for creating the new clan groups.<sup>122</sup>

Although al-Mirghani reported to British officials that most of the agitators had fled to

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<sup>120</sup> Many shumagulle also served in influential positions within the tariqa throughout much of northern and western Eritrea. Aberra Osman Aberra, interview with author. Ottawa, Ontario, July 23, 2010.

<sup>121</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/66, "Ad Takles Exiles, Assab ex. Keren," 1.

<sup>122</sup> Despite his prestigious position in the brotherhood, sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani often received criticism for his apparent disinterest and idleness in local affairs. Major R. Signals noted in one communication that only after he gave Abu Bakr "a sound lecture" did he finally commit to speaking with the Tigre communities. BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/59, Major R. Signals to BMA Chief Administrator. "Ad Tecles Tigre Dispute," 1.

the nearby mountains “rather than stay behind and be disrespectful” of his suggestions, he managed to procure a list of thirty names of the activists allegedly responsible for inciting the local people to create their own clans.<sup>123</sup>

If the BMA and the shumagulle had reasoned that the al-Mirghani family’s involvement would help bring most of the tigre activists to heel, they were only partially correct. While al-Mirghani successfully dissuaded most ‘Ad Takles residents from establishing new clan structures, his visit also served to legitimize the basic aims of the emancipation movement. In a petition sent to Eritrea’s Chief Administrator Darcy McCarthy in late March, 1945, some tigre representatives recalled al-Mirghani’s earlier visit and its significance to their cause.

He noticed in person the condition of those virgin lands, covered with woods and stones, and the hard works which were taking place to make the ground tillable. As a result of such ascertainment, he stated to the BET ASGHEDE [sic] that his conscience did not allow him to bid the TIGRE [sic] to pay them [the Shumagelle] a share of the crops, as it is unjust to sweat peoples, in opposition to Sciaria [Sic] as well as to any human law.<sup>124</sup>

Consequently, much of the justification for serf emancipation stressed the dual violation of shar‘ia law and basic human rights. Although sayyid Abu Bakr served as an intermediary between the shumagulle and the tigre, his apparent sympathy for their cause gave some activists cause for celebration. When al-Mirghani himself later took up the largely symbolic position of President of the Eritrean Muslim League in 1946, the connection between the tariqa and the tigre cause furthered solidified. Nevertheless, because a majority of shumagulle also served in positions of leadership within the

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<sup>123</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/42, Major R. Signals to BMA Chief Administrator. “Ad Teeles Disobedience,” 1.

<sup>124</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/92, 6.



brotherhood, Khatmiyya authorities as a whole did not sanction the tigre movement nor provide its leaders with significant material support.

Thus the movement's main actors, while acknowledging the significance and role of the Khatmiyya as the main regional Islamic authority, viewed their own identity as Muslims on different terms. In general, much of the justification for tigre emancipation included references to the fact that in the past the majority of the shumagulle within the clans had been Christian up until the Islamic revivals of the early nineteenth century.<sup>125</sup> This late "turn to Islam" by the dominant class provided activists with additional validation that their status as a true Muslim people justified their moral struggle for emancipation, arguing "we could call it an evolution in the opposite sense, as not we, the dependents, have adopted religion, language and customs of the dominating people, but they, the dominating class have adopted our religion, language and customs."<sup>126</sup>

This perspective on the "inauthentic" religious and moral standing of the shumagulle helps explain why many tigre representatives rejected the legitimacy of the elites as true Muslims. When discussing the origins and early activities of the 'Ad

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<sup>125</sup> See *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A), "Letter of Tigré Representatives," Appendix 18, 3-4. Trevaskis also discussed this religious dynamic among the Bet Asghede. With the coming of shaykh al-Amin b. Hamid b. Naf'utay of the 'Ad Shaykh holy family during the early nineteenth century, most of the shumagulle converted to Islam despite the fact that "many of their serfs and more especially the subject Almada [sic] peoples were Moslems either by long tradition or later conversion." *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1 (B). "The Tigre-speaking Peoples," 19. Tigre representatives' claims were however complicated by the fact that the rise of the Khatmiyya-sponsored "revival" during the nineteenth century among the 'Ad Shaykh, the 'Ad Mu'allim had essentially reconverted even these already-Islamicized tigre. See Miran, "Constructing and deconstructing the Tigre frontier space in the long nineteenth century," 44.

<sup>126</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/89, "To H.E. Brigadier C. D'arcy Mc. Carthy O.B.E. Chief Administrator-Eritrea- Asmara," 9. A report composed by the Four Power Commission in 1947 also took note of this distinction. The report also observed, "It is strange how these Christian Abyssinian populations, instead of attracting the inhabitants of the territories occupied by them, were themselves attracted by the subjected populations whose language and religion they absorbed." See *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A) *Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies*, Report on Eritrea, "The Question of the Tigré," Appendix 17, 2.

Shaykh holy family, tigre representatives noted that although the local shumagulle were descended from the venerated Sufi saint shaykh al-Amin b. Hamid b. Nafutay, they eventually subjected the local serf population to the “same system and treatment” that other local Ashgede (shumagulle) had practiced, despite the fact that “the Islamic religion does not impose such barbarous and abusive forms” they nonetheless “carried out the system in [a] false way.”<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, the basic consensus among the tigre included the belief that their separate status as a “civilized,” land-cultivating people -unlike the shumagulle- entitled them to freedom from paying the traditional dues. Although much of the public justification from tigre representatives downplayed any particular “Islamic” rationale for their activism, they nonetheless believed and articulated that they viewed their actions as part of a divinely ordained struggle for justice. One appeal by tigre leaders explained that its constituency held a firm belief that “Italy was defeated because of God’s punishment and because she did not protect our rights” as citizens and subjects.<sup>128</sup>

Accordingly, activists also made a point of appealing to British sympathies about how the legacy of both “divine and human laws” illustrated that the “residue of slavery” that had been imposed on them could only be wiped away by the British applying the appropriate “principles of Civilization and Liberty.”<sup>129</sup> Tigre representatives carefully argued that their emancipation required not a broad rejection of all local (i.e. BMA) authority, but specifically freedom from the customary tributes and illegal taxes unknown

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<sup>127</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Report on Eritrea, “Letter of Tigré Representatives,” Appendix 18, 7.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>129</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/92, 6.

to the presiding administration.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, tigre leaders used their moralistic language and ideals to play on European sympathies as a means of garnering support. In describing the historical oppression of their status, they made a point of mentioning that their condition was worse than slavery, “a form that not even the Nazis have given the world, while they are being accused of the ill treatment of humanity, humanity created partially by God, with all the organs of the body and the senses of man.”<sup>131</sup>

The strategic language employed by activists also demonstrated that although the discontent among much of the population materialized as mass protest and refusal to pay, the responsibility for directing and articulating tigre appeals to colonial authorities fell to a small group of politically savvy merchants that had originally come up through the ranks of the previous Italian administration. Tigre representatives themselves alluded to this phenomenon, boasting that while the ranks of the shumagulle had fallen into a process of lethargy and “retrogression,” the descents of many tigre “progressed enormously, passing from shepherds and cultivators to the arts, the free professions, commerce and employment both in government and commercial institutions.”<sup>132</sup> Markakis also alluded to this professional imbalance between the two groups, stating that the tigre had “availed themselves of new employment opportunities in the colonial armies and police, raising their income, while also reducing the labour power available for herding their own and their masters’ animals.”<sup>133</sup> Of these emerging tigre from the “free professions,” Ibrahim Sultan Ali became the most influential and politically astute leader

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<sup>130</sup> See BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/89, “To H.E. Brigadier C. D’arcy Mc. Carthy O.B.E. Chief Administrator- Eritrea- Asmara,” 15-20.

<sup>131</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A), “Letter of Tigré Representatives,” 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>133</sup> Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, 59.

to articulate tigre concerns and the need to initiate dramatic reform across western and northern Eritrea.

### **Ibrahim Sultan: The Avvocato of tigre Emancipation**

In May 1945, a BMA intelligence report documented a general meeting of tigre and shumagulle that took place in the village of Sheddem in the previous month. Of particular interest to authorities were the “irregularities” in the tigre arguments against making any future payments to the landlords. Authorities blamed the pointed and aggressive language of the tigre representatives on the influence of a meddling lawyer “whom the Tigre turned [to] for legal assistance.” The man, referred to in the report as the “Avvocato” (lawyer) could not be positively identified by either the BMA or shumagulle observers. Nevertheless, the Avvocato quickly gained a reputation as a “person who incites ignorant and gullible bushmen to disobey Government orders, who is afraid of putting his address on his letters and whose letters are falsely signed.”<sup>134</sup> The descriptions of the individual in question perfectly fit that of Ibrahim Sultan Ali and his notable contributions to the tigre cause.

Born to a family from the Rugbat clan of the Beni-Amer and raised in Keren, Ibrahim Sultan Ali embodied the administrative climb of Eritrea’s small Muslim professional class during Italian rule. Having received his initial education at a Qur’anic school under the instruction of sayyid Ja‘far al-Mirghani, he later began his primary Arabic-language education as a student of shaykh Osman Hasebela, himself a former

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<sup>134</sup> BMA/DIS 260/kel 10957/93. Senior Civil Affairs Officer to B.M.A. Headquarters. “Ad Takles Tribe-Tigre/Shumagalle Dispute,” 2.

graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo.<sup>135</sup> As a youth Sultan worked at a train depot in Agordat from 1922-1926. After being fired for allegedly engaging in an altercation with his Italian supervisor, he returned to Keren. Using his knowledge of Arabic, he procured a job in the colonial civil service as a translator and for the next several years travelled throughout Eritrea as part of the Italian colonial government's native affairs department; his duties took him to many of the major towns and cities in western Eritrea such as Agordat, Tessenai and Mendefera, where he came into contact with other members of the small class of Muslim civil servants.<sup>136</sup>

Sultan claimed that from an early age he had been instilled with a hatred for the injustices of the shumagulle. He recalled that as a child he and his friends had been taunted and called "tiny worms" by their peers because of their serf origins. He also made a point of describing many of the most debasing kinds of treatment that shumagulle inflicted upon the tigre.

When a Nabtab [Shumagalle] child is born, before the umbilical cord is cut, one of the tigrés will be called and the cord is cut in front of him. The tigre who was being called will thus be the slave of the child. The 'bad-hair' of the child is never shaven without a tigre being summoned; and the same thing for circumcision. The tigre presented between the shaving and the circumcision would become the slaves of the child.<sup>137</sup>

Like earlier figures such as Mohamed Hamid Tahgé, Sultan took a particularly passionate stand against the land-owning aristocracy, denouncing their policies against the tigre as being both "un-Islamic" and a violation of basic human dignity. He

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<sup>135</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview with Ahmed Haji Ali, Cairo, Egypt, March 20-25, 1982.

<sup>136</sup> Arefayne Bairu, "A Short History of Shaykh Ibrahim Sultan," Asmara: Research and Information Center, January 10, 1990, 2-3.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. See Nadel, "Notes on Beni Amir Society," 57.

contended that their treatment was worse than slavery.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, his efforts at building a political constituency from among the disgruntled peasant groups followed the earlier efforts of the 'Ad Takles activists who had tried to create new clan structures. According to Trevaskis, the greatest irony about the surge in activism was the fact that it had primarily “been led and organised [sic] by the commercial class- composed of merchants in the towns and petty traders in the country.”<sup>139</sup>

Although Trevaskis correctly observed the origins and economic strength of many of the movement's leaders, Sultan and his closest supporters had not only benefitted from their financial standing but also from their experiences as low level members of the 'native' colonial administration, coming of age with a clear understanding about how the colonial system had appropriated the tigre-shumagulle divide. According to Sultan, Italian administrators long understood that “this kind of local traditional system would make the society highly fragmented and weak, and so the Italians encouraged the existing master-serf relationship among the Tigre Society.”<sup>140</sup> Idris Shubek, a tigre activist and an alleged relative of Taghé, echoed this belief when he argued that the colonial appropriation and perversion of the traditional land system effectively created “double slavery” for tigre living in servitude under both “native” and “colonial” authorities that

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<sup>138</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>139</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1(B), “The Tigre-speaking Peoples,” 116. In the midst of his political involvement, Sultan himself owned and operated a cheese processing plant in Tessenei from 1943 through 1945. See Woldeyesus Ammar, “Ibrahim Sultan Ali: A Liberator who passed away 20 years ago Today,” Eritrean Human Rights Electronic Archive, <http://www.ehrea.org/Ibrahim0Sulta20Ali.pdf> (accessed July 12, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, audio interview, Sudan. Research and Documentation Center (RDC), Asmara. Audio-Visual Collection. Henceforth noted as RDC.

lasted until the BMA period.<sup>141</sup> Tigre Representatives thus made an effort to place Italian colonialism in a wider historical context of tigre society by illustrating how officials “approved and confirmed” the status of the shumagulle.<sup>142</sup>

With Sultan’s growing influence as both a legal and political organizer, and with discontent among the tigre communities reaching a boiling point by the summer of 1946, peasant representatives finally coalesced as a more cohesive political force. In August 1946 Ibrahim Sultan, along with Hamid Humed (one of Tahgé’s confidants and fellow exiles in Assab) and colleague Imam Musa, chaired a meeting of more than seven hundred tigre representatives in Sheddem. Unlike the previous meeting that had taken place in April 1945, the 1946 gathering, which excluded shumagulle representation, explicitly laid out the basic objectives of the movement. Members passed a resolution nullifying their previous status as vassals and prohibited their brethren from milking animals or farming the land of the shumagulle. In addition, representatives also agreed to carry their program out into the rural areas to continue building support for the cause.<sup>143</sup>

What began initially as a series of localized opposition movements to the traditional land tenure system developed into a widespread movement for political power in Tigre-speaking areas of western and northern Eritrea. Under the leadership of urban-based activists such as Ibrahim Sultan, Mohamed Hamid Taghé, Idris Fa’id and other activists of ‘serf origins,’ Tigre-speaking peasants across the region resisted in various ways against both the shumagulle and the largely-compromised BMA administration.

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<sup>141</sup> Idris Shubek, audio interview, Agordat, Eritrea, 1988. RDC, Asmara. Audio-Visual Collection. Shubek claimed to be a nephew of Taghé.

<sup>142</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A), “Letter of Tigré Representatives,” Appendix 18, 8.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Rejecting the abovementioned parties' calls for more 'moderate' solutions to their grievances, the peasant leaders saw themselves engaged in nothing short of a struggle to end the "continuous state of slavery" within tigre society.<sup>144</sup> In this respect, the tigre movement against shumagulle domination illustrated how localized peasant consciousness developed not simply "by the properties and attributes of his own social being but by diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors."<sup>145</sup> Indeed, as the later political ramifications of their movement demonstrate, tigre activists emerged with a profound understanding of their own "negation" as a subject class whose existence under elite landowners remained the preferred system of governance for both Italian and British authorities. Thus the tigre rebellions, as exemplified in both the physical actions against the shumagulle and in the written appeals of representatives to the BMA, gave rise to a newfound identity among the Tigre-speaking peoples in which communities were empowered to displace the old, colonial-backed system with new social structures to shape their destiny.

By the middle of the decade tigre representatives had illustrated how the Muslim masses in Eritrea could serve as a politically viable force beyond the issue of serf emancipation. This rise in tigre-peasant activism against the traditional systems of authority dovetailed with the growing politicization of religion taking place across the country. The tigre movement proved to be a major thrust in the development of the Eritrean Muslim League, as local cultural, economic and political concerns became increasingly entangled during the middle of the decade.

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<sup>144</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2 (A) "Letter of Tigré Representatives," Appendix 18, 1.

<sup>145</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18.



### **Developing Muslim Institutional Uniformity during BMA Rule**

If social and political turmoil marked the early years of British rule in the Tigre-speaking areas, a different kind of activism took hold among Eritrea's small but influential class of Islamic scholars and clerics. Members of the 'ulama' embraced a bold mission of promoting greater uniformity and centralization of Muslim legal and educational institutions. Although during Italian rule administrators had supported the construction of mosques and privileged regional Muslim authorities such as the Khatmiyya, the coming of British authority initiated an era of new possibilities for those Islamic scholars who wished to bring about greater uniformity across Eritrea. Chief among this group of concerned leaders was the grand mufti Ibrahim al-Mukhtar. As the highest-ranking Muslim leader and judge in Eritrea, the mufti sought to regulate and standardize Islamic institutions during his tenure.

### **Ibrahim al-Mukhtar and the Push for Islamic Continuity**

Born in 1909 near Mount Kended in Akkele Guzay, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar came from a family with a legacy of involvement in Islamic affairs. Many of his family members within the Saho-speaking Harak Faqih sub-clan served as prominent Islamic scholars and jurists in the area.<sup>146</sup> His father shaykh Ahmed Omar Kuri, had been a highly respected scholar who had received his Islamic education in the Hijaz.<sup>147</sup> As the second oldest of seven children, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar remained in Akkele Guzay for much of his childhood, receiving his initial educational training in the Islamic sciences at home. Following the death of his father, he traveled to Sudan in January 1925 to continue his

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<sup>146</sup> *Faqih* translates from Arabic as a scholar or expert in Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>147</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview with author, Athens, Ohio, October, 2009. During the Italian era, Ahmed Umar Kuri apparently turned down a position as judge for a local "native" court.

education. He eventually made his way to Omdurman in Northern Sudan where he stayed for several months until finally arriving in Cairo in 1926; he was only fifteen years old.

Enrolling at al-Azhar University, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar distinguished himself as a leading student of Islamic jurisprudence. According to the mufti's son Ismael al-Mukhtar, he was "much advanced over his peers because he was an avid reader who went beyond the prescribed texts at al-Azhar" and also sought out the mentorship of many recognized scholars in Cairo at the time and took additional lessons from them.<sup>148</sup> However, beyond his academic abilities, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar also developed a keen political sense about the pitfalls of Italian colonialism. While still a student at Al-Azhar, he became aware of Italy's actions in neighboring Libya and noted how the Italian embassy in Cairo, which kept government officials informed about the activities of Eritrean students, often warned the youth about the dangers of "being involved in any kind social or political activism," especially the activities of groups such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's political education developed during his time in Egypt and he began a close association with many of the resident Eritreans living in the city. As with many of the Eritrean students who trickled into Cairo during the 1920s and 1930s, he became increasingly apprehensive about how the colonial authorities had succeeded in co-opting Islamic institutions in Eritrea.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. See Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=123&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=123&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed February 12, 2010).

Ironically, it was because of Italy's "Muslim policy" in Eritrea –in which colonial officials subsidized and promoted Islamic religious activities and facilities to solidify government rule- that Ibrahim al-Mukhtar ultimately came to fill the position of mufti. When Italian authorities sought to appoint someone as the Chair of the High Islamic Court in Asmara in 1939, he was approached by a small group of local Muslim Leaders. The most vocal supporter for his appointment seems to have come from the influential degiat Hassan Ali, a colonial civil servant and diplomat who also served as one of Asmara's ward chiefs. Although the mufti expressed hesitation about taking the position because of his own disapproval toward Italian rule, he also recognized that Eritrea's Muslim community needed guidance and more centralized leadership.<sup>150</sup> Through degiat Hassan Ali and other leaders, and with the apparent pressure of the Italian embassy in Cairo, the mufti ultimately decided to return to Eritrea even amid his own poor health. On December 4, 1939 he was appointed as the "Judge of Judges," or mufti for Eritrea. In April 1940 he returned to Eritrea after more than fifteen years abroad to assume his new duties.<sup>151</sup>

Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's arrival signaled an important new transition for Eritrea's Muslim communities. In his brief tenure as mufti under Italian rule, he established

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<sup>150</sup> According to Salim al-Mukhtar, Italian authorities had employed only three handpicked qadis to serve in local positions before the mufti's arrival. Salim al-Mukhtar, "Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar," *al-Dawlia*, 1997, Part 1. In theory, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's appointment as mufti placed him in charge of thirty-nine separate Islamic courts, including those in Ethiopia under Italian authority during World War II. See Salim al-Mukhtar, "Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: His Return to Eritrea, 1940-1952," Part 4.

<sup>151</sup> Jonathan Miran, "Grand mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen: note sur la vie et l'oeuvre de cheikh Ibrâhîm al-Mukhtâr (1909-1969)," *Chroniques Yéménites* (Sanaa : Centre Français d'Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales) 10 (2002): 40. Allegedly the Italian administration, in its efforts to appease Muslims, first suggested bringing an Islamic cleric from Libya to take charge of Islamic religious affairs. Local leaders rejected this effort and instead petitioned for Ibrahim al-Mukhtar. Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

himself as the supreme Islamic authority in the colony. He served as the first ever head of Eritrea's Islamic court and, with the help of supporters, solidified his authority over what had been a largely decentralized community of clerics. He also began demonstrating his own rejection of long-standing Italian attempts to co-opt and utilize Islam to support colonial objectives. For example, when Italian military officers approached him in November 1940 and asked that he declare a fatwa so that Muslim askaris in the Italian army could break their fast to fight in their East African campaign, he refused.<sup>152</sup> More than his worry about how Italian authorities had helped to pervert and control Eritrea's Islamic institutions, the mufti's major concern was based in his belief that so much of the Muslim population lived in complete ignorance of their religion. He acknowledged that upon his return to Asmara, he found the social and spiritual conditions of Muslims to be "pathetic" despite the fact that their economic situation had been generally favorable because of the war-time economy. Because there was "no education, no schools and associations" that bound the community together, many of the residents lived under the influence of superstition and were divided by what he termed the forces of "tribalism."<sup>153</sup> This was especially true with regard to the mufti's concerns about the influence of the Khatmiyya and the specifically the al-Mirghani family.

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<sup>152</sup> Salim al-Mukhtar, "Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: His Return to Eritrea, 1940-1952," Part 4.

<sup>153</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "The Mufti describes the Conditions of Muslims until his arrival and his Reform Efforts," Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef_mukhtar) (accessed June 10, 2010); Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

Although the mufti did not disapprove of Sufism in principle, “he was shocked by the excesses he saw by the people in their glorification of their Khatmiyya Sufi masters.”<sup>154</sup> One of the mufti’s major qualms about the Khatmiyya was the influence that many of its khalifas had in the major cities and towns over religious affairs. This resentment stemmed from the fact that although many Khatmiyya representatives had achieved high-ranking positions in the Sufi order, they often had very limited knowledge about the Islamic sciences and the intricacies of the faith. The mufti also viewed them as an obstacle to change in light of the fact he had witnessed how the few qualified Islamic leaders “who didn’t tow their line” often received their dismissals by the brotherhood’s leadership.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, because of their considerable influence throughout Eritrea, the mufti dealt with the Khatmiyya authorities “very tactfully and discreetly” in his own efforts at reform. Part of this discretion also stemmed from the fact that many of Eritrea’s influential merchants and Islamic leaders themselves served as khalifas for the al-Mirghani family, even as they supported the mufti’s efforts at reform.<sup>156</sup> Consequently, many Khatmiyya members within Eritrea’s merchant community regularly crossed into Sudan to Kassala and Khartoum to meet with the al-Mirghani family. For example in 1946, Hagos Aberra-one of Asmara’s biggest supporters of the mufti’s reform efforts- allegedly led a major delegation of khalifas to bring customary tribute from their respective communities.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview, 2. Ibrahim al-Mukhtar’s father had been an adherent to the Khatmiyya and according to Salim al-Mukhtar, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar was initiated into the Khatmiyya during his brief stay in Kassala. See Salim al-Mukhtar, “Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: His Trips to Seek Knowledge: Sudan (1925-1926),” *al-Dawlia*, 1997, Part 2.

<sup>155</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

<sup>156</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

In addition, as an adherent of the Hanafi madhab (school) of Islamic law, the mufti faced several challenges in trying to bridge the divisions of the various competing sects, who often vied for influence against one another.<sup>158</sup> The mufti's challenge against what he viewed as the widespread ignorance and promotion of vice by the fragmented Sufi leadership developed into a direct emphasis on basic Islamic teaching. In 1944, the mufti issued a memorandum citing that only qualified Islamic teachers could give public sermons in the mosques and that they had to have specific permission from the local qadi.<sup>159</sup> He downplayed the importance of Sufi "innovation" and called for a return to the basic Islamic teachings of the Sunnah.

Part of this campaign involved his public denunciations of such "un-Islamic" practices such as female circumcision, nose piercing and other regional customs. He also tried to "awaken observances of religious occasions," including traditional Islamic feasts and festivals and the commemoration of major holidays.<sup>160</sup> While he noted the dangers of following lax interpretations of Islam, he also had apprehensions about the rise of more hard-line sects; he warned against the dangers of "extremism and militancy" that he saw in some of the communities that began to embrace Wahhabism. In March 1945, the mufti released a public proclamation that addressed the need to end the factionalism. Decrying the exclusion and hostilities against fellow Muslims in the mosques, he also

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<sup>158</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "The Position of the Mufti on Tribal and Religious Differences," Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=139&category=mawakef\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=139&category=mawakef_mukhtar) (accessed June 10, 2010).

<sup>159</sup> Salim al-Mukhtar, "Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: The British Throne: 1942-1952," *al-Dawlia*, 1997, Part 5.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. By 1945, the mufti succeeded in making sure that all of the courts coordinated the fast for 'Eid al-Fitr on the same day throughout Eritrea.

warned against embracing the “harmful distinctions” and called upon worshippers to embrace their community as one.<sup>161</sup>

When Italian authorities did lose their hold over Eritrea in early 1941, the change in leadership from Fascist to BMA rule presented the mufti with greater latitude to carry out his agenda. In 1941, the mufti released his first executive order, which consisted of 63 articles establishing a new network for regulating and standardizing the Islamic courts.<sup>162</sup> In June 1943, after completing a comprehensive tour of the more than seventeen separate Islamic courts within Eritrea, the mufti provided reports to each administrative unit with a list of recommendations for the courts. That same year, the mufti gained additional influence when BMA administrators transferred to him the authority to appoint members for Eritrea’s awqaf committees.<sup>163</sup> Specifically, the mufti issued a general rule “whereby each sharia qadi of the principal towns was vested with the power of establishing an awqaf committee and appointing its members in his administrative jurisdiction.”<sup>164</sup> While the mufti’s actions served as the driving force behind the process of standardizing and improving the condition of education of Muslims across Eritrea, his efforts could not have materialized without the assistance of Muslim Leaders who provided the much-needed funds to establish the new institutions. The mufti acknowledged as much, stating despite the poor conditions of Islamic education upon his arrival, he was encouraged initially because of the fact that “the wealth

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<sup>161</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, “The Position of the Mufti on Tribal and Religious Differences,” Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=139&category=mawakef\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=139&category=mawakef_mukhtar) (accessed June 10, 2010).

<sup>162</sup> Miran, “Grand mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen: note sur la vie et l’oeuvre de cheikh Ibrâhîm al-Mukhtâr (1909-1969),” 41.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 40; Yassin M. Abera, “Muslim Institutions in Ethiopia: The Asmara Awqaf,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5, no.1 (1984): 207.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

concentrated in Muslim hands” could assist him in his efforts. The mufti’s hopes increased after many of the “rich Muslim merchants” answered his call.<sup>165</sup> Between 1943 and 1951, the Muslim community helped open several Islamic institutions in Asmara, Massawa, Keren, Agordat and other major cities.<sup>166</sup>

In particular, Muslim businessmen made a point of contributing to the education of their respective communities through the awqaf. One of the more opulent examples of this spirit came from Saleh Kekiya Pasha, an influential merchant based in the village of Hirgigo near Massawa. In 1944, Kekiya used the revenue that he had received from property investments in Addis Abeba to fund the construction of a Muslim school in Hirgigo that enrolled more than five hundred students.<sup>167</sup> The facility, consisting of seven separate buildings, included a staff with several al-Azhar graduates that had been arranged through the assistance of the mufti and other leaders. At the grand opening of the school in March, officials also announced that in addition to teaching the Arabic language and basic Qur’anic education, the founders planned to establish classes for teaching other local languages such as Tigre and Saho. The jubilation at the school’s opening and appreciation for Kekiya’s actions was captured in a report printed in the weekly Tigrinya-language newspaper *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*.

Before today, we have never seen such work being done in our country. This deed, however, must have had a hand of the will from God as we have never encountered the extent of such quality of generosity and

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<sup>165</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, “The Mufti Describes the Conditions of Muslims in Eritrea until his arrival and reform Efforts,” Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef_mukhtar) (accessed July 15, 2010).

<sup>166</sup> See Miran, “Grand mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen: note sur la vie et l’oeuvre de cheikh Ibrâhîm al-Mukhtâr (1909-1969),” 41-42; Salim al-Mukhtar, “Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: The British Throne: 1942-1952,” *al-Dawlia*, 1997, Part 6.

<sup>167</sup> “An Amazing Good Exemplar.” *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, March 13, 1944: 1.



kindness in a human being. It is true that there are few wealthy people from our country since the majority of our country's wealth is in the hands of foreigners and those people, unless it is to gather up whatever they find here and send them to their country or to expand their selfish uses and wealth, we never saw them to do anything that help the native people or the government.<sup>168</sup>

In addition to the merchant communities along the coast, one of the most substantial sources of the support among the business community came from the Jabarti leaders based in Asmara. Although the Jabarti community had been “instrumental in funding the construction of mosques and other religious institutions” in Asmara and throughout the Hamasien region during much of the early twentieth century, many of the leading families proved especially supportive to the mufti’s overall efforts at reform throughout the early and mid-1940s.<sup>169</sup>

Beyond providing the bulk of finance for the Asmara waqf, Jabarti merchants also promoted the mufti’s wider efforts at encouraging Muslim youth to take advantage of the new push for educational reform. Many of the leading merchant families in Asmara assisted in opening new Qur’anic schools, organizing youth activities and subsidizing private Arabic-language instruction.<sup>170</sup> The efforts of shaykh Adem Kusmallah and his brother shaykh Kusmallah Muhammad illustrate this kind of urban-based activism. As owners of a successful clothing business in the city, they were involved in raising money for local mosques and sponsoring meetings of different community groups on their

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<sup>168</sup> “Great Celebration for the Opening of Hirgigo School.” *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, March 20, 1944: 1. For his part, the mufti noted that he had initially tried to persuade Kekiya to build the school in Massawa or Asmara because of the cities’ more strategic location. See Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, “The Mufti Describes the Conditions of Muslims in Eritrea until his Arrival and Reform Efforts,” Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=70&category=mawakef_mukhtar) (accessed July 15, 2010).

<sup>169</sup> Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” 196. See Abera, “Muslim Institutions in Ethiopia: The Asmara Awqaf,” 203-207.

<sup>170</sup> Nebil Ahmed, interview with author. Athens, Ohio, November 2009.

property. The Kusmallahs even made their storage facilities in the Geza-Berhanu section of the city available to local Muslim youth groups to further their studies while being encouraged by the brothers to maintain and “be attentive in their education.”<sup>171</sup>

Other Jabarti leaders in Asmara such as Berhanu Ahmedin involved themselves not only in supporting the institutional reform, but used their substantial contacts with Jabarti community members outside Eritrea to assist in the attracting new teachers and Arabic instructors to the city.<sup>172</sup> Some leading intellectuals, such as shaykh Abdelkadir Kebire made a point of regularly visiting the new schools, observing the progress of students and made their own recommendations for institutional improvement.<sup>173</sup> Kebire’s well-known zeal for supporting Muslim education initiatives also reflected his contributions in organizing donation drives among other Muslim leaders in Asmara and Massawa and helping to plan the construction of several trade and polytechnic schools for Muslim youth. Largely because the mufti “was very well respected and revered by the Asmara Jabarti,” many leaders proved receptive to the overall reform efforts that simultaneously contributed to a larger mobilization of Islamic civil society.<sup>174</sup> The mufti’s relations with Asmara’s Muslim leaders and those in other Eritrean cities revealed his considerable influence among the Muslim intellectual base. Accordingly,

the mufti had strong relationship with the intellectuals of his time, particularly those who spoke Arabic. They naturally gravitated towards him as he was a leading authority. The mufti was well versed not only in

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Although instructors and Arabic teachers arrived from al-Azhar periodically during the early and mid-1940s, the first official delegation of scholars from Cairo came in 1948 under the direction of shaykh Ali Mustafa Alughabi al-Shafi. Salim al-Mukhtar, “Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: The British Throne: 1942-1952,” Part 5.

<sup>173</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview. See also Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Abushehada Abdelkadir Kebire* (Cairo: al-Nasri dehebi, 1998): 40.

<sup>174</sup> Jamil Aman Mohammed, interview with author. Ottawa, Ontario, July 18, 2010.

Islamic subjects but also classic Arabic literature, history, politics, etc and that appealed to intellectuals of his time.<sup>175</sup>

Although the mufti made it his personal mission to establish new schools and promote greater uniformity for the Eritrean Muslim population, he also benefitted from the small but active group of British administrators that also worked to improve basic education for the population. The proliferation of schools for students reflected both the efforts of Islamic religious leaders as well as the basic aims of the BMA administration in improving basic education among the population. While their motives differed, British administrators did contribute by expanding school attendance and establishing new institutions. Consequently, the relaxation of previous restrictions on indigenous media and education provided by the British “was key to the mufti’s success in taking many initiatives and the establishment of various institutions.”<sup>176</sup>

Although understaffed, BMA administrators, working with the Muslim leadership managed to develop a growing network of local schools that ran parallel with Islamic leaders’ agenda. According to Major H.F. Kynaston-Snell, eleven schools for indigenous students were established in January 1943 alone, with an additional fifty-four schools opened through April 1946.<sup>177</sup> BMA administrators worked with Eritrea’s Islamic clerics to import Arabic language texts from Cairo and Khartoum and also supported “native inspectors” to develop the Tigrinya and Kunama materials. Kynaston-Snell also highlighted the fact that community elites played a major role in the affairs of schools,

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<sup>175</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Of these institutions, twenty-two were reserved for Arabic instruction, thirty one for Tigrinya and one for Kunama. Fabian Colonial Bureau, MSS Brit EMP S. 365 180/3/50. Major H.F. Kynaston-Snell to Dr. Rita Hinden, April 19, 1946. Hence noted as F.C.B.

noting that “each school has its committee of five or six notables whose duties are to seek the general welfare of the school.”<sup>178</sup> Although in 1941 only sixteen elementary schools were in operation with a maximum of only 4,177 enrolled students throughout Eritrea (and the province of Tigrai in northern Ethiopia), Kennedy Trevaskis reported that by the end of 1947, fifty-nine elementary schools had been opened, employing 153 Eritrean-born teachers with emphasis on standardizing education through Arabic and Tigrinya as the primary languages.<sup>179</sup>

Concurrent with the growth of education and religious standardization, the Muslim leadership within the Eritrean capital also exhibited a greater degree of unity and self-awareness as representatives of local interests. Part of this process included using the small but growing indigenous language print media in the city, especially the commentary sections of *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*. In particular, leaders in Asmara made use of the growing media to develop greater community awareness and stress the need for moral guidance during the transitional BMA period. For the Muslim-specific topics, written commentaries relied on stories from the Qur’an and the hadith to remind readers of their moral duties. One of the more colorful entries, published a February 1944 issue, reminded residents that because God had the power to see all things, even “a black ant moving along on a black stone in complete darkness,” the hearts of all people and their deeds would be seen and judged.<sup>180</sup> Other times, many of the commentaries

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid. To illustrate how understaffed the BMA were in their efforts, Kynaston-Snell mentioned in his correspondence that he had served simultaneously as the director of eleven separate educational facilities, the colony’s Director of Education, head of the Italian schools and as an advisor to several private “community schools” in the major cities. See FCB 180/3/51.

<sup>179</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 2(A), “Eritrean Education,” 69-71.

<sup>180</sup> “God is the All-Seeing- it is Written in the Qur’an.” *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, February 28, 1944: 1.

appealed to the fundamental unity of Eritrean Muslims and Christians as “brothers.” One of the most frequent ways that commentators expressed their hopes for equality and unity included the emphasis on education of the youth, particularly issues of language. Many editorials addressed the need to be adamant in using “native languages” in the schools both as a means of preserving culture and in developing their country.<sup>181</sup> In a mutually beneficial practice, BMA administrators often printed stories about educational progress while community leaders highlighted the accomplishments of the youth in developing their skills. Reports on student progress became one of the main issues of focus. The paper’s editor Woldeab Woldemariam highlighted the achievements by publishing student speeches and reports about their progress. Many of the speeches also made the connection between education and the need for building a new country out of colony.

I am ready to go to school early in the morning  
 I cleaned my face and wore my uniform  
 I spend my day happy in school  
 As of now I'm better than my friends  
 Over and over again, I thank my leaders  
 Over and over again, I thank my teachers  
 Over and over again, I thank my parents  
 Because of them, I am in better [shape] than my other mates  
 Here I am now ready to serve my country.<sup>182</sup>

Achievements in education represented one of the major accomplishments that the members of the Eritrean ‘ulama’ helped cultivate as the decade progressed, working in tandem with concerned merchants and community leaders. The proliferation of Islamic institutions added additional momentum to the growing activism among the Muslim urban intelligentsia. This activism became an important source of strength and cohesion

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<sup>181</sup> “Education in Mother Tongue within the Native Schools.” *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, April 24, 1944: 1.

<sup>182</sup> “News on Schools.” *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, July 6, 1944: 1.

for community leaders, particular for those residing in Asmara as the previously unknown forces of sectarianism emerged by the middle of the decade.

### **Muslim Intellectuals and Urban Life, the Case of Mahber Fikri Hager (MFH)**

Although its origins have remained largely obscured, the significance of the MFH has carried far beyond its initial creation in May 1941 and its supposed “demise” in 1944.<sup>183</sup> At its heart the MFH represented the earliest attempt among the urban intelligentsia to engage colonial authorities and address regional political concerns, particularly in Asmara. Initially, the group of community leaders that came together in the spring of 1941 to form the MFH expressed immediate concern over the fate of their respective communities and the future role of indigenous Eritreans in the new British-controlled administration. The heart of their concern, particularly for principal founders Abdelkadir Kebire and Gebremeskal Woldu, revolved around their anxiety about the BMA continuing to employ Italian administrators in the day-to-day operations of government and residents’ fears of Italian reprisals against the indigenous population.<sup>184</sup> Although established in secret, the organization made its presence known to BMA authorities by going against the ban on public gatherings, coordinating a demonstration of approximately three thousand people in Asmara on May 5, 1941.

The core group that founded the MFH represented the leading Eritrean intellectuals of their day. While some members had come from Eritrea’s older generation of community elites, the thrust of the organization’s program came from the group of former colonial civil servants that had been born during the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>183</sup> Henceforth noted as MFH.

<sup>184</sup> Gebremeskel Woldu and Abdelkadir Kebire served as president and vice-president, respectively. See Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Abushehada Abdelkadir Kebire*, 31.

Beyond sharing an “anti-Italian platform” and a concern for the overall objectives of BMA rule, this relatively young faction with the MFH represented the growing activism among Eritrea’s Muslim intellectuals and community leaders.<sup>185</sup> Most of them had attained the modest colonial-sanctioned educations and worked in positions within indigenous civil service. It became this small but influential group that established the basic perimeters of the nationalist contact zone. Besides the MFH’s official membership, the organization also had widespread support among the Jabarti community and other Muslim business elements. The organization itself developed as a result of an initial meeting held in the tea shop of the Red Sea Pearl Hotel, a popular establishment owned and operated by the Aberra family, one of Asmara’s most prominent Jabarti families.<sup>186</sup>

Despite their concern for Islamic interests, both the Muslim members within MFH, much like that of the reform-minded Christian members, embraced broad nationalist aims that allowed the organization to serve as a “common arena” where movements for social reform, economic betterment and community awareness fused.<sup>187</sup> Nevertheless, because of the BMA-imposed ban on political organizations, the MFH’s direct influence remained limited to that of a clandestine group whose activities were

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<sup>185</sup> On the day of the demonstrations, delegates from the MFH met with the first governor of BMA-occupied Eritrea, Brigadier Kennedy-Cooke, and presented their grievances. Abdelkadir Kebire acted as the main representative to Kennedy-Cooke, who by all accounts, received Kebire’s concerns with indifference. After their meeting, BMA authorities notified the demonstrators that their gathering violated the ongoing curfew on public gatherings and they soon dispersed the crowds. See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 33-36; Warka Solomon, “The Life and Political Career of Abdelqadir Kebire,” (BA Thesis, University of Asmara, 2002), 21-23; “The Life and Political Career of Abdul Kadir Kebire, in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History*, ed. Tekeste Melake (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2007): 194-207.

<sup>186</sup> The hotel, constructed and opened in 1935 on Via Cagliari, was the first hotel to be built, owned and operated by native-born Eritreans in Asmara. The hotel also served as the setting where MFH members elected their twelve official delegates of the organization’s Executive Council. Aberra Osman Aberra, interview. See Woldeab Woldemariam, “Do you Remember?” *Sagam* 1 (1987); Asanadai Tekwabo Arasai, *Merusat Anqasat Ato Woldeab: 1941-1991* (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 1995): 318-321.

<sup>187</sup> Iyob, *the Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 65.

limited to secret meetings and discussions mainly in Asmara and other major cities. Both Jordan Gebre-Medhin and Ruth Iyob's studies refute long-held claims that the MFH served from its inception as an irredentist organization with direct Ethiopian support. One of the more substantial points Gebre-Medhin raises is the fact that initially, many of the most ardent supporters of unionism particularly those in the hierarchy of the Coptic Church, rejected the MFH because its membership was largely composed of Muslim, Protestant and Catholic members of the urban intelligentsia rather than the traditional elites of the Tewahedo/Orthodox community.<sup>188</sup>

While the most "radical" unionist elements within the organization eventually used the MFH to built support for unification with Ethiopia, the shift to unionism or hadinet among some within the intelligentsia did not occur overnight. In fact, the trajectory of MFH illustrates that the supposed 'split' between most Muslim and Christian Eritreans did not represent a major breakdown in interreligious cooperation, at least among pro-independence intellectuals. When an explicit pro-unionist faction finally emerged in 1944 with the establishment of the Ethiopia Liaison Office in Asmara and its puppet organization the Society for the Unification of Ethiopia and Eritrea, most of the MFH's Muslim members and a small number of Christian representatives veered off in their own direction in an attempt to retain the early spirit of unity. Woldeab Woldemariam recalled how in 1944 Saleh Ahmed Kekiya organized a secret meeting of the pro-independence members at his residence in Asmara in which Muslim and

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<sup>188</sup> Gebrin-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 81. Some recent studies continue to frame the MFH as an overwhelmingly "unionist" organization. Shumet Sishagne has argued that the organization "adopted the prevailing demand for union with Ethiopia as its primary objective and built its membership around this idea." Sishagne, *Unionists and Separatists*, 24; Ruth Belay, "The Political Biography of Ibrahim Sultan," (BA Thesis, University of Asmara, 2000), 13-16.



Christian members shared a symbolic meal in which the attendees eat meat that had been slaughtered by both a Muslim and Christian and then swore to each other on both a bible and Qur'an that their group would remain united in their objectives in spite of the growing politicization of religion.<sup>189</sup>

The depth of their desire for inter-religious cooperation is important to note in light of the fact that many of the MFH's Muslim members had also functioned simultaneously as leading authorities within their respective Islamic communities. shaykh Abdelkadir Kebire, degiat Hassan Ali, Ibrahim Sultan, hajj Suleiman Ahmed Omar, Saleh Ahmed Kekiya and other leaders had all involved themselves in the various movements occurring throughout the colony. Their support for the wider social causes, be it tigre emancipation or the proliferation of Islamic education, was also linked with their attempts at building on the already preexisting harmony with many of the urban-based Christian intellectuals. Although the middle of the decade witnessed the beginning of limited hostility between many urban Muslims and Christians, this was the result more of the visceral reactions to specific political crises that fractured the otherwise cordial relations between most of the independence-leaning urban elites. This (partial) fragmentation that finally arose between some of the Muslim and Christian representatives came as a result of the two most significant events in the politicization of religion in Eritrea: The SDF 'incident' in August 1946 and the political fallout of the Bet Giyorgis conference during the following November.

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<sup>189</sup> Woldeab Woldemariam, "Do you remember?"

### **The Sudanese Defense Force (SDF) ‘Incident’ and early Sectarianism in Asmara:**

Although the BMA exerted control over Eritrea and its government in the aftermath of Italian rule, most Eritreans in the major cities came to know British rule through the presence of soldiers serving within the Sudan Defense Force (SDF). Originally established in 1925, the SDF became the main base of manpower for British officialdom in the Horn during World War II. Having defeated Italian forces at the battle of Keren in April 1941, SDF soldiers occupied an awkward place between British officials and Eritrean residents. Although many soldiers within the SDF had been recruited from many of the isolated “tribes” that occupied eastern Sudan and Western Eritrea, the majority of personnel came from “locally recruited” units from across Sudan.<sup>190</sup> For their part, the general attitude among British officials seems to have supported the idea that an “underlying antagonism,” particularly between Eritrean Christians and Sudanese troops, remained palpable throughout much of the early part of the decade. According to one British report, this tension developed in large part because “the Sudan troops arrived in Eritrea as victors, with the not unnatural result that they, in my opinion, look down on the Eritreans and regard them as a conquered race.”<sup>191</sup>

According to Jordan Gebre-Medhin, the resentment of a “cross section” of population against the SDF illustrated how Sudanese soldiers often “became the scapegoats for whatever went wrong with the British rule in the country,” including

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<sup>190</sup> Ahmad al-‘Awad Muhammad, *Sudan Defense Force: Origin and Role 1925-1955* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1983), 54. See SAD 740/9/20, J.O. Orlebar, “The Story of the Sudan Defense Force.”

<sup>191</sup> FO 1015/141. “Political Aspect of Disturbances- August 28<sup>th</sup>. 1946.” Officials also noted that despite the particular hostility between Eritrean Christians and the SDF, the same general feeling of antagonism toward the Sudanese existed among many local Muslim groups.

discontent in predominantly Muslim cities such as Keren and Massawa.<sup>192</sup> British intelligence reports also reveal that part of the conflict revolved around the tensions between SDF soldiers and low-level Eritrean administrators and members of the police force took place in most major cities. For example, in February 1943 a fight between one Sudanese soldier and an Eritrean police constable in Massawa resulted in a retaliatory attack by Sudanese soldiers from a nearby camp against the city's main police station. All told, BMA authorities reported thirty-three casualties, including sixteen deaths from among the local population.<sup>193</sup> Exactly two years later, a fight broke out in Asmara between Christians and SDF troops after a Sudanese soldier allegedly made a derisive comment about the "Coptic Religion." Soon after, a crowd of "several thousands" formed and began pelting a group of members of the SDF Provost staff with stones. Although the disturbance ended with only a small number of wounded bystanders, one police official warned that conflict between "the SDF soldier and Eritrean Copt" needed only "a spark to start a quarrel."<sup>194</sup>

In the context of the rising tensions, a general attitude of paranoia and fear against Asmara's Muslim population, both native and foreign-born, developed as a result of increasingly aggressive Unionist activities.<sup>195</sup> On Sunday, July 28, 1946, the politicization of religion in Asmara boiled over when Unionist supporters among the city's youth staged an unauthorized procession throughout the city. Although BMA officials issued orders for the crowd to disperse, the supporters continued their protests.

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<sup>192</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 86.

<sup>193</sup> F.C.B. 180/3/24, "Extract from a letter dated 23.10.46," 1.

<sup>194</sup> FO 1015/141. "Appendix B, Asmara."

<sup>195</sup> See Tesfagaber Tesfamariam, "Christian-Moslem Conflict in Asmara in the 1940s," (BA Thesis, University of Asmara, 2000), 42-50.

After authorities took five of the alleged leaders of the march to the Mercato police station, a crowd formed around the police station and many began to throw stones at the police. Although BMA authorities quickly released the march's leaders on parole until the next day, the crowd turned its anger on the mainly Muslim merchants in the nearby outdoor market and began looting and destroying their shops. Two days later on Tuesday July 30, disturbances continued when a crowd of approximately three hundred youths gathered at the office of the city's SCAO and demanded the release of the previously-arrested leaders. The attacks against the merchants and shop owners signified, according to Jordan Gebre-Medhin, the culmination of "many months of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-Italian and anti-Sudanese demonstrations" on the part of Unionist leaders.<sup>196</sup>

Even within the fractious climate, many of Asmara's Muslim leaders came out publically with BMA authorities and the MFH leadership to encourage residents to refrain from violence. In particular, one of Asmara's most influential ward chiefs, degiat Hassan Ali called publically for quelling sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christian residents.<sup>197</sup> Tensions in Asmara continued throughout the month until August 28, when the long-standing resentment against the Sudanese soldiers took on a new dimension. The infamous "SDF incident" took place on the late afternoon during the feast of 'Eid as Sudanese troops from nearby Fort Baldissera celebrated near the city's outdoor market. A British memo summarized the source of the conflict, stating that

on that day two or three Sudanese became engaged in a fight with Eritrean civilians in the market place. The fight was very fierce and one Sudanese was killed. The remained two Sudanese escaped back to their barracks

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<sup>196</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 84.

<sup>197</sup> F.C.B./180/3/67, "More Rioting in Asmara: Acting Chief Administrator's Stern Warning." *Eritrean Daily News*, August 1, 1946: 1.

where they found their fellows, seized their rifles, automatic weapons, and some armoured [sic] cars. They then ran riot throughout the town killing, looting and destroying property at random.<sup>198</sup>

Entering into the heavily Christian section of Abbashawl, the soldiers' indiscriminate shooting of residents continued for nearly two hours unabated until BMA authorities finally brought the approximately seventy SDF soldiers under control. When the violence ended, more than forty Christians had died and more than sixty were wounded.<sup>199</sup>

While the SDF attacks gave unionist proponents adequate fuel to fan the flames of sectarianism, the response of the Muslim leadership illustrated the extent to which Asmara's elites attempted to repair harmonious relations between Muslims and Christians. The city's Islamic leaders, ward chiefs, and most influential merchants supported the Chief Administrator's decision to remove SDF forces both from the city and throughout the Hamasien Plateau. When the BMA held an inquiry into the SDF's attack in the days that followed, Muslim community leaders provided testimony against the soldiers and praised the decision to remove the SDF soldiers and replace them with British troops. Degiat Hassan Ali spoke about the suffering of the people from his ward and noted how their removal had "very much eased the situation."<sup>200</sup> The response of Asmara's Muslim community demonstrated that the SDF's actions signified a fundamental conflict between the Sudanese soldiers and the local population, not a conflict exclusively between Muslims and Christians. Even British observers noted that

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<sup>198</sup> F.C.B./180/3/24, "Extract from a letter dated 23.10.46," 1.

<sup>199</sup> F.C.B./180/3/68, "Heavy Asmara Death Toll Follows Outbreak by SDF Soldiers," *Eritrean Daily News*, August 30, 1946. Two Muslims were also reported killed and ten injured. See also F.C.B./180/3/69, "Verdict in S.D.F. Trial," *Eritrean Daily News*, December 19, 1946: 1.

<sup>200</sup> FO 1015/141, "29<sup>th</sup> Witness, Dejatch Hassan Ali, Ward Chief."

the “increased antipathy to all sudanis [sic]” had resulted mainly from the soldiers’ supposed inappropriate public behavior, including their well-known “penchant for drink” and their “endeavoring to appropriate local women.”<sup>201</sup> Despite the fact that the attack helped “politicize religion in a way like never before” for unionist leaders, it also represented a more general “watershed” moment in how the indigenous leadership, both Muslim and (especially) Christian grew increasingly dissatisfied with BMA rule. Moreover, the incident did not destroy Muslim efforts to continue building unity even as political mobilization took on increasingly religious connotations.<sup>202</sup> Although factions had previously developed, the majority of local unionist and pro-independence representatives had maintained cordial relations with each other in the weeks preceding the meeting. This was largely because of the reality that most of the political leaders had grown up together, “learned at the same schools,” and remained well-respected members of the community to each other.<sup>203</sup>

### **Bet Giyorgis Conference and the ‘Muslim’ Response**

In theory, the political conference that took place on the outskirts of Asmara at Bet Giyorgis in late November 1946 should have illustrated the considerable strength of the Eritrean intelligentsia, both Muslim and Christian, in addressing the growing political fragmentation. With the BMA chief administrator John Meredith Benoy lifting the previous ban on formal political parties in October, the intelligentsia, led by Woldeab

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., “Political Aspect of Disturbances-August 28<sup>th</sup>. 1946,” 1. See also “Report of the Incident on the Population: The Possible Repercussion and Action to Minimize Them. The Steps Suggested to Avoid a Recurrence.”

<sup>202</sup> Astier M. Almedon, “Re-reading the Short and Long-Rigged History of Eritrea 1941-1952: Back to the Future?,” 125.

<sup>203</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 187.

Woldemariam and with the assistance MFH President Gebremeskel Woldu, Muhammad Umar Kadi other more moderate representatives, planned to organize a general meeting to address the fragmentation. The official meeting on November 24 itself represented the culmination of several secret gatherings during the prior weeks in which some members of the competing factions of the MFH attempted to stave off the division, forging a basic twelve point agreement that sought to guarantee the local autonomy of most political and cultural institutions from Ethiopian control in the event of political union. According to Ruth Iyob, support for “conditional union” by some members encouraged most of the MFH’s “radical unionists” to intensify their efforts at complete unification, especially those closest to Eritrea’s Coptic Church hierarchy under the leadership of Abune Markos.<sup>204</sup> Thus religion did not, prior to the November meeting, serve as a marker for political identity among the concerned intellectual class until hard-line unionists under Abune Markos and Tedla Bairu, the newly-installed head of the Unionist Party, used it as one of the more prominent wedge issues during talks.<sup>205</sup>

Although often cited as the major spokesman and participant at Bet Giyorgis, Ibrahim Sultan, one of the more prominent supporters of Tigre emancipation movement and the movement’s most recognizable spokesperson, initially came merely as an observer and did not participate in the previous drafting committee for the first session of the conference.<sup>206</sup> Observing the radical turn of events, including Tedla Bairu’s now

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<sup>204</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 69.

<sup>205</sup> The evening before the conference, Gebremeskal Woldu was demoted from his post as President of the MFH in favor of Bairu. See Shumet Sishagne, “Tädla Bayru ‘Oq’bit,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 813; Iyob, *The Eritrean struggle for independence*, 69; Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 93-95.

<sup>206</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 185.

infamous insulting of Woldeab Woldemariam and his lineage and the more general disdain for Muslim concerns, Sultan (having been made to sit on the floor) stood up and attempted to walk outside from the meeting. When unionist representatives noticed and then asked Sultan to provide his opinion on the issues, a member of the unionist youth allegedly yelled out to Sultan that no matter what he said, the Muslim “herders” would *have* to obey what the Christian elders decided at Bet Giyorgis.<sup>207</sup> Sultan claimed that he was told that because “a thousand mules must follow one horse” he and every other Muslim leader, being “mules” themselves, had no right to instruct the Christian representatives on what needed to be done.<sup>208</sup> While Sultan retorted that he had come to only to observe and was not in a position to “represent all Muslims,” he staged a walkout from the meeting with most of the attending Muslim representatives and immediately headed toward his office at the Asmara Chamber of Commerce. Although some of the Asmara’s more prominent pro-independence Muslim leaders remained at the meeting for the duration, Sultan began drafting the founding document for a new political organization that could represent pro-independence interests.

Having shown the political program to associates Suleiman Ahmed Omar and Abdelkadir Kebire, Sultan and his supporters took the program to degiat Hassan Ali and the mufti for their approval in the following days. Afterwards the group made a point of going around to all of Asmara’s mosques and Islamic centers to get signatures for Sultan’s petition the BMA to form the new political organization.<sup>209</sup> On the following Friday, Sultan and his group organized a dinner in the Akriya section of Asmara and

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>208</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>209</sup> Bairu, “A Short History of Shaykh Ibrahim Sultan,” 6.



celebrated as they received approval for creating Eritrea's first official nationalist political organization. The leaders then set a date for December 4 to meet in Keren to elect the leadership for their new association, the Eritrean Muslim League.

### **Conclusions**

Between the arrival of British authorities in April 1941 and the time of the Bet Giyorgis conference in 1946, an emerging generation of pro-independence Muslim leaders across Eritrea began articulating the concerns of their respective communities through social, religious and political activism in several unprecedented ways. Whether concentrated among the Tigre-speaking clans of the Western Province, within the confines of religious and educational institutions or among the urban intelligentsia, the broad if somewhat crude formation of a distinctly Eritrean identity among the various Muslim peoples began to emerge. Although a singular, politically unified "Muslim" community did not materialize, the intelligentsia that made up the bulk of Muslim leadership took important steps in forging community cohesion like never before. This basic cohesion helped propel activists into establishing the Eritrean Muslim League by the end of 1946.

Those who established the organization and continued to build a program for Muslim interests illustrated the significance of the three major transformations that took place within "Islamic" Eritrea in the early and mid-1940s. The push among the Tigre-speaking "serf" communities for emancipation from the traditional land system built a highly mobilized movement that developed into a viable political force. Simultaneously, the concern that Islamic practices and education had fallen into despair led members of

the ‘ulama’ to establish stronger institutions on behalf of the Muslim community as a whole. Concurrent with these two phenomena, the small but active Muslim elements that emerged within Mahber Fikri Hager in 1941 continued to push for safeguards for their communities against both European administrators and perceived pressure of the “radical unionists” aligned with the Ethiopian government. With the establishment of the League, each of these interrelated transformations took on deeper social significance as the Muslim League’s political program solidified. Although the politicization of religion that manifested during late 1946 demonstrated the “temporary fission between urban Eritrean Muslims and urban Christians,” it did little to thwart those activists who committed themselves to establishing an independent Eritrea through new political means.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War for Independence*, 106.

CHAPTER 3: BUILDING A CAUSE FOR ALL ERITREAN MUSLIMS:  
THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT,  
NOVEMBER 1946-DECEMBER 1947

“Just as the sky does not have a pillar, the Muslim does not have a nation.”<sup>211</sup>

Popular joke within Eritrea’s Unionist Party

In late November 1946, the various factions of Eritrea’s indigenous political, social and educated elites gathered at Bet Giyorgis in hopes of finding a workable solution to the growing crisis. Instead, perceived attacks by the predominantly Christian unionist supporters precipitated a walkout by a number of Muslim attendees. Citing opposition to the “humiliation and disdain” that unionists had displayed toward the Muslim delegations, Ibrahim Sultan decried the “Christian conspiracy” at Bet Giyorgis as a meeting designed to “sell Eritrea to the wolf.”<sup>212</sup> Soon after, he and other leaders planned to form their own political organization.

This chapter examines how that organization, the Eritrean Muslim League, formulated and expanded its program during its first year of existence from December 1946 through the duration of the Four Power Commission’s stay in Eritrea in December 1947. It analyzes the organization’s intellectual and ideological constructs by looking at how the League developed its nationalist discourse among two general audiences, the Muslim grassroots within Eritrea and the wider international community. The chapter also argues that two broad ideas emerged that League leaders and intellectuals used to further their agenda. First, the League refined its basic argument that Muslim identity

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<sup>211</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 193.

<sup>212</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

and rights would be compromised if Eritrea was annexed to Ethiopia. Secondly, the League presented the case to international observers that Eritreans wished to develop their own nation-state and played upon western sympathies that Eritrea be given an opportunity to establish a “civilized” government to guard against the supposedly ignorant, feudal system of Ethiopian rule. By examining the broader social dynamics from which these arguments emerged, this chapter revisits some of the more significant moments in the first year of officially-sanctioned political activity in Eritrea with a focus on the Muslim League leadership in adapting to the changing circumstances.

### **Establishing the Eritrean Muslim League**

With the blessing of Asmara’s leading Muslim clergy and the official approval of the BMA, pro-independence leaders convened an initial meeting at Keren in early December 1946 at the invitation of sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani. Held at the residence of the late sayyid Ja‘far al-Mirghani, the meeting reflected the considerable diversity within the initial nationalist constituency. Those in attendance included representatives from four influential and sometimes transposable factions: the urban intelligentsia, tigre emancipation leaders, religious officials and the “local dignitaries” of Keren, including members of the al-Mirghani family and the affiliated khalifas. Those in attendance also included a small number of pro-independence Tigrinya Christian activists who later formed their own nationalist organization, the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP). Attendees elected their colleagues to positions in the League’s Executive Council or its

colloquial name, Lujinna al-ayan.<sup>213</sup> Although League leaders later guarded against being labeled a purely “Islamic” organization, the founding conference illustrated that activists sought to build upon their basic strengths as a political outlet for Eritrean Muslims. With Ibrahim Sultan elected to the position of Secretary General and wielding much of the executive authority, officials elected sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani as League President. Although al-Mirghani himself did not carry much official power within the organization, his symbolic position and informal influence illustrated how the new organization worked to build the broadest possible support under the banner of Islam.<sup>214</sup> Besides sayyid Abu Bakr’s position, other members of the al-Mirghani family in Eritrea played a pivotal role in the early organization and the “introduction of al-rabita to the outside world,” particularly in major cities like Kassala and Khartoum where their influence carried tremendous weight.<sup>215</sup> Months after the League’s formation, the organization’s officials praised al-Mirghani for his initial role in “bringing Muslims together” at Keren and helping representatives address their concerns “under one accord.”<sup>216</sup>

Although the League’s first meeting did not constitute a mass gathering of all of Eritrea’s Muslim groups, those in attendance established three main objectives that they

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<sup>213</sup> Nebil Ahmed, “A History of Al-Rabita Al Islamiya Al Eritrea (1946-50),” in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History*, ed. Tekeste Melake (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2007), 135. The spelling of Lujinna al-ayan is based on Nebil Ahmed’s model.

<sup>214</sup> The duties of the League’s Secretary General, as defined by the organization’s statutes, included the “preservation of the documents of the League; fixing dates of meetings of the Superior Council; addressing invitations to the Provincial Committees; preparing documents and arguments subject to discussion; registration of statements of decisions; and despatching [sic] of copies of decisions to Provincial Committee etc.” *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 106, “Memorandum on Aims and Program,” 4.

<sup>215</sup> Nebil Ahmed, interview. One of the more prominent League supporters was Osman al-Mirghani, sayyid Abu Bakr’s younger brother and a close confidant of Ibrahim Sultan. See FO 742/23, 32.

<sup>216</sup> See *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 17, 1947: 1.

later presented to their respective communities to draw support. The basic points included the mission to (1) preserve the “territorial unity of Eritrea” as demarcated by Italian officials before 1935, (2) to support and pursue the unconditional independence of Eritrea-if not immediately then after a period of trusteeship and (3) to outright refuse the union or annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia or any other country.<sup>217</sup> Because the Lujinna al-ayan included many of Eritrea’s most influential religious and community leaders, the inclusion of these “important personalities” gave added credibility to the organization and allowed its overall membership to swell during its initial months.<sup>218</sup>

### **Building League Membership across Eritrea**

Between the founding meeting on December 3, 1946 and the first official conference in late January 1947, the League relied on these community leaders and members of the intelligentsia to build support at all levels of society. While some held official positions within the organization as presidents, vice-presidents and secretaries of the various branches, many of the organization’s most senior members also served as key advisers for the League’s relatively young leadership. Some veteran political and social leaders, such as degiat Hassan Ali and Imam Musa Abdu, served as key links between the Executive Council and clerics in the major cities while other religious officials gave their own tacit support to the organization.

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<sup>217</sup> Ahmed, “A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50),” 134; “This is the Muslim League.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, February 25, 1947: 2.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 136; Nebil Ahmed, interview. Among the initial members of the Executive Council included Ibrahim Sultan, Abdelkader Kebire, hajj Suleiman Ahmed Umar, degiat Hassan Ali, Adem Muhammad Kusmallah, hajj Imam Musa Abdu, Muhammad Uthman Hayuti, Berhanu Ahmedin and Yasin Mahmud Ba Tuq. Hajj Zeinu Adem Kusmallah, interview with Nebil Ahmed, Asmara, January 2, 2003.

In particular, mufti Ibrahim al-Mukhtar became involved with the organization's leadership. Having been consulted by many pro-independence activists before the League's actual creation, the mufti gave considerable moral support to their agenda and served as a voice of counsel. Even prior to Bet Giyorgis, the mufti had been apprehensive about what he saw as Ethiopian-supported "unionist ploys" to gain influence in Eritrea's political affairs and he encouraged the formation of a political organization to protect Muslim interests. More than a month before the League's founding in late October 1946, sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani sent a letter to the mufti requesting his presence for a future conference in which all Muslims of "opinion and influence" could exchange their views about Eritrea's future.<sup>219</sup> Although according to Ismael al-Mukhtar the mufti "was a very passionate nationalist, who was probably among the most knowledgeable on the intricacies of Eritrean politics," his position as the highest ranking Islamic authority allegedly placed him in a delicate situation where his official duties did not allow him to take a public stance on politics; consequently, he was absent at the League conference in Keren in January 1947.<sup>220</sup> He did however send his representative shaykh Idris Hussein Suleiman to give the League his blessing and support. In addition, the mufti included a brief speech to be read aloud to delegates. In his communication he noted that the quest for independence reflected the pride of Eritreans everywhere who wished to breathe life into a homeland of "freedom and equality." In addition to agreeing with the League's three founding aims from the

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<sup>219</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "Founding Conference at Keren, First and Second Years," [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=43&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=43&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed July 12, 2010).

<sup>220</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

December meeting, he implored all Muslims to maintain unity in their political objectives.<sup>221</sup>

Throughout the League's initial growth, the mufti carefully followed the developments through his close association with many top officials, including his brother hajj Suleiman Ahmed Umar, qadi Ali Umar Uthman and his former student shaykh Yasin Mahmud Ba Tuq.<sup>222</sup> Expressing to League leaders his worries of the "imminent danger facing the country" from continued Ethiopian and pro-unionist interference, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar remained well informed of the organization's intentions and was kept abreast of its program, especially by Asmara-based leaders degiat Hassan Ali and Abdelkadir Kebire.<sup>223</sup> Consequently, the mufti's allegiance as an unofficial supporter became an invaluable tool for the League in gaining further legitimacy as an organization capable of speaking on behalf of Eritrea's Muslim communities.

### **Rural Support for the League**

In the weeks after the December meeting, members of the committee traveled from Keren and Asmara across the country to inform their colleagues about the new developments. Accordingly, the participating "district members" within the towns and villages had the task of convening their own meetings to elect representatives for the first general conference of the Muslim League planned for late January 1947. Although news of the meeting spread quickest in the major cities, League leaders also made great efforts to get support and participation from rural communities. Initially, officials sponsored

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<sup>221</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "Founding Conference at Keren, First and Second Years," [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=43&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=43&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed July 12, 2010).

<sup>222</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, interview.

<sup>223</sup> Jamil Aman Mohammed, interview.



meetings in the private homes of party supporters, holding discussions within mosques and, occasionally, instructing supporters through written correspondence.<sup>224</sup> Hajj Abdel Hadi Hajji Beshir Se'id a tailor based in the village of Korboria in Akkele Guzay noted that community leaders first received a telegram from the Lujinna al-ayan in Keren instructing them about how to organize their own League branch.<sup>225</sup>

Others noted that the League, in addition to the merchant communities, received considerable support from Muslims in the villages, although many of those who joined did so because they allegedly believed that based on its name, the League represented a purely religious organization.<sup>226</sup> In spite of the supposed misinformation, religious leaders took up the task of educating their respective communities.<sup>227</sup> In this crucial period before the printing of the League's political tracts and newspaper, rural participation developed through public preaching and informal information sessions with leaders. For example, one of the strongest early voices to emerge came from qadi Ali Umar Uthman, the president of League's Akkele Guzay branch. A former Judge on Asmara's shar'ia court of appeals, qadi Uthman served as a powerful orator for the League's cause by appearing within Mosques to disseminate information on the League's pro-independence position.<sup>228</sup> This also included political speeches at weddings, funerals

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<sup>224</sup> RDC/01714. Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, Central Administration of Eritrean Liberation, "A Questionnaire regarding the Political Parties of the 1940s and 1950s," March 1, 1991. Ali Se'id Bekhit Umar, interview. Henceforth noted as RDC/01714.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. Hajj Abdel Hadi Hajji Beshir Se'id, interview.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. Umardin Abdelkadir Mahmud Muhammad, interview.

<sup>227</sup> It remains to be seen whether or not some League officials intentionally presented the League as a purely religious organization as a means of garnering the widest possible support from their respective constituencies.

<sup>228</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "Qadi Ali Umar Uthman, Senior Scholar and Leader of Eritrea," [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=7&category=bios\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=7&category=bios_mukhtar) (accessed July 6 2010).

and other public gatherings.<sup>229</sup> In addition to preaching against union with Ethiopia some leaders took harsher measures to garner support, including shunning community members who refused to join the League. Ali Se'id Bekhit Umar, a resident of Dekemhare described how even well respected community members could be shunned if they came out against the League:

Religious leaders were pressuring their religious followers to come to the side of the party. When Ahmed Telsem joined the Unionist party, it was agreed that no one would come to his funeral or participate in any of his happiness. However, we later went for his funeral but we did not partake in the meal.<sup>230</sup>

Reports of apparent coercion from Muslim leaders also surfaced later in the year with the development of additional political parties, including the Muslim-majority membership from the Pro-Italy Party. In their public testimony before the Four Power Commission in November 1947, Pro-Italy Party representatives testified that the Moslem League had “always tried, through the religious/religious heads, to intimidate anybody who spoke on the future of Eritrea, endeavoring to impede their work,” and thus tried to monopolize politics in Muslim communities.<sup>231</sup> Other critics claimed that members of the al-Mirghani family directly approached those leaders who intended to voice their support for other organizations and threatened them with excommunication.<sup>232</sup>

The ability of the League to reach deep into the social fabric of both urban and rural areas speaks to the effectiveness of the Lujinna al-ayan in merging the League's

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<sup>229</sup> RDC/01714. Mehmedin Ahmed Se'id, interview.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. Ali Se'id Bekhit Umar, interview; Mehmedin Ahmed Se'id, interview.

<sup>231</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 143, 1-2.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. In their testimony to the Four Power Commission in December 1947, Pro-Italy Party representatives also claimed that this pressure justified the low turnout of its members at the Committee's official hearings.

political program with community interests as a whole. This included both the perceived material gains and ideological rationale for joining the League. For many urban residents in cities like Asmara and especially Massawa and its surrounding areas, the promise of an independent and vibrant merchant-driven economy contributed to the popular sentiment the League could deliver greater prosperity through its pro-Independence program than if Eritrea became a region under Ethiopian control. In the more rural areas and particularly among many of the Tigre-speaking clans of the western province, the League's anti-feudal stance, combined with promises of meaningful political and social reorganization, also helped attract support for the League's argument that it alone was working to safeguard Eritrean Muslims' main interests.

The organization's self-professed status as a defender of Muslim social and economic justice was no doubt strengthened by the fact that the Executive Council went to great lengths to showcase how Islamic religious leaders and officials formed an integral part of the organization. Indeed, many shaykhs and qadis oversaw key aspects of the organization, including "ratifying budgets and expenditures, summoning meetings and selecting [the] time and place of meetings, ensuring the execution of laws and resolutions" as well as "coordinating the affairs of the party and determining its internal organization and operation."<sup>233</sup> Community leaders also made a point of gathering necessary funds from among villagers.<sup>234</sup> Donations to the League, usually made in the

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<sup>233</sup> Ahmed, "A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50)," 137. See FO 742/23, "Moslem League- File SB/A/6"; *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 106, "Memorandum on Aims and Programme," 3.

<sup>234</sup> Ironically, some former League members noted that from the League's very beginning "mosques were not good contributors because of the lack of revenues and sources of income they encountered." Ahmed, "A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50)," 137; RDC/01714. Hajj Abdel Hadi Hajji Beshir Se'id, interview.

form of foodstuffs, cattle and other payments in kind helped build the organization's resources, while urban residents usually provided direct cash donations and contributed raw materials and office supplies.<sup>235</sup> These activities also helped the rapid mobilization of the League's constituency that materialized when an estimated 7,000 representatives congregated in Keren on January 20-21, 1947 for the League's first general assembly.<sup>236</sup>

### **“National” Participation in the January Conference**

Unlike the initial gathering the previous December, the January conference represented the first truly “national” meeting of Eritrea's Muslim communities. Because much of the League's program had yet to be drawn up, its vaguely nationalistic position drew a wide cross-section of representatives. Coordinated by the Lujinna al-ayan, the two-day meeting heard the testimonies from most of the major factions and ethno-cultural groups in the country, including those from the major cities, “tribal leaders” from the villages, as well as representatives from various factions of tigre activists and shumagulle. Significantly, the meeting also included the presence of many of the leading pro-nationalist Christian figures from the highlands who had come to show their support for the League's cause. Their attendance marked the beginning of a long and cordial relationship between the League and Christian nationalists. With the input and participation from these various groups, the League elders set to work on finalizing their organization's statutes and the basic political program. In total, the League passed seven resolutions at the conclusion of the conference:

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<sup>235</sup> RDC/01714. Mehmedin Ahmed Se'id, Umardin Abdelkadir Mahmud Muhammad, Idris Ibrahim Hussein, interview. Once the organization firmly established itself, voluntary contributions were augmented by monthly and annual fees for League members. See Four Power Commission, Appendix 106, “Memorandum on Aims and Programme,” 4.

<sup>236</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 124, “C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing,” 5.

- 1: Eritrea should not be partitioned under any circumstances and stay as one united country.
- 2: Complete Eritrean Independence. However, if this is not possible because of a lack of basic education [political readiness], the Eritrean people should have internal independence and remain under the trusteeship of Britain or the UN for a period of ten years. When these ten years have passed, immediate independence should be granted unconditionally.
- 3: The immediate aspirations of the Eritrean people are education and advancement. So until now, they do not want to place their property and circumstances with a government they do not know. Therefore, it is not the desire of the Eritrean people to be united with Ethiopia or any other country.
- 4: The Muslim League (Association of Muslims) of Eritrea calls on their brothers who reside outside of Eritrea to be united and come back to their land and their country.
- 5: Any issue concerning full independence or trusteeship should be discussed and debated by those educated and wise people that are selected.
- 6: If it is not possible to achieve full independence, the country which administers Eritrea under trusteeship should be observed and monitored by the UN.
- 7: The People's Association of the Muslim League will present the drafted constitution of their Christian counterparts aspiring the two parties will discuss and be bound together by it.<sup>237</sup>

In each of the resolutions, League authorities demonstrated that their organization represented far more than an exclusively “Muslim” political association concerned solely with Eritrea’s independence. At the core of its many official aims, the League sought to build upon the growing sense of “Eritreanness” that had developed during the previous years of BMA rule. An examination of the League’s founding statutes provides an important overview of how the leadership sought to integrate its program as a vehicle for wider social reform. While the Lujinna al-ayan served as the guiding body on a national level, the provincial committees were a more direct reflection of grass roots political

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<sup>237</sup> “This is the Muslim League.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, February 25, 1947: 2. See *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, March 5, 1947: 1; Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 199; Ahmed, “A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50), 135.

involvement. With twelve members elected to each provincial council, representatives had the right to choose their representatives by a majority public vote among its members and also to demand meetings with the Lujinna al-ayan upon request.

What is also striking about the statutes is the elders' insistence that members of the provincial committees strive to "learn the views of personalities, chiefs and notables of the Moslem League before taking any decision, merely to be conversant with their ideas."<sup>238</sup> In truth, such early edicts reflected the League's penchant for top-down organization that would prove problematic in subsequent years, when leaders faced growing resentment from among the grassroots about the League's overall direction and aims. This emphasis on building a more educated and critical membership at this early stage reflected the League's standing as an inherently intellectual organization whose leadership extended its activities from the political realm to cultural concerns among the wider public. The most effective means of facilitating public enthusiasm for defending Eritrean autonomy and addressing other Muslim concerns came from the pages of the League's newsletter, *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya* (the Voice of the Muslim League).

### **Nationalist Discourse and *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya***

Nearly a month after League representatives adjourned from the Keren Conference, members of the Executive Council secured one of their major organizational aims by establishing their own Arabic publication, *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, in February 1947. Originally managed by Bashir Osman Bashir and edited by shaykh Yasin Ba Tuq and shaykh Muhammad Uthman Hayuti, the Asmara-based writers established

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<sup>238</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 106, "Memorandum on Aims and Programme," 3.

the weekly Arabic newsletter to serve as an outlet for the growing activism.<sup>239</sup> Although its publishers often faced financial difficulty and periodically ceased publication, the newsletter made an immediate impact on building the League as a national entity.<sup>240</sup> Beyond addressing immediate political concerns, the newsletter also represented the most significant outlet for the larger intellectual debates taking shape among the Arabic literate public.

In a redactor that appeared in the newsletter's first edition on February 25, Muhammad Uthman Hayuti welcomed the participation of Eritreans of all faiths and viewpoints to contribute their opinions, even those who shared different positions from the League. He remarked that the organization supported such participation in part because the League's ideology and political decisions were not based "solely on considering Muslims' benefits" and that the organization wished to take into account Christian citizens' concerns and support a "common national interest."<sup>241</sup> Also featured in its inaugural issue, Eritrea's most prominent Muslim leaders lend their support to the new tract. Shaykh Hussein Alamin, degiat Hassan Ali and Ibrahim al-Mukhtar each contributed pieces that addressed concerns within the Eritrean Muslim community.

Echoing Hayuti's spirit of solidarity with Eritreans of all faiths, degiat Hassan Ali wrote

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<sup>239</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "Profesor Yasin Mahmud Ba Tuq: Writer, Thinker and Political Leader," [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=88&category=biography\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=88&category=biography_mukhtar) (accessed July 9, 2010). Born in Massawa in 1914, Yasin Mahmud Ba Tuq came from a prominent merchant family and received his initial education from local Islamic and Italian schools. During the early 1940s, he studied under the Mufti and became a steadfast supporter for his reform efforts. In this period, he also served on Massawa's school advisory board and was appointed as the chairman for the schools committee in 1942 and became a member of the waqf committee in Massawa in 1945. After attending the League's founding in December 1946, he served simultaneously on the Lujinna al-ayan and as secretary of Massawa's League branch.

<sup>240</sup> See FO 742/23, 30.

<sup>241</sup> "This is the Muslim League." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, February 25, 1947: 2.

that besides building solidarity with “Muslims around the world,” the paper would be used for “strengthening the bilateral understanding between our Christian brothers with whom we are connected in our national interest and economic and social responsibilities.”<sup>242</sup>

### **Eritrea as a “Modern” Society**

Many league officials used the paper to demonstrate the tangible nature of the movement for Eritrean identity. The League intelligentsia established the basic discourse on how to achieve sovereignty and the terms on which an independent Eritrean society should be based:

Eritrea can manage its affairs economically, but the essentials of ultimate independence have to be founded with the cultural, social and ethical requirements that without them cannot exist. It is essential that the children of this country are capable and possess the qualities that reflect the ripeness of a political conscience so that they can take responsibility for administering the nation by themselves.<sup>243</sup>

Other contributors emphasized that Eritrean independence depended on the ability of all Muslims to strengthen civic activism. Muhammad ‘Uthman Hayouti warned that without establishing an autonomous government that included the “participation of all elements,” Eritrean leaders would not be able to manage the complex “matters of the age.” He claimed that the League had assumed a major responsibility in trying to guarantee the rights, livelihood and happiness of “every Muslim who is faithful to his

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> “We and Independence.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 4, 1947: 1. See *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, March 18, 1947: 1-2.



homeland” and that the “momentum of the national feeling” needed to be supported by a serious commitment among the Muslim leadership.<sup>244</sup>

In the commentary sections of *Sawt al-rabita*, contributors also equated Muslim education as a national priority on par with rejecting Ethiopian influence. Shaykh Muhammad Said Abu encouraged Muslim youth to explore their “interest in knowledge” because he believed in education as a foundation of progress that represented the “renaissance of all nations and peoples.”<sup>245</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq argued that independence was not possible unless greater access to education was offered to “all categories of the public.” He affirmed that taking an interest in the sciences and culture was essential if they wished to “reform the society.”<sup>246</sup> Several issues of the newsletter also featured commentaries addressed directly to Muslim youth, imploring them to attend the new Islamic schools and work toward becoming functioning professionals for a new independent state. In other instances, students themselves published op-ed commentaries. One of the more notable pieces, written by Abdel Nebi Muhammad Ibra Haqus, a student from Asmara’s King Farouk Islamic Institute, expressed disappointment that “many parents do not send their children to the schools” and that contrary to many Muslim families, Christian schools had a far greater student enrollment and held an advantage that threatened the political future of all Muslims.<sup>247</sup> As 1947 progressed, additional voices of concern emerged and argued that the League also needed to guard

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<sup>244</sup> Muhammad Uthman Hayuti. “Our Duties toward Independence.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 4, 1947: 1.

<sup>245</sup> Muhammad Said Abu. “Let us Leave the Ignorance and move toward Knowledge and Work.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 17, 1947: 2.

<sup>246</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, “Which are the Best Means to Create Reform?” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 17, 1947: 1.

<sup>247</sup> Abdel Nebi Muhammad Ibra Haqus, “Toward the Duty.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 17, 1947: 2.

against all possible threats to Muslim sovereignty. Shaykh Muhammad Nurhussein contended that the League needed to protect Muslims both from the “dictatorship of the Ethiopian government” and the “silence of the international community.” He argued that while Eritrea’s Christian population had “never suffered from the repression” of Ethiopian rule, Muslims faced ongoing threats to their language and religious traditions.<sup>248</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of this growing activism within the pages of *Sawt al-rabita* included promoting the virtues of an independent nation-state to redress the perceived shortcomings within Eritrean society. Some of the most substantive calls for independence from Ethiopia relied on a defense of a “modern” Eritrean nation-state and the relationship between national progress and the fulfillment of Islamic ideals.

Now we need to ask, what is the best way for reform or treatment? No doubt that sociologists in their search for treatment of social diseases have reached ways and theories that can protect societies from the dangers that surround them. They have researched theories that the Qur’an has also discussed. So if we want reform and morality, we have to take responsibility put on our shoulders and before everything, we have to start educating ourselves, because education is the best thing in this awakening. No nation can reach the stage of development if they do not have education and cultural knowledge.<sup>249</sup>

At a less abstract level, supporters argued that the Muslim League served as a tool for activists to establish a functioning state that could succeed. In a commentary titled “Our Ministers are Writing with Scissors,” Mahmud Nurhussein Berhanu criticized many of Eritrea’s unionist leaders for their “weak hearts” by essentializing the political debates and having taken many of the League’s public statements out of context. His primary

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<sup>248</sup> Mahmud Nurhussein Berhanu, “On Two Articles.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 11, 1947: 2.

<sup>249</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, “Which are the best means to create Reform?”

concern dealt with justifying why Eritrean Muslims, as with different cultural and religious groups in other societies, had the fundamental right to pursue social progress through an independent state. After defining “the state” as a group of people connected by common objectives, certain geographic connections, and represented by a particular political tradition, Berhanu asked rhetorically of his critics, “What is the difference between the state [in other societies] that represents them and the League that represents us?”<sup>250</sup>

Echoing Berhanu’s argument, Ali Muhammad Hassan, a League representative from the Tigre-speaking ‘Ad Shaykh group, argued that a nation “was based on many things” and that specifically for Muslims, their faith represented the cornerstone of national identity upon which other accepts, including “language, rights, science, arts, traditions, history, shared pains of the past, and shared desires of the future” could be used to cement a national identity.<sup>251</sup> He went on to assert the guiding significance of Islam in the pursuit of national sovereignty.

...it is apparent for the Muslim that the bigger nation is his Islam. In Islam is his happiness, pride and glory. And he can not be changed and he ought to protect his nation because that is his duty for his ancestors who fought and bore the pain in order to protect it [the nation] for the Muslim individual and his fellow believers.<sup>252</sup>

Arguments in favor of establishing an Eritrean nation-state thus became increasingly intertwined with the rationale that only a new state could guarantee Muslim rights. Ahmed Abdelkarim, a League member from Massawa, proclaimed that “as long

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<sup>250</sup> Mahmud Nurhussein Berhanu, “Our Ministers are Writing with Scissors.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 3, 1947: 4.

<sup>251</sup> Ali Muhammad Hassan, “No Muslim wants to Unite with Ethiopia.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, November 11, 1947: 2.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

as there is respect for justice and humanity, a nation's self-determination is a right for everyone." He continued, "our wishes and desires as Eritrean Muslims are that we live free and that we do not want to tie our destiny with a nation that we do not have any ties with such as Ethiopia."<sup>253</sup>

The nationalist language that League members employed among each other changed little when representatives finally made their appeals to members of the international community charged with deciding Eritrea's fate. When representatives of the Four Power Commission arrived in Eritrea in November 1947, the League not only emphasized how Eritrean society was better prepared for achieving independence than Ethiopia, but harkened back to the fundamental incompatibility between Eritrea's Muslim population with a political system in which "the influence of the Church over the Government of Ethiopia" by definition reduced Muslims to second class citizenship.

A Muslem [sic] does not have the right to be equal to a Coptic Ethiopian or to fill an administrative vacancy of any nature. A government that goes ahead, under such religious influences to this extent cannot be allowed to rule over the lands. Of others, and if progressive civilization is being entrusted to Civilized Countries, that have taken the obligation to protect the high principals of life and social justice, then it is their DUTY not to throw away the people of this country to the feet of Ethiopia.<sup>254</sup>

Indeed, fears about the conditions of Muslims within Ethiopia were often a rallying point in arguing against any form of political union. In a private correspondence with his colleague Muhammad Nurhussein, Asmara Muslim League President Abdelkadir Kebire confided that he and others had long observed and worried about the

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<sup>253</sup> "Speeches on the June Demonstration." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, July 8, 1947: 2.

<sup>254</sup> FO 743/23, "Memorandum from the Eritrean Muslem League."

situation of the more than ten million Ethiopian Muslims that had become “mute and powerless” under Ethiopian rule.<sup>255</sup>

Throughout 1947, League writers went to great lengths to illustrate how the Ethiopian government did not concern itself with the welfare of its Muslim subjects. One League supporter argued that Ethiopian indifference revealed itself immediately after the defeat of the Italian army when “the Ethiopian government did not include a single mosque when they gave money to rebuild many of the churches in Ethiopia and Eritrea damaged in World War II.” According to League proponents, proof that the government did not care about “Islamic issues” was also evident in Ethiopia’s curtailing of Arabic language education, imposing Amharic instruction on residents and reducing “the overall number of Muslims in their census.”<sup>256</sup> League writers also addressed the protection of Muslim rights in different ways. One of the most effective campaigns included a push by writers to place their struggle in a broader nationalist context.

### ***Sawt al-rabita and the Wider World***

As international debate over Eritrea’s political future increased throughout 1947, Muslim League officials increasingly framed their struggle as part of the wave of nationalism spreading across the globe and the Horn of Africa in particular. Many articles provided reports on political uprisings in Syria, Somalia, and elsewhere across the Islamic World. The Somali independence movement received particular focus in the League press; members viewed the struggle of their “Somali brothers” as a parallel

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<sup>255</sup> Saleh A.A. Younis, “Abdulkadir Kebire,” Dehai-Eritrea Online, [http://www.ephrem.org/dehai\\_archive/1997/feb/0171.html](http://www.ephrem.org/dehai_archive/1997/feb/0171.html) (accessed July 29, 2010); Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 197.

<sup>256</sup> Ali Muhammad Hassan, “No Muslim wants to unite with Ethiopia.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, November 11, 1947: 2.

development among the Muslim peoples of the two former Italian colonies. As one commentary asserted, “the political movements [within Eritrea and Somalia] express the alertness of the spirit of conscience among all Muslim nations spreading from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea.”<sup>257</sup> Yet of all international political developments, Muslim League writers showed particular interest in Pakistan’s fortunes. Many writers focused on how increased levels of formal education and Arabic language training were helping promote Pakistani national unity.<sup>258</sup> In later years, as the League began addressing more direct threats to Muslim security from unionist supporters, developments in Pakistan received greater coverage by commentators who tried to build momentum for the League’s cause by highlighting Pakistan’s success.<sup>259</sup>

In later years, during deliberations on Eritrea’s future at the UN General Assembly, the newsletter published a series of articles documenting the wide range of support that Eritrea’s nationalist cause was receiving from other Muslim nations at the General Assembly, including Syria, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Some officials, including Yasin Ba Tuq, traveled abroad during the UN debate and presented Eritrea’s case, warning about the “crime of Ethiopian occupation” to audiences throughout the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>260</sup> Other leaders, particularly Abdelkadir Kebire, also used the newsletter to write about Eritrean independence in the context of regional political movements. According to Warka Solomon, Abdelkadir Kebire’s political leanings were

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<sup>257</sup> “The Consensus of Muslims by the Principals of the Islamic League.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 9, 1947: 2.

<sup>258</sup> See Yusef Sadeq, “The Arabic Language in Pakistan.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 9, 1949: 2.

<sup>259</sup> Much of the coverage included excerpts from speeches and articles from other international Arabic publications, particularly from presses based in Cairo.

<sup>260</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, “The Eritrean Sea and Ports.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 7, 1950: 1.

heavily influenced by many of the political figures he came in contact with while working as an Italian civil servant in Yemen (1930-34), including figures like Palestinian mufti Amin al-Hussaini, Syrian writer Hashim al-Atassi and others.<sup>261</sup>

Beyond emphasizing Muslim identity as a fundamental element needed in constructing an independent Eritrea, many League activists went on the offensive to use the nationalist cause to help breakdown the previous legacy of “tribalism” between different Muslim groups. The emphasis on a singular community became one of the major tools that League writers used to build up Muslim unity. In other instances, the newsletter promoted the activities of other emerging Muslim organizations, such as the “Society for Cultural Cooperation” an association that held fundraisers and promoted events and lectures for Muslims in the major cities.<sup>262</sup> Through all of these emerging initiatives, League activists developed a nationalist platform while articulating the need for drastic social reform to achieve independence. The proliferation of the League’s publication had a tremendous influence on changing the political discourse of the emerging nationalist contact zone. Extending beyond calls for independence and emphasizing the inherent autonomy of Eritrean society, League authorities used the growing Arabic media to present Eritrean independence as a struggle similar to movements among other indigenous peoples. The Muslim League thus expanded the parameters of the nationalist contact zone by using emerging outlets of indigenous knowledge to both articulate the shared interests of all Eritrean Muslims as well as to

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<sup>261</sup> Solomon, “The Life and Political Career of Adbul Kadir Kebire,” 197.

<sup>262</sup> “The Society for Cultural Cooperation.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 3, 1947, 2. Several prominent Muslim League members held positions in the organization, including shaykh Idris Hussein Suleiman, shaykh Ahmed Suri and hajj Sulieman Musa, himself a close associate of Ibrahim al-Mukhtar.

incorporate nationalist trends from the wider Muslim world.<sup>263</sup> Complementing these growing trends in the League's outreach efforts, a sizable number of students and Muslim youth also were drawn to the organization during its initial months.

### **Broad Participation in the League: Muslim Youth**

As the League's regional infrastructure coalesced, Muslim youth also began taking an interest in the political mobilization. Alemseged Tesfai notes that Muslim youth had a significant presence even at the outset of the League's creation and explained that although many of them did not possess a "deep knowledge" about the organization and its inner workings, "they were all highly affected by the political environment." Several hundred youth from the provinces were even invited to observe the initial meeting in Keren. After representatives attended the January conference, support to create a separate wing specifically for Muslim youth increased.<sup>264</sup>

Despite the early interest among the public to form a youth association, the branch was the brainchild of Abdelkadir Kebire, who sought to engage the youth in the growing mobilization. Having witnessed the relative success of unionist supporters in tapping into the mainly urban youth, Kebire sought to give a greater sense of purpose for the Muslim students who were now watching their elders widen the independence struggle.<sup>265</sup> Representatives established the Youth Association (also known as the Union of Muslim Youth) in May after a meeting in Asmara's Red Sea Pearl Hotel, where Kebire and other league leaders frequented.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> See Yusef Sadeq, "The Arabic Language in Pakistan."

<sup>264</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 401.

<sup>265</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. See also FO 742/23, 33; Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 402.



Responsibility for running the new organization fell mainly to Muhammad Se'id Aberra, Kebire's son-in-law. Besides serving as its first president, Aberra also used his family's commercial resources to help build the association into a viable organization that could serve and protect the interest of the League elders.<sup>267</sup> With the assistance of other high ranking youth leaders such as Se'id Sfaf and Mahmud Umar, the Youth Association quickly took on a major role in most of the League's affairs and its members were charged with the responsibility to "organize demonstrations, mass mobilizations, distribution of different pamphlets, booklets, leaflets etc. and dissemination of the party's objective through campaigns."<sup>268</sup> In the aftermath of the youth branch's establishment, many Jabarti families in Asmara stepped up their logistical support for the new wing. The Kusmallah brothers, as they had done previously for Muslim students, used their resources to assist the association and provided their storage compound in Geza-Berhanu to allow members to gather for meetings and practice drilling exercises.<sup>269</sup> While youth association representatives also worked to expand membership, its most practical function involved protecting League members from the supposed unionist aggression.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

<sup>268</sup> Ahmed, "A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50)," 138. See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 402-405.

<sup>269</sup> Nebil Ahmed, interview.

<sup>270</sup> During the spring and summer of 1947, many of League's top officials were the targets of assassination attempts. Degiat Hassan Ali claimed that he had been the target of at least 3 attempts when unionist supporters threw grenades at his residence. See *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 3. Trevaskis noted that prior to the demonstrations a bomb had been thrown into the League's office in Asmara. On subsequent evenings after the protests, he also recorded that "four more bombs were pitched into the houses of Asmara Muslims & two were thrown at the house of a prominent Liberal." See F.C.B./180/3, Correspondence from Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis to Dr. Rita Hinden, January 4, 1947, 9. Henceforth noted as Trevaskis to Hinden; "Bomb incidents in Asmara." *Eritrean Daily News*, June 12, 1947: 3; "Another Asmara Bomb Attack." *Eritrean Daily News*, July 4, 1947: 3.

As early as February 1947, BMA reports noted the steady rise in politically-motivated attacks against Muslim residents, especially in Asmara. A particular cause for concern involved the fact that many of such ‘attacks’ were actually instances where unionist Eritrean police constables had abused their power to physically harm or imprison those who identified themselves as members of the League.<sup>271</sup> Consequently, members of the Youth Association (or “the Brotherhood” as they called themselves) became responsible for protecting League facilities, meetings and those League leaders most often targeted by unionists.<sup>272</sup> The Youth Association thus served as the principal security force, guarding meetings with sticks and swords. In particular, Muhammad Se‘id Aberra put great effort into recording acts of aggression and other slights against League supporters. His major concerns included Unionist influence within the Eritrean police force and the financial support that Christian youth supporters received from the Ethiopia Liaison office in Asmara. In keeping with the basic attitudes of the senior League leadership, Aberra argued that unionist supporters represented “the worst enemies of the Moslems” and added that “the Promises of equality made by the Ethiopian government certainly conceal their real plans- which aim at the suppression of the Islamic religion.”<sup>273</sup> Oftentimes, the Youth Association’s direct exposure to the urban unrest and abuses of the Eritrean police allowed its members to provide up to date information on events to the Lujinna al-ayan.

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<sup>271</sup> See FO 742/23.

<sup>272</sup> By all accounts, the groups self-designated term “Muslim Brotherhood” did not have any relation to the more notable Muslim Brotherhood organization based in Egypt. See FO 742/23, 33.

<sup>273</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 156, 2.

In public, the Youth Association presented itself as a highly mobile and disciplined force. Local branches of the Association issued uniforms and helped organize many of the public marches that took place when the League sponsored demonstrations marking its sixth month anniversary in June 1947. Observing the activities of the Muslim youth, Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis provided a less than flattering description of its composition.

The Moslems have formed a 'youth movement' which appears to have every horrible facet characteristic and from the young toughs who are its members I foresee a great deal of trouble. They are well organized, arrogant, and thoroughly intolerant. Their well drilled cheering and slogan shouting are unpleasantly reminiscent of the Hitler Youth.<sup>274</sup>

Despite the British administrator's pessimistic assessment about the new branch and their attitude, most accounts indicate that the youth organization actually served as one of the more open forums for participation in nationalist politics. In particular, the youth association seems to have provided a means for wider involvement of Muslim activism, even, in some rare cases, for Muslim women.

### **Women's Participation in the Muslim League**

Although it remains an issue deserving of further scrutiny, the political role of Muslim women in early nationalist politics has been difficult to assess. Almost universally, women's participation in the Muslim League has been dismissed as non-existent. Ibrahim Sultan himself commented that women had no role whatsoever among the League or its supporters.<sup>275</sup> When questioned about women's involvement in the League, many former members simply stated that "shar'ia law" did not allow their

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<sup>274</sup> F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 9.

<sup>275</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

participation, in addition to the fact that most fathers had forbid their daughters from taking part in any kind of public activities.<sup>276</sup> Owing to the general cultural climate and gender constraints within 1940s Eritrea and among Muslim groups in particular, female political participation seems to have at best manifested itself as auxiliary support.

Most observers have noted that women were often responsible for sewing the uniforms of Youth Association members and flags as well as preparing meals for meetings and other public gatherings. Beyond these basic contributions, the record of women's involvement leaves many unanswered questions. League Leaders' attitudes on the participation women were perhaps best captured during an exchange between representatives from the Four Power Commission and League delegates. When the Soviet representative asked the six League delegates about the duties and role of Women in the League's political affairs, they responded curtly, "Women have no say in such matters, the men speak for them."<sup>277</sup> Nevertheless, some instances of more direct participation have been inferred. According to hajj Ibrahim Otban Ahmed, a Youth Association organizer in Akkele Guzay province during the late 1940s, many of the unmarried girls between the ages of 14 and 16 participated in Youth Association-sponsored marches in towns such as Adi Keyh and Tekon'da'e. Accordingly, the girls joined in the chanting against Ethiopian rule with slogans such as "The Flag of Habesha [Ethiopia] is burned" and "Long Live the Eritrean Muslim League."<sup>278</sup> Thus, while Muslim women's participation in the organization proved minimal, it would appear that

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<sup>276</sup> RDC/01714. Mehmedin Ahmed Se'id, Umardin Abdelkadir Mahmud Muhammad, Idris Ibrahim Hussein, interview.

<sup>277</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 6.

<sup>278</sup> RDC/01714. Hajj Ibrahim Otban Ahmed, interview.

the few who did involve themselves supported the organization's basic aims. That being said, the overall trend of non-participation leaves many unanswered questions about the extent of such support among the majority of other women whose husbands, brothers and other male relatives were involved with the League.

Ultimately, further research is needed to determine whether this non-participation indicated support, disapproval or simply an acquiescence to their circumstances.<sup>279</sup>

Nevertheless, the Youth Association's attempts to branch off and attract the participation of wide segments of Muslim civil society illustrate how its supporters embraced the basic aims of the League leadership in arguing that independence depended on unifying all segments of society, not simply among the youth and elders, but especially between Muslims and Christians.

### **Engaging Muslim League Critics**

While adhering to the inclusive, nationalist language found in their publications and public statements, Muslim League leaders stressed that there was a fundamental unity among Eritreans that could not be ignored.<sup>280</sup> In this respect, the League expanded the political debate by going on the offensive and claiming that the League's Muslim composition did not limit its agenda of independence for *all* Eritreans. Throughout the year, Ibrahim Sultan and his colleagues waged a campaign to discredit unionist accusations that challenged the League's legitimacy in Eritrean politics. In a prolonged feud with the Secretary General of Eritrea's Unionist Party, Tedla Bairu, Ibrahim Sultan

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<sup>279</sup> Despite providing generally detailed accounts of the June protests and an estimated number of each city's protesters, Trevaskis could not, unlike the previous month's pro-Unionist demonstrations, confirm the participation of women and children. See F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 8.

<sup>280</sup> Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 2007), 266

responded to attacks against the League by repeatedly arguing that the organization was the largest association in Eritrea and made a point of showing respect for all of the country's religious and cultural groups.

Tedla Bairu went so far as to suggest in May 1947 that “a Muslim League does not exist.” He contended that the League constituted “only some groups of Muslims, who have yet formulated a well defined political and economical aim.”<sup>281</sup> Tedla Bairu's admonishment of the League was also a personal attack directed at Ibrahim Sultan, whom he viewed as an opportunistic agitator supported by “only a few chiefs, each tied to each by kinship.”<sup>282</sup> Tedla Bairu's criticisms appeared alongside an anonymously published British article within the *Eritrean Daily News* that contradicted his claims. The article noted that the League's nationalist agenda was indeed directed by a “small intellectual group” that recognized the country's kinship with Ethiopia, but “did not wish to pass unconditionally under the government of the Negus” and had begun to work with Muslim and Christian leaders to achieve its aims.<sup>283</sup> Regardless of the public feuding between League officials and the unionist leadership, one of the League's biggest success stories in its first year of existence was its efforts at building a nationalist constituency between the League and pro-independence Christians. In addition to the public calls for furthering Muslim education and achieving autonomy, establishing genuine camaraderie with Christian nationalists became one of the hallmarks of the League.

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<sup>281</sup> Tedla Bairu, “Future of Eritrea.” *Eritrean Daily News*, May 22, 1947: 3.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> “Italy's Oldest Colony may go to Abyssinia.” *Eritrean Daily News*, May 22, 1947: 2.

### League Support for Muslim-Christian Cooperation

In spite of Ibrahim Sultan's contention that Eritrea's Muslims had been "put asunder" by Christian unionist leaders at Bet Giyorgis, the establishment of the Muslim League was in large measure a compromise that addressed the need for political protection for Muslims and guaranteed a continuation of the religious unity established years earlier within the MFH. Woldeab Woldemariam also addressed this dilemma in a commentary within *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, claiming that if there had been a true "spirit of understanding with humility" among the delegates at Bet Giyorgis, the formation of separate organizations like the Muslim League and the LPP may have been unnecessary.<sup>284</sup> Yet even as Eritrea's political factions were increasingly politicized by religious differences during late 1946 and 1947, Ibrahim Sultan and other Muslim League leaders strove for a harmonious relationship with their Christian nationalist peers.<sup>285</sup>

More indicative of its progressive, pluralistic view of Eritrean society was the fact that the League's policies and proclamations were carried out with the intention that the organization would not be seen as an "Islamist" organization. The League's resolution to adopt both Tigrinya and Arabic as its official languages was intended to "demonstrate that it was a nationalist party," despite the fact that it was overwhelmingly composed of Muslims that did not speak Tigrinya as a first language.<sup>286</sup> Resisting unionist attempts to label the organization as a purely Islamic entity, the League leadership argued that their organization already had a strong legacy of joint Muslim-Christian political cooperation,

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<sup>284</sup> Woldeab Woldemariam, "Eritrea for Who?" *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazzetta*, May 5, 1947: 1.

<sup>285</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, "We and Independence." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 4, 1947, 1; Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 199.

<sup>286</sup> Bereketab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991*, 147.

best illustrated by the partnership of Ibrahim Sultan and Woldeab Woldemariam, the Tigrinya Christian nationalist leader. British officials also took note during late 1946 and early 1947 that “the present state of affairs points to a merging of the Moslem League with those Coptic Christians who are unwilling to accept union with Ethiopia.”<sup>287</sup>

Although many of the organization’s Christian members joined with Eritrea’s unionist camp after the Christian leadership’s alliance with the Ethiopian government “changed the equilibrium in favor of pro-union sentiments,” Woldeab Woldemariam and a small group from the urban intelligentsia began pushing a nationalist platform.<sup>288</sup> After the League’s formation and Woldeab Woldemariam’s Liberal Progressive Party (LPP) in February 1947, members who had formed the nucleus of the MFH continued to work together from within their new respective organizations. Following the League’s first general conference in January 1947, Ibrahim Sultan affirmed that Muslim and Christians were “brothers and children of the same homeland” and that independence could be achieved by coming together and embracing each other’s “culture, religion, habits and customs.”<sup>289</sup> Interfaith cooperation also developed into one of the major criteria for the League’s membership. Beyond an individual’s personal courage and efficiency, the criteria for electing representatives to the party was based largely on their ability to build strong alliances with Christians, Italians, “half-castes,” and other groups.<sup>290</sup> Under the banner of Islam, League leaders used their credentials as Muslim scholars to remind

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<sup>287</sup> F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 3.

<sup>288</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 66. For additional information on the “Greater Tigray” concept and its development, see Alemseged Abbay, “The Trans-Mareb Past in the Present,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (1997): 321-334; *Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1998).

<sup>289</sup> “The Party of the Free Eritrean.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 11, 1947: 1.

<sup>290</sup> Ahmed, “A History of Al-Rabita Al-Islamiya Al-Eritrea (1946-50),” 138.



followers that their faith “calls for the freedom of all people without distinction between race or ethnicity and makes freedom the founding principal of humanity by prohibiting the despotism of the powerful against the oppressed.”<sup>291</sup>

The Lujinna al-ayan led by example to cultivate Christian allegiance and supported the agenda of its sister organization, the LPP. At the LPP’s inaugural ceremony in late February 1947, President Ras Tessema Asberom echoed the spirit of unity by proclaiming that Eritrea had belonged to both religions “for thousands of years” and that “we [Christians and Muslims] have lived in harmony with our respective religions and helped each other.”<sup>292</sup> The LPP’s ideology of an unconditionally independent Eritrea, though different from the Muslim League’s support for a period of European trusteeship, helped cement mutual support for the aims of each organization’s leadership apparatus. Ibrahim Sultan, Abdelkadir Kebire and other Muslim League officials also made a point of attending the LPP’s founding ceremony.<sup>293</sup> The Lujinna al-ayan thus promoted religious plurality as an integral component of its program by highlighting the appeal of independence for all Eritreans.

As Ruth Iyob illustrates, officials within the LPP were proactive and “outspoken in their demands” for independence, as well as in establishing their alliance with the Muslim League. She cited the testimony of Azmatch Berhe Gebrekidan, vice president of the LPP’s Seraye province branch, who derided unionists for falsely proclaiming that all

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<sup>291</sup> “There is no Oppression against any Person in the Islamic Tradition.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 11, 1949: 2.

<sup>292</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 70.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

nationalist Christians had “converted to Islam.”<sup>294</sup> Even BMA officials could not deny the strong message of religious unity between the League and the LPP.<sup>295</sup> Concerns over maintaining religious camaraderie are evident in many of the private testimonies of Muslim League officials. Writing to his colleague Muhammad Nurhussein, Abdelkadir Kebire explained the Muslim League rationale for Eritrean unity:

It is not our purpose to dominate the Christians of our home country or to expand the Muslim religion. The purpose is to reject, in all conditions, the supported statement of Ethiopian federation. Since Allah, the Listener and the Knower, has given us the power of reasoning, how do we stand united with the deceiver and colonizer Ethiopia?<sup>296</sup>

Kebire’s concerns help illustrate how leaders from within the League were able to make political overtures to Christian nationalists without reservation that their gestures were detrimental to Muslim interests. By and large, Muslim religious leaders, including both those within the Lujinna al-ayan and the general membership, recognized the importance of this rich legacy of Muslim-Christian interaction and used it to their advantage as nationalist momentum developed throughout 1947. As far as the organization was concerned, part of being a pious Muslim meant working with non-Muslims for the betterment of society.<sup>297</sup> Many Muslim League representatives even claimed, however incorrectly, that an overwhelming majority of “Hamasiens Christians”

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>295</sup> See F.C.B./180/3.

<sup>296</sup> Younis, “Abdulkadir Kebire,” [http://www.ephrem.org/dehai\\_archive/1997/feb/0171.html](http://www.ephrem.org/dehai_archive/1997/feb/0171.html); Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 196.

<sup>297</sup> See Masoud Kamali, *Multiple Modernities, Civil Society and Islam: The Case of Iran and Turkey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 244. These developments within the regional Sufi institutions support Masoud Kamali’s argument that Islamic civil society, at its heart, is based on understandings and reverence for diversity, and “pluralism in terms of religion and lifestyles.” See Ismael al-Mukhtar, “The Plight of the Family of Ras Tessema Asberhom in the Federal Period,” [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=169&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=169&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed July 27, 2010).

belonged to the LPP and thus, only a fraction of Christians didn't support the goal of independence.<sup>298</sup> While the League may have embellished the LPP's numbers, both organizations' leaders often viewed themselves as simply two branches of a wider nationalist consortium. Ras Tessema Asberhom was often heard to remark that he had only wished the Muslim League had never adopted its "Muslim" marker because it misconstrued its meaning and could be used by unionists to encourage division.<sup>299</sup> Scholar Gaim Kibreab concurs that ultimately the Muslim League label gave a false impression to the wider public by inferring that the organization only represented Muslim interests, when in fact "its sole intention was the establishment of a secular Eritrean state where Muslims and Christians would live harmoniously as they had always done in the past."<sup>300</sup>

Regardless, social and political camaraderie between Muslims and pro-Independence Christians was an integral part of the League's organizational philosophy. Aside from their rhetoric and public support for each other, both organizations linked themselves in more concrete ways. Both adopted the same flag, which featured a half green and half red background with a balanced scale sewn in the foreground, signaling the equality of Islam and Christianity. The spirit of this religious accord was eloquently captured in the League's anthem, entitled "Peace be upon you, Flag of Eritrea":

*Greetings to you, flag of Eritrea  
Al-Rabita Al-Islamiyya at the center of Asmara  
Consulting with her sister, the freedom seeker [LPP]  
Let her flag wave in the center of her country*

<sup>298</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 5-6.

<sup>299</sup> RDC/01714. Mehmedin Ahmed Se'id, Umardin Abdelkadir Mahmud Muhammad, Idris Ibrahim Hussein, interview.

<sup>300</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War for Independence*, 105.

*With her greenish hips and red lips  
 Her strong Mission like a bridge with a scale at her core  
 Bringing both Christians and Muslims together  
 At daybreak, she went down to Massawa  
 She crossed through the Red Sea and came into sight of Assab  
 Climbed up to Sen'afe  
 Stopped by Adi-Keyh, saying "hear me out"  
 Toured Emni Hajer, Tessenei and Barentu  
 And she said she wouldn't leave behind Agordat, Keren and Nakfa  
 Whomever distances themselves from her or sees her as trivial  
 will not see our country developed.<sup>301</sup>*

Indeed, the idea of independence being a joint Muslim-Christian venture was a potent reality for the League leadership who had come of age during the earlier part of the decade and had seen how religious differences had been used to weaken the nationalist movement.

### **Muslim League Protests, June 1947**

The six month anniversary of the founding of the Muslim League represented both the highpoint of the early Eritrean nationalist movement and the most vivid illustration of the League's ability to arouse public enthusiasm. Planned in the wake of Unionist demonstrations that had taken place the previous May, the Muslim League coordinated pro-independence activities in more than a dozen cities on Tuesday, June 10, 1947. Claiming to also be responding to the alleged harassment from Ethiopian-supported unionists, the executive council - through Youth Association representatives - coordinated the protests to demonstrate that the League represented the "majority of the inhabitants who affirmed the claim of independence and rejected any incorporation or

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<sup>301</sup> RDC/01714. Hajj Ibrahim Otban Ahmed, interview. Often League writers provided information and update about the LPP's activities. The newsletter included a report about the LPP's founding ceremony in February 1947. See "The Party of the Free Eritrean." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 11, 1947: 1.

union with Ethiopia.”<sup>302</sup> With the participation of Islamic clerics, committee members and the energetic bands of the recently-established Youth Association, protesters filled city streets shouting slogans and carrying banners in support of independence. Demonstrations in Keren, Asmara and Agordat each attracted more than five thousand people while other cities featured several thousand participants and an array of public proclamations from League leaders.<sup>303</sup> In his own estimation, Abdelkadir Kebire believed that the protests across the country had “no resemblance in past history” and in his speech before an Asmara crowd, Kebire told supporters that the protests marked Eritrea’s most “memorable day.”<sup>304</sup> Elaborating on their significance and the League’s role, he went on to boast that the protests represented the day that the majority of Eritrean people “woke up and stood up to claim their existence and declare that they want one thing and nothing else, and they articulate that in two words; there is no third word: Freedom and Independence.”<sup>305</sup> Nearly a year later, Kebire’s passion about the protests remained strong as he reflected on how the public activism served a higher purpose beyond the organization itself:

The purpose is honor and the price of honor is life. They will pay the price but the price is not a cheap commodity. The dearest thing a person owns is precious, priceless blood [which is] the price of writing a page in the chapters of the international struggle for justice. The goal is to achieve justice or die trying. And such is our case and our cause is just.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> “A Major Demonstration in all the Cities of Eritrea.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 17, 1947: 1.

<sup>303</sup> See F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 8.

<sup>304</sup> Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Abushehada Abdelkadir Kebire*, 58.

<sup>305</sup> “Speech of the President of the Muslim League in Asmara.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 24 1947: 1.

<sup>306</sup> Younis, “Abdelkadir Kebire,” [http://www.ephrem.org/dehai\\_archive/1997/feb/0171.html](http://www.ephrem.org/dehai_archive/1997/feb/0171.html).

In addition to the brazen and often idealistic arguments for independence, most of the official speakers at the demonstrations stressed the need to build unity between Eritrea's Muslim groups within the confines of a new nation by securing the right of self-determination. Ahmed Abdelkarim, a League representative from Massawa spoke about the independence struggle as a path toward achieving "natural rights" for all Muslims:

We want independence and we call for freedom. We call for our natural right, a right that no force on Earth can stand between us. As long as there is respect for justice and humanity, a nation's self-determination is a right for everyone. Our wishes and desires as Eritrean Muslims are that we live free and that we do not want to tie our destiny with a nation that we do not have any ties with like Ethiopia.<sup>307</sup>

Expounding on the need for greater unity, he exclaimed, "in this situation, I am saying that Muslims will not be protected unless they are united under one government" and that "all of us should work toward Islamic unity because there are no differences between us."<sup>308</sup> The theme of Muslim unity found its way into most of the public declarations. Hajj Suleiman Ahmed Umar noted that the task of Eritrean independence could not be accomplished unless citizens were willing to remain united against all tribulations for the new country, "that we will sacrifice everything for."<sup>309</sup> While the League facilitated much of the activities for the occasion, the June 10 protests also featured substantial participation from the LPP. As a whole, the June protests illustrated on a grass roots level what its leadership had articulated since its founding. Although the League called for the political unity and protection of all Eritrean Muslims, its members did not present themselves as having an inherently religious cause.

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<sup>307</sup> "Speeches on the June Demonstration." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, July 8, 1947: 2.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

In the latest demonstrations of the M.L. the placards carried were purely political, denouncing union with Ethiopia and demanding independence of Eritrea. The flags which they carried were those of the four great powers as well as Moslem banners. The M.L. knew its greatest strength & held its biggest demonstrations after it had declared its political policy.<sup>310</sup>

The significance of Muslim League and LPP cooperation during the protests should not be overlooked, particularly when taking into account that the LPP included not only many of Eritrea's most influential Tigrinya-speaking Christian intellectuals, but that it also commanded respectable numbers in the supposed unionist strongholds in the Eritrean highlands. Even the relatively conservative BMA estimates placed support for the LPP at 30% of the population in Akkele Guzay and Seræ.<sup>311</sup> Public support also extended into politics in other meaningful ways. Ali Se'id Bekit Umar noted that some League members in the rural areas of Akkele Guzay and Hamasien publicly changed their affiliation to LPP to protect themselves from anti-Muslim unionist attacks.<sup>312</sup> For their part, LPP leaders proved more than willing to protect their Muslim colleagues. For example, Abraha Tesemma allegedly used his own car to secretly transport members of the League's Youth Association to the various towns across Hamasien and Akkele Guzay.<sup>313</sup> This initial logistical cooperation between the LPP and the League continued in later months even as their confrontations with unionist supporters intensified. As with its support for interreligious cooperation in the political struggle, the League leadership continually branched out by tapping into wider movements of social reform during its first year of existence. While it secured its support base and furthered its partnership with

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<sup>310</sup> F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, July 24, 1947, 9.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 2. This estimate placed the LPP's membership at around 70,000.

<sup>312</sup> RDC/01714. Ali Se'id Bekhit Umar, interview.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

the LPP, the League also continued to make strides in addressing the issue dearest to many of its constituents, the push for permanent tigre emancipation.

### **tigre Emancipation and Eritrean Sovereignty**

The founding of the Muslim League in November 1946 had been in part a result of Eritrean nationalists' investment in what Jordan Gebre-Medhin called the "new confidence of the serfs" and the growing political cohesion among Muslims as a whole.<sup>314</sup> The emphasis on empowering those most oppressed within the traditional social structures of western Eritrea was not lost on either League leaders or BMA authorities as the nationalist movement widened. In July 1947, Trevaskis reflected on the surge of grassroots popularity of the League in connection to the tigre issue.

I made the mistake of expecting political leadership, if it came at all, to come from the chiefs. In fact it came in the first instance from the huge mass of serf or subject classes which remain in a state of political & partial economic subjugation to the small aristocratic ruling groups of the Northern & Western Eritrean tribes.<sup>315</sup>

Indeed, the establishment of the Muslim League came at almost the exact time Ibrahim Sultan granted his broadest support to tigre emancipation and British intervention in the clan restructuring.<sup>316</sup> According to Kibreab, Sultan and his supporters' later success in working with the BMA and the shumagulle by "resurrecting [the] social organizations" of traditional tigre society could not have been achieved without the legacy of the "deeply embedded social organization that was inherited from the past" and the subsequent contributions of many of sympathetic members of the Muslim clergy in

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<sup>314</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 152.

<sup>315</sup> F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, July 24, 1947, 3-4.

<sup>316</sup> See Jan-Bart Gewald, "Making Tribes: Social Engineering in the Western Province of British-Administered Eritrea, 1941-1952," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2 (Winter, 2000); FO 1015/138, "A Report on Tribal Reorganization in the Western Province," 1-34.



helping to resolve the conflicts.<sup>317</sup> Indeed, this inheritance was linked with the considerable activism of Muslim authorities among the tigre, as Ibrahim Sultan's colleagues in cities such as Keren and Agordat who used their religious authority, much as Muslim businessmen used their economic influence, to shape the negotiations with BMA officials and quell the uprisings.<sup>318</sup> In the midst of these transformations and the League's efforts to address the broader social dynamics of its constituency, wider forces were at work that soon helped to dramatically shift the speed and aims of the nationalist movement.

Delegates from Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union had first convened talks in London in September 1945 to discuss the future of Italy's former colonial territories. It was not until the deadlock at their second conference in Paris in April 1946 that representatives agreed to deploy a fact-finding committee to ascertain the political attitudes in the former colonies. In the case of Eritrea, the Four Power Commission finally arrived in early November 1947 and remained in country through the rest of the year. Having worked closely with the Commission in planning the visit, presiding BMA officers, including some of those who were also chosen to serve as commission members, set up public hearings in approximately a dozen major cities and towns while the Muslim League, LPP, Unionist Party and the recently formed Pro-Italy Party prepared their representatives for the official meetings.<sup>319</sup> With the coming of the

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<sup>317</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 88. See *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 128, "Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies): Two Chiefs of the Western Province."

<sup>318</sup> G.K.N. Trevaskis, "Report on Serfdom," FO 230/255, June 5, 1948; Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>319</sup> The Pro-Italy Party officially formed in early October 1947. The towns selected for the Commission's official tour included Geshnashim, Decamere, Adi Caiee, Senafe, Teramni, Adi Quala, Arresa, Keren, Agordat, Barentu and Massawa. Their spelling is based on the Commission's original version. See FO 742/19.

Four Power Commission, each major town and city where representatives convened their inquiries became flashpoints of political activism and civil unrest. Not surprisingly, the continuing issue of tigre emancipation emerged with new vigor before the international audience. Long before the commission's arrival however, the League had done its part to keep the issue in the public consciousness.

The tone within *Sawt al-rabita* supports the idea that League members, even those from outside of the Western Province were genuinely sympathetic to the plight of the tigre. The newsletter's first edition mentioned the circumstances in which the League was founded, stating that the organization was itself a compromise that resulted from discussions between dispossessed serfs, religious leaders and merchants. Within the newsletter, the tigre issue was discussed and analyzed with particular emphasis on shumagulle who took exception to the League's agenda. For example, when Diglal Gailani Hussien Pasha, a shumagulle (nabtab) from the Beni-Amer renounced his allegiance to the League and planned to join the Unionist Party in late 1947, he was heavily criticized in editorials. Most commentators argued that his departure was not due to sincere political concerns but rather his worry that he would eventually lose his lands and feudal dues in the event of independence. One writer, Ahmed Muhammad Ibrahim al-Tigrawi, argued that the existence of any of the shumagulle in an independent Eritrea was equivalent to a "plague" being cast upon the country's citizens.<sup>320</sup>

A group of designated tigre representatives later echoed the spirit of much of this criticism. In a memorandum sent to the Four Power Commission in early November

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<sup>320</sup> Ahmed Muhammad Ibrahim al-Tigrawi, "Feudal System." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 9, 1949: 1. See *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 128, "Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies): Two Chiefs of the Western Province."

1947, tigre from the Western Province claimed that with regard to the conditions under shumagulle rule, “a population of a half million souls is subjected to the will of 1,000 parasites.”<sup>321</sup> Besides containing an identical political platform to the one that the League established at its initial meeting in Keren, their memo included the signatures of representatives who served dually as tigre spokesmen and League members. Like the League’s official memos, tigre representatives rejected “categorically any system of annexation or union with Ethiopia or any other nation” and claimed that they were willing to accept a period of British trusteeship before assuming full independence.<sup>322</sup> Moreover, representatives used their memorandum to craft a detailed history of the social and economic relations between their various clans and shumagulle rulers.

It is our duty to explain to your commission, with great displeasure, the very ugly situation in which we, the Tigré of Eritrea, find ourselves; a situation which has lasted for more than three centuries; a situation which could not even be applied to animals, seeing that there are laws that protect them from ill-treatment, and people who break these laws are liable to punishment.<sup>323</sup>

Although the representatives went into detail to describe the ways in which the tigre were abused and forced to pay various forms of tribute to the shumagulle, the testimony also illustrates how abolishing serfdom and subjugation became, in the eyes of many, one of the central tenants in the Muslim League’s push for social reform. Gerald Kennedy Trevaskis also took notice of the party’s grassroots strength on the issue. He noted that although in the earliest stages many shumagulle chiefs “formed the party together with their subjects thinking that they would control its activities,” they

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<sup>321</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 18, “Letter of Tigré Representatives,” 16.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

subsequently discovered that it was not “a Chief’s party & that it is a party which stands (in their tribes) for serf emancipation.”<sup>324</sup> Trevaskis also observed that the amalgamation between the League and the cause of tigre emancipation took place as several “aristocratic ruling groups” from Western Eritrea began joining the Unionist Party.<sup>325</sup>

### **tigre Activism and anti-Feudal Politics**

When the Four Power Commission’s delegation arrived in Eritrea in early November 1947, shumagulle and tigre representatives articulated through their respective testimonies the indivisible nature of the League’s nationalist aims and tigre emancipation. In testimony before the commission, kantibay Osman Hedad Pasha of the Habab Clan defended the previous status of the tigre, explaining that “all the Tigre had to do was to plough the land, give us one quarter of the crops and do the milking,” but that the BMA and opportunistic leaders among the tigre had interfered and caused “much confusion” to the traditional system.<sup>326</sup> Echoing these concerns, diglal Gailani Hussein Pasha discussed the continuing troubles with the tigre and the League’s involvement. He noted “the people or organization who is telling the Arabs [tigre] not to pay tribute to us is the Moslem League.” Gailani went on to explain that because the organization encouraged “the Arabs and Tigre not to pay tribute to the Nabtab,” he believed that the League’s leaders could not have promoted their program unless they were being secretly supported by the BMA. When delegates questioned the diglal about why he had recently changed

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<sup>324</sup> F.C.B. 180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, 24 July, 1947, 4.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>326</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 128, “Council of Foreign Ministers (Deputies): Two Chiefs of the Western Province,” 2.

his political status from the Muslim League to the Unionist Party, he again stressed that there was a hidden tigre agenda.

First when we formed the Moslem League it was to decide its wishes regarding the future of Eritrea. Now the Moslem League has changed from the future of Eritrea to the problem of the Tigre and the nabtab.<sup>327</sup>

In spite of the heated rhetoric from some shumagulle representatives, their resentment toward the League's pro-tigre stance did not surprise most observers who had watched since the League's founding about the precarious situation of the clan chiefs and the largely populist organization. Ethiopian representatives had made a point of courting most of the clan chiefs in the Western province and *kantibay* Osman in particular. To him, they promised to permit "full powers over his tribe if he supported the Ethiopian cause," which included the resurrection of older "feudal dues" that the Ethiopian government would recognize if he supported union.<sup>328</sup> Observing the unionist strategy, British administrators noted that Ethiopian attempts to win the support of the "reactionary old chief" extinguished any possible support for their cause among the tigre, who flocked in mass to the Muslim League."<sup>329</sup> League representatives also used this practice as a means of discrediting shumagulle who publically endorsed Union with Ethiopia both before and during the Commission's stay. Resenting the chiefs' embrace of the apparent bribery and patronage, League representatives noted in a memo to the Commission that *kantibay* Osman had been offered "a magnificent gift in pounds and a good monthly

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 3.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid. The issue of "tribal" restructuring remained an ongoing problem for BMA authorities despite the relative success of activists in ending the payment of the customary dues. See F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, October, 1947, 1.

salary as compensation for his adherence to the ‘annexionist’ Party” in the aftermath of the League’s creation.<sup>330</sup>

For others, particularly some of the clan heads and coastal merchants, the commission provided a forum to address their own unhappiness with the League’s agenda now that it seemed to favor the tigre base from the Western Province. According to one former league member from Hirgigo, the League’s priorities had changed.

I joined the Moslem League on religious grounds and I was disappointed when I discovered that it did not include all Moslems and also that it should want Four Power Trusteeship and not British Trusteeship. The Program of the Moslem League was formed in two hours at Keren, where only the Keren and Agordat Divisions were represented, and I do not consider that two hours is a long enough time in which to decide the future of a country. When eventually I found that the Moslem League was run by the secret hands of the Italians, I left it for the National Party.<sup>331</sup>

For the League’s Executive Council, the willingness of many shumagulle chiefs to support union represented only the most recent aspect of their own power agenda that had first unfolded during the initial rebellions in 1941. Clearly League leaders believed that shumagulle support for Ethiopia reflected the elites’ own preoccupation with recovering their previous status and privileges. Testifying before the commission, representatives from the Executive Council alluded to the shumagulle’s quest to reclaim their status.

These people have got federation systems, and the Ethiopian Government promised to help them, so they joined but only for their own benefit. They are deceiving their tribes and getting money from them without given

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<sup>330</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 107, “Moslem League, Eritrea,” 3.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 171, “Summary of Views of Representatives at Hearing at Massawa I (Samhar Area),” 4.

them any help. They are afraid of losing the federation system when the country receives its independence [sic].<sup>332</sup>

In its official inquiry, members of the Commission also noted that for some tigre representatives in the League, the concept of independence itself meant not so much Eritrea's future status but their freedom from paying future tribute to the shumagulle. Some members went so far as to claim that "they would leave the Moslem League if it were to decide that tribute should be paid through the chiefs."<sup>333</sup>

In both their rhetoric and actions, League leaders equated the tigre emancipation issue as a struggle to breakout of the previous feudal traditions that, coincidentally, remained well entrenched in Ethiopia. Consequently, support for the tigre also aided the organization in providing additional justification against Eritrea being absorbed into Ethiopia. League representatives noted that their constituents, tigre and non-tigre alike "do not like any other system than that given under the Atlantic Charter, which gives freedom of religion, freedom of the press, etc."<sup>334</sup> Taking their rhetoric a step further before the commission, representatives again couched their goals as a movement to build a "modern" Eritrean nation against rather than return to the archaic system in the Abyssinian tradition, noting that "it is certain that the Amharics [sic] are primitive. Their administration -which is based on ignoble dictatorship- is that of a very remote past, and can be compared to that of the Middle-Ages."<sup>335</sup> As the year progressed, the League's

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 5. Despite some notable defections of these community elites, both the League leadership and BMA officials noted that "with few exceptions the Moslem League has succeeded in gaining the support of any Moslem of consequence in the territory." F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1947, 3.

<sup>333</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 169, "Summary of Views of Representatives at Hearing at Agordat (Agordat District)," 2.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 5.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., Appendix 107, "Moslem League, Eritrea," 1.

independence platform continually merged with its anti-serfdom stance. By November 1947, the organization made clear that both objectives were interrelated, stating that of the many reasons the League rejected both union and annexation with Ethiopia, “the old worn out ‘FEUDALE’ system of government” represented one of the major apprehensions among Muslim Eritreans and was seen as yet another reason why the League did not think Ethiopia’s government possessed any particular “higher standard of administrative capacity” to achieve independence.<sup>336</sup>

### **The League and the Four Power Commission**

Although much has been written about the problems related to the Commission’s visit, including the often-discussed conflicts between nationalist and unionist supporters and the rampant inflation of each party’s membership, it also represented the first instance where Muslim League leaders made their case directly to an international audience. Consequently, the League made a point of refining its nearly year-old program by again placing their movement in the context of wider global struggles for independence. Before the Commission’s arrival, Ibrahim Sultan sent a telegram to the delegates explaining the nature of League’s position, explaining that “the League invokes your assembly in the name of justice and humanity to safeguard the rights of small peoples in line with the Atlantic Charter and San Francisco Treaty” to guarantee complete independence.<sup>337</sup> Upon the Commission’s arrival, League representatives continued to draw their attention with a written appeal that included an extended description of its original resolutions that they had passed in the previous January. In

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., Appendix 103, “Memorandum from the Eritrean Muslem League,” 4-5.

<sup>337</sup> FO 742/23, 34.



emphasizing their independence aims, the League again crafted its appeal as a struggle against the perceived Ethiopian backwardness, arguing that “it is known and admitted by all reasonable men, that it is not right to place a Nation which enjoys a standard of education and equality under an inferior nation.”<sup>338</sup> The League continually framed independence as a right deserving of its strong intellectual composition.

Now the Eritrean People has achieved a certain intellectual evolution by its contact with the civilized nations, and for this it has to-day a level of education superior to that of the Ethiopia people. To this should be added that equity and equality amongst Moslems [sic] did not exist in Ethiopia where the traces of the Middle ages still exist to-day.<sup>339</sup>

On December 16, members of the Lujinna al-ayan expanded their rationale to the Commission. Besides providing extensive examples of the supposed “bad behavior”<sup>340</sup> of unionists and Ethiopian agents, representatives again made the claim that supporters of Union wished to take Eritrea back into a period in which a “racial policy based on Feudalism” of the ruling Amhara reigned supreme.<sup>341</sup>

### **The League’s Reaction to its Rivals**

Echoing many of the previous attacks on Ethiopian “backwardness” found in the League’s newsletter, representatives played on the idea that Eritrean Muslims as a whole were in a position to take on independence because of their intellectual strength and economic position.

We have many intellectuals who have gained world-diplomas, at Cairo University of El-Azhar, or at Omdurman College, Khartoum. The

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<sup>338</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 105, “To: The Hon. International Commission of Investigation,” 3.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 107, “Moslem League, Eritrea,” 1.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

financial position of the Moslems is excellent. Many of them are the owners of beautiful buildings, of great wealth.<sup>342</sup>

In their attacks against unionists and “annexationists” working directly under Ethiopian authorities, the League also derided the “ignorant class” of Eritreans that had recently chosen to support the Pro-Italy Party. Dismissing Pro-Italy Party supporters as a people who “did not know the word ‘Honour,’” the League decried their alleged material-based reasons for joining the organization, which included receiving small financial payments and foodstuffs in exchange for official party membership.<sup>343</sup> Their accusations were later confirmed by the Commission. When delegates recorded their findings from the second hearing in Keren, they noted the testimony of one Pro-Italy Party representative who admitted that many of his constituents had recently switched their allegiance from the League to the Pro-Italy Party because they had received “food, soap, flour, coffee and cloth” for their support.<sup>344</sup> This testimony thus supports the claims of some League representatives who argued that many from the Pro-Italy Party “were actually members of the League,” who had simply joined the new organization to obtain uniforms for themselves and for their families acquired “a little rice or flour with a piece of meat and a gift of a few shillings.”<sup>345</sup> Hajj Ibrahim Otban Ahmed also recalled

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., Appendix 160, “Summary of Views of Representative at Hearing at Geshnashim (North Hamasien),” 3. See also Appendix 170, “Summary of Views of Representatives at Hearing at Barentu (Barentu and Tessenni District),” 2. Summarizing this general trend among representatives, Lloyd Ellingson noted that many delegates to the Commission seemed to have no idea “just whom or what they were supposed to be representing.” He added that “some of their responses to the commission were parrot-like, especially among those who favored the Unionist cause, as if they had been carefully memorized.” Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950,” 265.

<sup>345</sup> *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 107, “Moslem League, Eritrea,” 6.

how representatives from the Pro-Italy Party came to Adi Keyh and “recruited people by handing out money, bread and meat” on the eve of the Commission’s arrival.<sup>346</sup>

In addition, the League tried to discredit some members of Massawa’s merchant community who had created a counter organization, the National Party of Massawa. Deriding the group’s platform of supporting international trusteeship for an indefinite period as unrealistic, the League laid blame principally at Nazir Mohammad Nur, Osman Adam Bey and a small group of supporters for attempting to create the party as a means to simply “deviate from the track followed by the mass” in Massawa.<sup>347</sup> Like they had done with many of the shumagulle chiefs, League representatives argued that their political movement was founded strictly on a quest for power and vanity among the upper classes. That being said, the League also made distinctions when it came to discussing particular Muslim leaders who did not officially support the League’s nationalist agenda. One of the most complex examples was the case of Saleh Ahmed Kekiya Pasha. While he had been one of the strongest supporters for improved Muslim education and the mufti’s reform efforts in the early 1940s and a confidant of many of the independence-leaning members of the MFH, he came out in favor of union in early 1947 by serving as the vice-president of the Unionist Party.

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<sup>346</sup> RDC/01714. Hajj Ibrahim Otban Ahmed, interview.

<sup>347</sup> For their part, the leaders of the National Party of Massawa claimed that they in fact represented the “great majority” of the Muslim population in Eritrea and expressed their desire to remain under British governance for at least fifteen years based on British success at presenting “new and excellent institutions” for the local population. See F.O 1015/4, 18 C. According to Ellingson, the party claimed a membership of more than 56,000, including a large number of the Afar-speaking clans in northern Dankalia. Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950,” 273; *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 134, 1. Support for the National Party of Massawa among the Afar-speaking communities was somewhat undermined by the League’s claims regarding its own membership in the region. See “Representatives from Massawa Confirm League Demands.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 23, 1949: 1.

Despite his official support for union, he seems to have maintained close ties with independence supporters and apparently did not fall out of favor with most of the League leadership in Massawa and Asmara. Abdelkadir Kebire praised Kekiya, calling him a “true friend” with whom he shared a strong friendship, in spite of unionist accusations to the contrary.<sup>348</sup> Even when the League explained that they had heard that Kekiya had been responsible for issuing Unionist membership cards to residents in Hirgigo and Massawa, he was not derided by the League as other shumagulle chiefs had been.<sup>349</sup> The most common explanation for his stance seems to be that the choice to promote union was based on his own precarious economic position; his considerable business investments in Ethiopia had previously allowed him to use the revenue to support Muslim education, assist in the construction of Mosques and other buildings and even pay to send local students from the Hirgigo area abroad for education. His complex political position is also supported by later claims that Kekiya supported the independence cause by advising youth in and around Hirgigo to support the League.<sup>350</sup> Moreover, Kekiya’s extended stay in Ethiopia from much of the period between 1946 through 1949 suggests that his contribution to the Unionist Party was minimal at best and did not present any meaningful threat to the League’s cause.

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<sup>348</sup> FO 742/23, 28. “Men are Known by Their Deeds.”

<sup>349</sup> See *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 107, “Moslem League, Eritrea,” 2.

<sup>350</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview; Jamil Aman Mohammed, interview. Despite allegations that they faced serious opposition from some of the Massawa-based merchants, Muslim League supporters sponsored fairly large demonstrations during the Commission’s stay in Massawa and fielded more than three hundred representatives from the area and Northern Dankalia to appear before the Commission. See “Representatives from Massawa Confirm League Demands.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 23, 1949: 1.

### **The League's Arguments to the Four Power Commission**

Despite their aggressive language toward their political competitors, League leaders found themselves largely on the defensive when they finally appeared before the Commission. Just under a year after the events at Bet Giyorgis, six members of the Muslim League's Executive Council appeared before British, French, American and Soviet delegates on November 18, 1947 in Asmara.<sup>351</sup> Facing questions ranging from its own inflated membership estimates, the relationship with the LPP and its alleged connection to international organizations such as the Arab League, representatives attempted to legitimize their platform and counter accusations about many League leaders own supposed "unionist" pasts. For example, when one delegate asked Ibrahim Sultan about his past involvement in Eritrea's Unionist Party (still under the old moniker of the MFH) and inferred that he had once supported Ethiopian annexation, Sultān repudiated the accusation:

I was a member of the party called "Love of Country" and not the Union Party. I changed my mind when Dr. Lorenzo and Dr. Zacharias came from the Ethiopian government with a donation of 3,000 pounds for support of the Union Party. People who left the "Love of Country" Party formed the Moslem League Party."<sup>352</sup>

Other representatives also rejected unionist accusations that the League did not truly represent the majority of Muslim residents and that Eritrean sovereignty itself was not based on any legitimate historical claim. In a report filed by the UP to the commission, representatives had previously cited the membership of the leading nabtab,

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<sup>351</sup> The representatives included Abdelkadir Kebire, sayyid Muhammad Uthman Hayuti, qadi Musa Adam, Ibrahim Sultan, hajj Sulieman Ahmed Umar and degiat Hassan Ali. *Four Power Commission*, Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 1.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

shumagulle and “about 60,000 Tigré” from the western province in their organization as proof that the League did not represent Eritrea’s Muslim communities.<sup>353</sup> In addition, they argued that the League’s basic objectives only served a small urban elite. Arguing that “no ethnic, historical and economic reason” could be used to reject incorporation with Ethiopia, unionists claimed that League leaders had been motivated more by the “financial considerations” involved with political independence.<sup>354</sup> Moreover, by arguing that the League relied on “religious sensitiveness” and a rabid promotion of “Arabian culture and language” to provoke Muslim fears of Ethiopian rule, the UP tried to paint the League as a reactionary force devoid of any historical justification for its platform. Representatives commented that “the Moslem League is certainly like somebody who has lost his case and tries to regain respect by talking with a big voice.”<sup>355</sup>

Responding to these accusations, League representatives again testified that they instead sought self determination from a country that had remained frozen in “ignorant” and ancient traditions. Because they believed that Ethiopia’s leaders continued embracing their feudal system and had a standard of living “below that of the Eritreans,” independence was justified. Representatives stated that if given the opportunity, they believed that Eritrea could be both economically and politically self-sufficient within a few short years. Although they spoke out about their concerns for protecting Muslims’ rights from Ethiopian influence, religion itself remained largely absent in their overall defense. None of the representatives claimed that the League and its agenda were guided

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., Appendix 96, “Clarification for Four Power Commission Concerning the Memorandum Submitted by the Moslem League on the 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1947,” 5.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 5.

by any particular religious zeal. Only when pressed by the Commission about how the League planned to resolve Eritrea's "national and religious questions" if granted independence did they comment on the subject, answering "there have never been any religious troubles. We are all brothers, the Muslims and the Christians."<sup>356</sup> While the delegation's appearance proved to be in some ways anti-climatic, it demonstrated that after nearly a year of campaigning and expansion, the League maintained a remarkable continuity in articulating its original program among constituents and in its later appeals to the international community. Most significantly, this included its rather diffident position on Eritrea's Muslim identity and any religious-based rationale for independence.

### **Hostilities during the Commission's Inquiry**

If the League and its supporters worried about how the Commission would ultimately rule on Eritrea's fate, their concerns took place in the backdrop of more immediate fears about the growing unrest throughout the country. In the midst of their contest to win the commission's favor, nationalist and unionist representatives were both accused of inflating their numbers at the hearings and their rivalry often boiled over into full scale violence. Across Eritrea's cities and major towns, Muslim League, LPP and Pro-Italy supporters squared off against unionist supporters. Reports of assault, stoning and small scale riots between the three national factions and unionists became increasingly common during the Commission's stay. For nationalists, concerns that unionist supporters were being supplied with arms and funds from the Ethiopian government began to alter the political climate in new and worrisome ways.

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., Appendix 124, "C.F.M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing," 6.

By mid-November, even BMA officials were alarmed at the increasing regularity of clashes between nationalists and unionists. In Massawa, unionists were accused of attacking congregations of Italian settlers and members of the pro-Italy party.<sup>357</sup> In Keren, Teramni, Agordat, Dekemhare and other sites of the commission's inquiry, representatives from the League, Pro-Italy Party and the LPP filed complaints against unionist supporters, claiming they had been threatened and assaulted by members.<sup>358</sup> At an inquiry held at Geshnashim in northern Hamasien province, the Four Power Commission recorded that the "hostile demonstrations from the unionist-onlookers" forced Muslim League representatives to seek the protection of the Commission during its stay in the village.<sup>359</sup> In other instances, Unionist Party and League members repeatedly "came to blows" when representatives gathered outside of the commission meetings to provide their respective testimonies.<sup>360</sup> During the Commission's visit to Teramni on November 30, several LPP representatives were reportedly stopped by unionists along the road and assaulted before they could reach the commission. At one point, unionist youths attacked a gathering of LPP and Muslim League supporters with stones, injuring more than seventeen.<sup>361</sup> For their part, League writers internalized the growing hostility and used the developments to build further support among Muslims to continue in their "righteous struggle." By late December, the League again connected the League's efforts with the wider aims of independence across the Muslim world. On

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<sup>357</sup> FO 371/63222, 38762/OET, "Emergency."

<sup>358</sup> See *Four Power Commission*, Annex to Appendix 153, "Eritrean Police Force, Asmara," 1.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 160, "Summary of Views of Representatives at Hearing at Geshnashim (North Hamasien)," 3.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, Annex to Appendix 142, "Extract from Daily Crime Return," 1.



December 23, the League published a speech given previously by Pakistan President Muhammad Ali Jinnah at Lahore University. The speech, cryptically titled “There is Nothing More Preferable to the Muslim than Dying for the Truth” addressed many of the general themes related to Pakistan’s independence movement. The speech’s overall tenor and emphasis on the importance of its members being ready to willingly sacrifice their lives and wealth to achieve the goal of political freedom echoed many of the ideas touted by League leaders throughout the previous year.<sup>362</sup> However, the timing of the piece’s publication amid the growing reports of hostilities signified that in many ways, the League’s program and the wider nationalist movement had entered a new and dangerous phase with the coming of the Four Power Commission.

What had begun among the Muslim League and the other pro-independence parties as an opportunity to showcase their organizations’ respective strengths ended in a series of bitter public disturbances. The net effect of these clashes would not be realized until after the commission concluded its work in early January as a series of new challenges confronted the League and their nationalist allies. Unfortunately for the League in particular, the rancor that had revealed itself during the Four Power Commission’s visit only intensified as 1948 progressed. This shift in the political climate presented the League with a series of new dilemmas that put its members in an increasingly difficult position. Nevertheless, the League’s success in establishing itself as a significant political, social and intellectual force provided its leaders with important

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<sup>362</sup> “There is Nothing More Preferable to the Muslim than Dying for the Truth.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 23, 1947: 1.

ammunition to withstand the new challenges of anti-Muslim violence, increased Ethiopian involvement and internal division within the League itself.

## Conclusions

In its first year, the Eritrean Muslim League had much to celebrate as it had formed, established its basic political program and expanded its membership to at least half a million people in less than six months. Through the initial efforts of League elders and later the energetic Youth Association, the League quickly cemented itself as Eritrea's first genuine nationalist organization and also made strides as an association committed to promoting Muslim interests and culture across the country. One of the most significant contributions that League leaders made to Muslim civil engagement included establishing its own newspaper, *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*.

Beyond simply discussing the basic objectives of the independence movement, the newspaper became a forum for addressing more complex ideas about Muslim identity, cultural concerns and Eritrea's place in the wider movement for independence taking place across Africa and Asia. Through their efforts, Muslim League writers expressed a profound understanding of their own "ontological status as native intellectuals" charged with shaping a political movement that was responding to both Ethiopian pressures and the larger skepticism among international observers who largely dismissed the idea of an independent Eritrea.<sup>363</sup> In writing back to such criticisms, their arguments echoed the efforts of earlier Tigrinya writers who also carefully used written accounts to critique and comment on the distinctiveness of Eritrean society. By enriching the overall intellectual climate, the League established a stronger base from which its

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<sup>363</sup> Negash "Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone," 75.

membership could engage the independence movement. This was most evident in the instances where the League promoted its inclusive vision of an independent Eritrea by embracing Christian nationalists in what became the LPP. These early interactions between the League and the LPP hierarchy in the spring of 1947 helped set the stage for more widespread cooperation between nationalist groups that culminated with the formation of the Independence Bloc in 1949.

Along with these activities, the international community's growing interest in resolving the question of Italy's former colonial possessions placed Eritrean activists in a curious position by late 1947. With the coming of delegations from the Four Power Commission, the Muslim League intensified its efforts at arguing Eritrea's incompatibility with Ethiopia. Fearing both the influence of the Unionist Party and the Commission that often expressed doubts about the legitimacy of Eritrean independence, the League wrapped itself in the language of the West, appealing to the defenders of "civilization" to not let Eritrea come under Ethiopian authority. In their arguments, Muslim League representatives largely steered away from using religious language or inferring that Eritrea possessed an inherently "Islamic" character. Although the League often appealed to the Commission for the need to protect Muslims' rights and institutions from the influence of the Coptic Church, it rarely stressed that religion was the sole reason why union with Ethiopia was not a viable course. Gaim Kibreab's point that the Muslim League's primary purpose remained to safeguard Muslims' political interests rather than embrace a particular Islamic political project is important to note, particularly when we begin to see how the League began adapting its language and tactics to address

Muslim concerns after 1947. As pro-independence Muslims increasingly incurred the wrath of unionist supporters, the League found new ways to fuse the growing Muslim consciousness and social activism with its political mission.

CHAPTER 4: WEATHERING THE STORM:  
THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND THE WIDER INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT,  
JANUARY 1948-SEPTEMBER 1949

Although 1947 represented a period of unprecedented grassroots expansion and optimism within the Muslim League, the next three years demonstrated that building upon its initial success would not be easy nor would even the League's most ardent supporters be able to guarantee the organization's survival. At the outset of 1948, the League faced several internal crises that tested its leadership like never before. With the Four Power Commission concluding its activity in Eritrea in early January, the League struggled to follow through with its agenda amidst financial difficulties, increased tension with unionists, internal divisions and ultimately, the rise of armed banditry (shiftanet) against nationalist supporters.

In a broader sense, this period also represented the most challenging era for League activists who struggled to maintain a foothold in the wider nationalist discourse, as the multiple crises transformed the dynamics of the movement and the strategies of the leading intellectuals within the League. At the heart of this transformation was the organization's decision to merge with other pro-independence groups to create the Eritrean Independence Bloc in June 1949 and in the process alter the nature of the intellectual debate on national identity. If the League's leadership had been more than willing to present their cause as a national struggle for Eritreans of all religious backgrounds from 1946-47, its decision to spearhead the Bloc's activities demonstrated how League leaders were willing to broaden their nationalist program in new ways.

In the context of these challenges, the political manifestations of Eritrean Muslim identity also began to shift. Nationalist supporters adapted to the changing circumstances and also retained their agency in forging their political and social objectives among the wider public. This included the League's success in helping to finally establish new clan structures within the Tigre-speaking communities of the Western Province, aggressively countering the rise of rival "Muslim" political organizations, speaking out against shifta activity and reformulating their political advocacy before the international community.

### **Muslim League Troubles and the Political Lull of 1948**

Although by late December 1947 the Muslim League had mobilized supporters and had drawn widespread participation during the Four Power Commission's stay, by early 1948 leaders found themselves confronted with an entirely new situation. The first major dilemma for the League came when the organization ceased the publication of *Sawt al-rabita* in January. Faced with financial shortfall and unable to maintain its press, the League's editors suspended operations from January 1948 through March of the following year. Aside from hindering the League's ability to reach a wider readership and keep its members informed of the political developments, the fourteen-month gap also compromised the organization's efforts at a time when its leaders came under increasing attack from UP supporters. By early January, several issues of the unionist publication *Ethiopia* had intensified their attacks against many of the League's top officials.

In a scathing editorial published on January 4, UP writer sayyid Ahmed Hayuti accused Muslim League leaders of defrauding the organization's funds from its general

membership. Hayuti took particular aim at Abdelkadir Kebire, accusing him of being nothing more than a conceited political opportunist and the “imaginary president” of the League’s Asmara branch.<sup>364</sup> He also accused him of having a dubious personal history, claiming that he had once stolen funds from his friend and “life supporter” Saleh Kekiya Pasha and that he remained a servant of Italian interests because of his former employment in the colonial civil service.<sup>365</sup> Even prior to the article’s appearance, Hayuti publically accused Kebire of being born out of wedlock. Without an official media outlet to respond to the accusations, Kebire penned a response entitled “Men are Known by Their Deeds” which he submitted to BMA officials for general distribution.

Warning that Hayuti’s accusations would lead to “partial enmity” and even possibly a wider conflict between League supporters and unionists, Kebire addressed the insults made toward League leaders by saying that Hayuti’s “lies” would be dealt with by officials in Asmara’s shar’ia court. Reacting to the accusations about his own “bastard” origins, he responded “I have nothing to say, but it is a bold, rude and impolite lie from a man who has always been known as a first class liar.”<sup>366</sup> Kebire acknowledged his past work for Italian colonial authorities, saying that he had served as a paid employee who had earned his living by his “own honest efforts, being absolutely unlike you who have stolen public committees’ money, companies and banks- and moreover- personal cases of

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<sup>364</sup> Prior to joining the Unionist Party, sayyid Ahmed Hayuti had been a founding member of the National party of Massawa that had petitioned the BMA with a separate independence platform. See FO 1015/4.

<sup>365</sup> FO 742/23, 26. See *Ethiopia*, January 4, 1948: 1.

<sup>366</sup> FO 742/23, 28. The personal nature of the character attacks strongly suggest that Kebire and Hayuti’s feud went well beyond their nationalist-unionist political rivalry.

theft and stealing, which I am ready to prove when necessary.”<sup>367</sup> He also defended his close friendship with Saleh Kekiya.

I am sure that your aim is to break the friendship between him and myself and at that time you may be liable to gain some matterial benifit [SIC] from him. I should like to tell you that he is a true friend of mine and I consider his boot to be more respectable from your beard. I trust our friendship will remain, ever strong inspite [SIC] of all efforts for breaking it.<sup>368</sup>

Despite the criticisms leveled against Kebire and other top League officials, Hayuti’s invective proved to be only the most docile form of anti-nationalist sentiment as the year progressed. The apparent lull in the League’s political activity throughout 1948 seems to have been shared by the majority of other nationalist parties. With the Four Power Commission having postponed its final decision on the fate of Eritrea and the other former Italian colonies, the League turned its attention to addressing two troubling trends that began to take shape, (1) the growing threat of politically motivated shiftanet and (2) the widening political division between some members of the League hierarchy.

### **Shifta Activity and its Implications an anti-Muslim Political Tool**

The hostilities that had first erupted at the demonstrations during the Four Power Commission’s inquiry now gave way to a new form of violence: the use of politically-motivated shiftanet.<sup>369</sup> Although shifta activity was not without precedent in Eritrea as family blood feuds, disagreements over land and other conflicts had been motivating factors in local banditry, the political nature of the attacks that erupted in 1948 represented a departure from previous “social” and “economic” forms of armed

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> See F.C.B./180/3, Trevaskis to Hinden, January 4, 1948; March, 29, 1948.



banditry.<sup>370</sup> N'bsrat Debassai noted that the rise in Ethiopian-sponsored shifta became one of the defining characteristics of post-1947 Eritrean politics and a major concern for all nationalist groups and the BMA.<sup>371</sup> Unlike many of the small-scale raiders that subsisted historically by raiding cattle and villages throughout rural Eritrea, the new form of banditry also developed a strong urban component. In particular, the well-documented role of Asmara's Ethiopian Liaison Office as a "guiding light and center for urban terrorism" by supporting the UP and its youth supporters with money and weaponry added to the League's dilemma during the spring and summer of 1948.<sup>372</sup>

Although shifta raiders were at first "directed to influence the works of the Four Powers Commission," the weeks immediately following the Commission's departure brought an unprecedented era of activity directed against Italian settlers and pro-Independence Eritreans.<sup>373</sup> BMA officials noted that by early March 1948 the attacks, largely financed and "organized by elements favoring incorporation of Eritrea in Ethiopia," had caused enough worry that authorities established special anti-shifta units and patrols.<sup>374</sup> In general, most shifta activity took the form of raids on villages and especially armed robbery along the routes between major cities such as Asmara, Massawa, Keren and Agordat. An additional source of concern developed as many shifta coordinated attacks on the private homes and businesses of Italian settlers, causing panic in the rural areas.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> N'bsrat Debessai, "The Shifta Movement in Eritrea: The Case of Mosazgi's Sons," in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History*, ed. Tekeste Melake (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2007), 110-112.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ogbasellassie, "Shifta Problems in the Kebessa Regions of Eritrea (1947-1952)," 55.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> FO1015/146, J2621/1543/66, May 4, 1948.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., "Note on Shifta Activities in Eritrea.," 27 (B).

While the overwhelming majority of these early attacks were directed at prominent Italian residents and their properties, much of their “anti-Italian political character” also extended to members of the LPP, Pro-Italy Party and especially the Muslim League. In January 1948 Mohammed Omar Abdula, a member of the Muslim League’s Youth Association and the son of a prominent League official in Keren was killed by shifta.<sup>376</sup> In mid-March, shifta attacked the village of Ad Sherraf and reportedly stole twenty-seven head of cattle owned by Muslim League members and launched an attack on the house of the district chief.<sup>377</sup> The concentration of early attacks in the League’s strongholds of Keren and Agordat occurred with enough regularity that even BMA reports noted that with the exception of wealthy Italians, pro-independence Muslim residents almost always received the brunt of the attacks.<sup>378</sup>

Often lacking in financial resources, members of the League’s Youth Association stepped up their efforts throughout this period to prevent further attacks. In particular, members became a potent force by helping to organize League meetings in secret so as to not draw attention to their activities. Without even a guarantee of safety at open meetings, the League came to rely heavily on the network of local branches of the Youth Association whose members served as a protective force against possible shifta, particularly in the rural areas where League supporters were most vulnerable. Ironically, some members of the Youth Association came into disagreement with the League leadership over how to address the security issue. Tesfai noted that in Akkele Guzay, a

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<sup>376</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 120.

<sup>377</sup> FO 1015/146, “Shifta Incidents.” 27(B). See The Association of Italo-Eritreans, “Terrorism in Eritrea.” (Asmara: August 1950).

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 20 (A).

number of the association's Saho members petitioned the League leadership to provide them with arms to guard against shifta attacks that had increased in their villages. Despite their concerns, Ibrahim Sultan apparently erred on the side of caution, refusing to permit their request for fear of Ethiopian reprisals and for the fact that the League lacked the financial resources to acquire arms.<sup>379</sup>

The fear among rural Muslim League supporters also increased as a result of the constant reports of material support being given to shifta bands in northern Ethiopia. The raising of arms, men and other supplies across the border by Tigrean leaders also served as a source of concern amid reports that many shifta leaders had maintained close relations "with Ethiopian authorities across the border."<sup>380</sup> Unlike the raids in the Western Province that targeted both Italian settlers and pro-independence supporters, the attacks by "plateau Coptic shifta" were usually directed exclusively at Muslim residents and resulted in a perpetual state of hostility and perpetuated a series of "blood feuds" among residents.<sup>381</sup> Although the Ethiopian government's precise role in facilitating this rural support remains a controversial and speculative issue, the general atmosphere of apprehension remained high among residents who often reported being threatened by shifta bands to give their allegiance to the Ethiopian Emperor.<sup>382</sup> Adding to the growing concerns for the basic safety of Muslims, League leaders were soon confronted with an

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<sup>379</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 402.

<sup>380</sup> Ogbasellassie, "Shifta Problems in the Kebessa Regions of Eritrea," 56; RDC, BOX/294, 13471, "Monthly political report-Akeleguzai," April 4, 1948.

<sup>381</sup> FO 1015/ 146, 50 (A), "No. 30 Monthly Political Report, Eritrea- June 1948."

<sup>382</sup> Activities also included an increase in "non-political" raids by shifta leaders, including prominent Muslim raiders such as Hamid Idris Awate. See FO 1015/ 146, 57(A), "Extract from Eritrea Monthly Political Report, No. 31, dated July, 48."

additional crisis that shook its membership during the fall of 1948 when the first major division within the League hierarchy emerged.

### **al-Mirghani's Defection from the Muslim League**

In late October, Muslim League representatives met in secret at Mendefera following news that their president Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani had resigned his post and declared his support for the unionist cause.<sup>383</sup> Although British officials noted initially that both Abu Bakr and his brother Osman had signed their official allegiance to the UP, reports of their dual defection proved inaccurate. On October 25, Osman al-Mirghani sent a secret memo to Abdelkadir Kebire explaining the course of events. According to al-Mirghani he had recently traveled to Agordat with Ibrahim Sultan to meet with local unionist supporters in an effort to ease the growing shifta hostilities. He explained that both men were presented with a pronouncement allegedly signed by Abu Bakr al-Mirghani stating, "To unionist[s], who are concerned with the future welfare of their country I join them together with all my followers-all past announcements made in my name by the Moslem League I hereby renounce."<sup>384</sup> Although Osman al-Mirghani explained that his brother's proclamation lacked his official seal, he confirmed the handwriting and in his correspondence said that he now awaited further instructions from Kebire on how to proceed.<sup>385</sup> In the following days, Sultan convened several emergency meetings with League officials to discuss the matter. On October 28, a gathering took place in the home of Berhanu Amedin in Asmara where League leaders accused the BMA of interfering in their activities by supporting the unionists. Many believed that al-

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<sup>383</sup> See FO 742/23.

<sup>384</sup> FO 742/23, "22 Zulhigga 1367 (25/10/48)," 33.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid

Mirghani had been swayed to join the UP due to direct British encouragement.

Allegedly, some of the concerned League members claimed that “the only hope for salvation was to join up with the Pro-Italia Party” to maintain momentum.<sup>386</sup>

Although the exact reason for al-Mirghani’s departure remains unclear, his decision seems to have been tied to a variety of personal factors. Many accounts have noted that Ibrahim Sultan and sayyid Abu Bakr al-Mirghani had struggled to maintain an uneasy alliance, with the latter attempting to gain greater influence in the League’s inner workings and financial matters. According to one intelligence report the two “had a big dispute over political and money affairs” just prior to al-Mirghani’s defection from the League in October.<sup>387</sup> Others have claimed that al-Mirghani, largely under pressure from family members in nearby Sudan, was instructed to switch parties because Khatmiyya authorities believed that the BMA would soon partition most of Eritrea’s Muslim communities to Sudan anyway and they could, in the meantime, reap the benefits of Ethiopian support.<sup>388</sup> Still, other accounts have argued that al-Mirghani’s motivations were based on the prodding of some Muslim merchants who wished to pursue a more conciliatory approach toward Ethiopia.

One BMA intelligence report claimed that Massawa-born merchant and lawyer Muhammad Umar Kadi had succeeded in bringing al-Mirghani to the unionist cause. A conditional unionist himself who argued for the creation of a federation system between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Kadi had been one of the more vocal critics of the League’s position

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<sup>386</sup> FO 742/23, Report no. 6610/61928.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., Report no. 6610/61930.

<sup>388</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

after the Four Power Commission's arrival.<sup>389</sup> By the summer of 1948, Kadi had allegedly completed a tour of Massawa, Keren, Agordat and other cities in an effort to convince "the influential elements of the League and other Moslems of the necessity of introducing a reform in the League."<sup>390</sup> Kadi's main objective seems to have been to try and get the League to tone down its language and become less hostile toward unionist supporters for economic reasons. For their part, BMA observers claimed that al-Mirghani, when faced with the prospect of losing a power struggle within the organization to Sultan or watching the League forge an official alliance with the Pro-Italy Party, decided to opt for unionist support as a means of maintaining his own influence and status. Openly derided by Sultan as an "opportunist and egoist," al-Mirghani thus went about building support for union after having served for nearly two years as the President of Eritrea's largest nationalist organization.<sup>391</sup>

In theory, al-Mirghani's shift to the unionist camp should have placed the League's mission in greater jeopardy.<sup>392</sup> As the spiritual head of the largest and most influential Sufi brotherhood in Eritrea, al-Mirghani and his inner circle still carried influence in many Muslim communities as khalifas and former League officials. For some BMA observers, the rebellion against the "religious chief" (al-Mirghani) left most League supporters "without a clear and capable guide" to carry on their objectives as a united nationalist force.<sup>393</sup> Indeed, when in the previous December the League rejected

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<sup>389</sup> FO 742/23, "The Case of Morgani and its Possible Development." A founding member of the MFH, Kadi was also one of the major behind-the-scenes organizers at the Bet Giyorgis conference.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

both the idea of Italian and Ethiopian control of Eritrea, some writers alluded to the central importance of the al-Mirghani family to the cause. One of more impassioned examples was found in an untitled poem written by youth supporter from Tessenai under the moniker “nation-child.”

<i>My Country, My Country, my country</i>	<i>Wake up, listen to your</i>
<i>Italy claims your ownership,</i>	<i>enemies</i>
<i>Since when were Ethiopia your kings?</i>	<i>Ethiopia calls for joining</i>
<i>If you were lions in your land,</i>	<i>with you</i>
<i>Italy, you have to be thankful</i>	<i>There isn't any reason for</i>
<i>You were hit by thousands of airplanes,</i>	<i>debate</i>
<i>When did you wake up and claim this?</i>	<i>why did you leave your</i>
	<i>thrown empty?</i>
	<i>the hated son [Mussolini]</i>
	<i>was slaughtered</i>
	<i>whose fire flames you</i>
	<i>swallowed</i>
	<i>Is your grave in such a high</i>
	<i>place?</i>

*My country, I will not let anyone claim you unless I am oppressed  
and I will sacrifice my soul and my wealth for you  
I will not choose for me or you the oppression  
and I will not let the enemies kick you.  
Our youth are our pride  
the son of al-Mirghani, who no man comes before.<sup>394</sup>*

Nevertheless, al-Mirghani's influence among the broader Khatmiyya public could not prevent him from falling out of favor and his “political stock slumped badly” among the League leadership upon hearing the news of his defection.<sup>395</sup> For many of the more orthodox Islamic clerics, particularly those League officials closet to the mufti in Asmara, al-Mirghani was already *persona non-grata* in terms of the League's day-to-day political activities. Prior to his resignation, al-Mirghani had already infuriated much of the

<sup>394</sup> See *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 23, 1947: 3.

<sup>395</sup> FO 403, No. 48, “Eritrea: Monthly Political Summer No. 1,” 105.

League leadership when he attempted to convene a general meeting of the Executive Council in Keren in October to convince other members to get behind Kadi to support conditional union with Ethiopia.<sup>396</sup> Consequently, al-Mirghani's defection did little to weaken the basic agenda of the Executive Council. If anything, al-Mirghani's switch to the Unionist Party served to validate the League's earlier claims that many prominent Muslim leaders, including many of the shumagulle in the Western Province and the merchants from Massawa, were willing to support union simply as a means to guarantee their own economic influence in any future government with Ethiopia. When in mid-1949 al-Mirghani again switched his allegiance from the Unionist Party to the Muslim League-dominated Independence Bloc, his reputation as a viable political authority was all but destroyed.

While al-Mirghani's defection appeared to further complicate the League's efforts already under strain by shifta activity and its own financial troubles, al-Mirghani's move illustrated that collectively the organization was willing to pursue its wider objectives even if influential Muslim leaders themselves withdrew support. This attitude goes a long way in explaining why even at such a seemingly low point that League leaders finally accomplished one of their key aims in 1948 by overseeing the first steps toward legitimate tigre emancipation by helping establish new, autonomous clan structures throughout the Western Province.

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<sup>396</sup> FO 742/23, "The Case of Morgani and its Possible Development." One of the more controversial aspects of al-Mirghani's activities involved his alleged exploits with several of his female "servants." In particular, BMA reports noted that one house worker, a thirty year old from Agordat named Ama Tasein Kidanei, had been caught delivering information about the League's political affairs to unionist supporters. Although al-Mirghani fired her, his compromised position further weakened his reputation and ability to gain control of the League's political operations. See FO 742/23, "Said Moh'd Osman Morgani, resident of Agordat, Head of Moslem League."



### **tigre Clan Restructuring in the Western Province**

By April 1948, the BMA's long delayed process of establishing new "tribal structures" in the Western Province finally commenced in the aftermath of the Four Power Commission's inquiry. Although the previous years of unrest eased the economic burden of most tigre communities to the shumagalle, the push to establish a new clan system reflected a political desire among the tigre representatives to consolidate control over their own communities. In addition to providing "adequate salaries" and "tribal retainers," the new structures also ensured that representatives could be appointed to a BMA-sponsored Native Court.<sup>397</sup>

Beyond merely appointing new clan heads, the establishment of the new clan or "tribal" units involved a close dialogue between BMA and League officials, whose political influence had served previously to intensify relations between tigre and shumagulle representatives even after the Four Power Commission's departure. According to British officials, the political conflicts actually delayed the clan reorganization because the Muslim League and the UP had rallied their respective constituencies to the point where any compromise to alter the preexisting clan units became "as practicable as mixing petrol and water."<sup>398</sup> In particular, the "close connection between the Moslem League and the movement for Tigre independence" had caused so much concern for the BMA that only with the complete breakdown of the

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<sup>397</sup> FO 1015/138, 2(A).

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 10.

“traditional tribal government” among the Tigre-speaking clans three months after the Commission’s departure did the reorganization finally commence.<sup>399</sup>

With the BMA holding public meetings with new prospective “tribal leaders,” across the Keren, Nakfa and Agordat districts, the initial meetings led to later gatherings where officials and tigre representatives actually began the process of reorganization.

the holding of further public meetings of all other groups to determine which if any could provisionally be considered to merit independent tribal status, to persuade as many as possible to enter larger groups or to unite with each other to form groups of reasonable size, and at the same time to elect heads (to be recognized as chiefs if independent status were later acquired) to them and their subdivisions.<sup>400</sup>

The complex process of merging and reformulating the clans was not without difficulty for all parties, as concerns over guaranteeing representation and safeguard against future abuses remained ongoing points of concern. Nevertheless, BMA officials were optimistic about the extent to which the new formations had altered the tigre communities for the better.

After five months 20 wholly new tribes comprising a total population of 147, 164 have emerged as independent units, 8 former non-aristocratic tribes comprising a total population of 32, 899 have been refashioned as the result of five months, the assistance of the Police was at no time required and not a single penal case has resulted from it.”<sup>401</sup>

The peaceful and relatively rapid transition to the new clan units illustrated both the tremendous grassroots support for the new structures as well as the importance of the already designated new clan heads that emerged during negotiations with the BMA. Organized and supported by tigre representatives within the League leadership, the new

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 17.

clan heads took control in the “tribal areas” situated near the League’s major strongholds in the Western Province, including the sub-districts around Keren, Agordat, Tessenei and elsewhere.<sup>402</sup> The fact that the BMA noted that very few of the elections for new clan chiefs were ever disputed suggests that the overall cohesion and well-planned nature of the transition illustrated the League’s basic role in delineating the shape of the new institutions among the tigre.<sup>403</sup>

Beyond simply redressing the previous concerns among tigre communities, the creation of these clan units reflected how the Muslim League leadership had succeeded in using grassroots support to establish new political units with a strong adherence to the independence cause. The reorganization, carried out with logistical support from BMA officials who hoped to finally stabilize the unrest among the tigre clans across the Western Province, proved to be a wholesale success. Encouraged by Ibrahim Sultan and other tigre activists, the representatives of the new clans came to benefit both British authorities and Muslim League leaders by presenting manageable units of authority and social organization that had previously not existed. Although some writers exaggerated that the League leadership, particularly Sultan, desired for nothing more than to acquire supreme chieftainship over the new clans, the reality was that although the restructuring provided significant advantages for the league’s organizational strength, it did not reflect a newfound power grab by League officials. While Ibrahim Sultan and several other tigre emancipation leaders gained newfound status as chiefs and

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid. 35-36.

<sup>403</sup> The BMA did note that the reorganization among the tigre in the Keren district proved more difficult than in the Agordat and Nakfa districts because of the political objectives linked with the new structures. Ibid., 17-19.

sub-chiefs in the new structures, in general their power was confined to the small local sub-clans where their political influence had already made them de-facto leaders of their constituencies among those that had argued that the new units needed to be based exclusively on kinship.<sup>404</sup>

Moreover, if the League, according to some of its detractors, really had been created for the sole purpose of giving opportunistic tigre leaders power over new clans, it fails to explain the continued zeal among the activists in support the League's independence aims after the restructuring.<sup>405</sup> While only Eritrean independence could guarantee the continuation of the clan structures, tigre activists on the whole seem to have been particularly attuned to the larger dimensions of the League's concerns during the period. One of the more overlooked advantages for the League was the fact that for the tigre leadership, desperate to improve its revenue, tapped into the new financial benefits for the new clan authorities. With the BMA's approval of "tribal retainers" for chiefs and sub-chiefs as well as for "land inspectors" and elected representatives to the Native Court, the new clans opened up a new line of funding that leaders could utilize to contribute greater revenue to the League from their salaries. Unlike the previous chieftainships where revenue could be raised through taxation and force, the new clan safeguards included preset "salaried and uniform retainers" under colonial supervision that, in theory, would prevent a return to the previous exploitation.<sup>406</sup> Officials also believed that bringing direct administrative oversight over the collection of tribute by the

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>405</sup> For his part, Ibrahim Sultan became chief of one a sub-tribes (badanna) of the Rugbat clan, heading a group of more than 13,000 residents. See FO 1015/138/ Appendix B, "New Tribal Organization of the Nacfa District," 35-37.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 23.

new clan heads would “provide the Administration with adequate tribute and the tribe with adequate funds” by allowing each clan group to build up its own “tribal deposit” to raise money for community expenditures.<sup>407</sup>

By helping to solidify local power structures, clarify land ownership and financial matters among the Tigre-speaking groups, these new clan authorities represented tangible results for tigre activists who had long sought to emancipate their respective communities from shumagulle rule. Just as important to improving localized community objectives among the tigre, the new clan structures gave the Muslim League an important victory in an otherwise bleak period. It secured one of its major social objectives and permanently solidified tigre-majority support for the League’s efforts. This support became especially significant during later attempts to fracture the League and its leadership throughout the western province.<sup>408</sup> Even British officials alluded to the fact that the clan reforms were a clear advantage to League’s overall nationalist aims:

Whatever the measures proposed by BMA are of a nature to commend themselves to the Ethiopians is doubtful. We feel however that the importance of this point can be discounted, particularly in view of the possibility that the administration of the Western Province will not fall to Ethiopia.<sup>409</sup>

When taken together, the creation of the new clans and the previous loss of al-Mirghani to the UP also suggests that his decision to leave the League may have also hinged on fears that the new structures also posed a threat to his traditional authority. Clearly, the UP’s earlier success in late 1947 in corralling shumagulle support gave little

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>408</sup> This base of support was particularly crucial to the League’s campaign to discredit splinter organizations that later emerged, particularly the Muslim League of the Western Province (MLWP) in early 1950.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 2(A), J.M Benoy, January 24, 1949.

reason for tigre supporters to maintain cordial relations with many of the traditional elites, including the Khatmiyya head.

Despite al-Mirghani's earlier public support for the easing of customary payments against the tigre, many of the League's leading representatives came to resent Mirghani's perceived indifference to their plight given the inclusion of many shumagulle as local Khatmiyya khalifas. Compounding the situation, the noted rivalry between Mirghani and Ibrahim Sultan, the most prominent spokesman on the tigre issue, suggests that al-Mirghani's decision to break off from the League in the fall came once the League had finally delivered on the clan restructuring issue and solidified tigre support. Ironically, only a few months earlier Abdelkadir Kebire had alluded privately to the fact that al-Mirghani's stature and "leadership" in the Muslim League's formation had helped ensure that "999/1000 of the Muslim villagers" were allied with the League's cause.<sup>410</sup>

Regardless of either al-Mirghani's actual motives or the concerns of many in the League leadership, the success of the clan reorganization toward the end of 1948 helped consolidate the League's strength among both its rural base in the Western Province and the rank and file members in the cities. This support proved crucial when the League finally began to re-engage the political rivalry between unionists and nationalists in the following year.

### **The League's Nationalist Resurgence of 1949**

While the Muslim League managed to keep up its momentum and retain its basic program despite the setbacks of 1948, Eritrea's fate among the international community remained in a precarious situation throughout the rest of the year and only increased

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<sup>410</sup> Younis, "Abdulkadir Kebire," [http://www.ephrem.org/dehai\\_archive/1997/feb/0171.html](http://www.ephrem.org/dehai_archive/1997/feb/0171.html).

nationalist concerns as a whole that pro-independence groups would not be given another chance to present their respective positions on independence. The inability of the Four Power Commission to reach a consensus punted the issue of Eritrea's future status to the members of the UN General Assembly. Having been kept on standby, the UN gave notice to all Eritrean political parties in late 1948 that they would be invited to present their views to the Assembly at its temporary headquarters at Lake Success, New York for its fourth Official Session.

The UN's notice that the Eritrean issue would now be taken up by the General Assembly breathed new life into the League and ended the general calm in nationalist politics that had characterized much of the previous year. News that the League could send its own group of representatives both energized and troubled its leadership. Unlike the Unionist and the Pro-Italy parties, the absence of any external support for the League's activities left its officials troubled as to how to field a legitimate delegation to the UN. Still struggling to replenish its treasury and to resume the printing of its newspaper, the League was hardly in an ideal position as the independence question again surfaced. By the following February, League offices were even presented with a letter from Unionist Party leaders mocking the League's support for a plan of international trusteeship prior to eventual Eritrean independence. The communication also argued that because the League had neither the financial nor material resources necessary to guarantee an independent Eritrea, its only option was to give in and join with the Unionist Party.<sup>411</sup> In response, League members called a general meeting in Asmara where they not only once again rejected incorporation with Ethiopia, but some members

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<sup>411</sup> FO 1015/187, "no. 38 Monthly Political Report Eritrea- February 1949," 1.

allegedly carried placards “describing Ethiopians as savages” and suggested that Ethiopia itself needed to be placed under international trusteeship.<sup>412</sup>

No one embodied the League’s tenacity better than Abdelkadir Kebire, the League President of the Asmara branch and one of its most active intellectual leaders. Since his days as a founding member of the MFH he had been at the vanguard of the urban intelligentsia in arguing for greater inclusion of Eritreans in government and in combating British indifference to local political concerns. By late March League leaders decided that Kebire would be part of the small delegation that would be sent first to Cairo in hopes of gaining entry into the United States for the Lake Success meeting. Although BMA authorities privately worried about the departure of a League delegation and had initially tried to prevent their departure, Kebire announced on March 25 that he, Ibrahim Sultan, Muhammad Uthman Hayuti and hajj Ibrahim Muhammad Ali were appointed by the Lujinna al-ayan to represent the League.<sup>413</sup> The opportunity to present the Muslim League’s case to the UN should have been Kebire’s finest hour; he had been one of the most articulate leaders to merge ideas about Muslim identity and political self-determination with the League’s argument of a separate Eritrean identity from Ethiopia.

### **Assassination of Abdelkadir Kebire**

On the evening of March 27 Kebire and his colleagues met at one of the usual gathering places for League leaders, in the café of the Aberra-owned Red Sea Pearl Hotel on Asmara’s Seraye Street. The meeting, called to address the agenda of the departing delegation, ended in the early evening and Kebire left for home. As he walked away,

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> See FO 1015/187, “No. 39 Monthly Political Report, Eritrea- March 1949,” 1.



Kebire was allegedly called back by an unknown voice from in front of the hotel. As Kebire walked back toward the building, the assailant fired a pistol, shooting Kebire in the back.<sup>414</sup> Kebire was taken to the Regime Elena hospital where he survived for another two days before succumbing to his wounds on Tuesday, March 29. Although attempts on the lives of Muslim League and other pro-independence leaders had been a reality since early 1947, Kebire's murder at the age of 47 represented the first major assassination of a prominent nationalist figure in Eritrea.

On Wednesday March 30, the League members observed his death by closing all offices, schools and Muslim shops in Asmara for the day.<sup>415</sup> Kebire's martyrdom served to reignite the League's base of support on scale not seen in more than a year and half. In keeping with Islamic practice, Kebire's family, friends and league colleagues held a memorial for him forty days after his death on Sunday, May 8<sup>th</sup>. Gathering at the Cinema Impero Theatre, members of the League, LPP and the Pro-Italy Party, as well as representatives from the BMA, Asmara's Italian community and officials from the city's consulates came to pay their respects.<sup>416</sup> For League supporters, Kebire's assassination represented the ultimate act of political violence. The decision of unionist supporters to target such a high profile figure illustrated the long-held concerns that Asmara's nationalists expressed about Ethiopian involvement in unionist activity. In particular, activists throughout the previous year had focused much of their anger on the activities of the Ethiopian Liaison Office in Asmara, which they accused of being the major sponsor of attacks and assassination attempts on the city's nationalist leaders. Even within the

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<sup>414</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

<sup>415</sup> Solomon, "The Life and Political Career of Abdulkadir Kebire," 203

<sup>416</sup> "News about the Mourning of Kebire's Death." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 19, 1949: 1.

BMA many officials suspected the office's role in such attacks. Kebire's assassination thus presented the most extreme example of Ethiopian support for unionist shiftanet. Hours after the shooting, BMA authorities entered into the Asmara office of andinet, the Youth wing of the Unionist Party. Investigators noted that

Among the many documents discovered was one, addressed to some unknown person, asking for authority to arrange for IBRAHIM SULTAN (the Secretary General of the Moslem League) and ABDELKADER KEBIRE to be killed, as they were 'enemies of Ethiopia.' This document was dated 24<sup>th</sup> March 1949-ABDELKADER was shot on 27<sup>th</sup> March. The full hauls of documents is not yet known, as they are still being translated, but it is already sufficiently obvious that that the ANDINET and the Unionist Party proper were in constant and close communication with the Ethiopian Liaison Officer. There were also found a number of hand axes (with members' names on them) and some arsenic powder."<sup>417</sup>

Despite the public outcry after Kebire's assassination, the Muslim League leadership went to great lengths to calm its members, particularly urban youth, from committing any reprisals against unionists. Perhaps the only thing more shocking about the course of events other than Kebire's murder was the League's subdued response. Most of the credit for this can be traced to both the ability of the League's Asmara elders to reign in the youth association and the proactive measures taken by the BMA to minimize urban unrest. For their part, the BMA's decision to outlaw the hadnät association and put most of its leaders in prison within a week of Kebire's death, as well as imposing an evening curfew in early April, produced a "steadying effect" on most local youth.<sup>418</sup> Although League officials made no effort to hide their belief that the UP was responsible for Kebire's murder, leaders defused much of the public anger by finding alternative ways to address the outrage and apprehension among members.

<sup>417</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 39 Monthly Political Report- Eritrea- March 1949," 1.

<sup>418</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 40. Monthly Political Report-Eritrea-April 1949," 2.

If the conspirators behind Kebire's death believed that his assassination would dishearten the League's constituency and dissipate the growing interest in the UN debate, they badly miscalculated. Kebire's martyrdom actually rejuvenated the League's political momentum at a time when the organization had yet to fully emerge from its previous year of setbacks. The public interest following the assassination helped the League collect sufficient funds to re-launch its newspaper after a fourteen month gap in publication. The recommencement of printing could not have come at a better time for the League, as additional reports and tributes concerning Kebire's death became one of the major topics of interest.<sup>419</sup> Most of the tributes to Kebire were impassioned pleas among supporters to continue honoring his memory by supporting his political aims. In particular, Kebire's death resonated with many urban Muslim youth who recognized his efforts to fuse the league's political activities with efforts to improve Muslim education, especially in Asmara.

Well known for his interest in expanding Asmara's schools, Kebire was celebrated by supporters and his death became a rallying point. Hamid Abdel Haleem, a graduate of Asmara's King Farouk Islamic Institute commemorated Kebire as a "symbol of righteousness, courage and honesty."<sup>420</sup> Noting that Kebire had served the Eritrean youth by offering his wealth as well as his soul for their betterment, Haleem lamented that "all Eritrean Muslim Youth have lost a very important leader; an intellectual, a wise mentor. All Eritrean children cry as much as you have tears in your eyes and pray for

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<sup>419</sup> See *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 28, 1949: 4. In this issue, the editors took the time to explain the publication difficulties and to thank their members' contributions in helping to finance the paper's continued printing and circulation.

<sup>420</sup> Hamid Abdel Haleem, "Memorial for the Leader." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 12, 1949: 2.

him all that you can by way of grieving and asking God's blessing."<sup>421</sup> Even League leaders also took note of Kebire's influence in shaping local initiatives for the younger generations and his seemingly tireless efforts as a leading intellectual authority. Degiat Hassan Ali, Yasin Ba Tuq and other officials praised Kebire as one of Eritrea's true founding fathers for his attempts to motivate Muslim youth in their education.<sup>422</sup> Tributes to Kebire also extended well beyond the confines of Asmara; in the ensuing weeks, the late leader was honored by activists across Eritrea, particularly by League supporters in his home city of Massawa. The President of the Massawa branch of the Society for Cultural Cooperation, sayyid Muhammad ibn al-Se'id Abu Balawi, praised Kebire for his significant "intellectual capacity" and his own spiritual sacrifices in the national struggle.<sup>423</sup>

Some of Kebire's admirers living outside Eritrea also made a point of praising his life's contributions to Eritrean society. Ja'far al-Sharif Umar al-Suri, a friend of Kebire's residing in Gederef in eastern Sudan reflected on the significance of his passing.

the news of the assassination of the hero has had the effect of a thunderstorm in the soul of every free man who respects courage and knows the worth of men. But this is God's will that he gave cowardness and cruelty to people who could not face nations that stood for their rights. So, their cruelty pushed them to commit the worst crime ever known in Eritrean history, past and present.<sup>424</sup>

Kebire's martyrdom also had an important effect by galvanizing supporters just prior to the League delegation's pending appearance before the United Nations General

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> "News of the Mourning of Kebire's Death." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 19, 1949: 1.

<sup>423</sup> "Speech of the President of the Cultural Society of Massawa." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 26, 1949: 2.

<sup>424</sup> Ja'far al-Sharif 'Umar al-Suri, "The Freedom Martyr." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 9, 1949: 1.

Assembly. The League's UN delegation itself had left Eritrea within days of Kebire's assassination and its members could only watch the activities from abroad. Despite being short one of their most articulate and well-versed politicians, the remaining delegates wasted little time in publicizing their cause to the international community.

### **Presenting the Muslim League's Case before an International Audience**

Even in the immediate aftermath of Kebire's assassination, the League's Executive Council continued its plans to help finance and send the delegates, now numbering three, to Lake Success. In early April, the delegation arrived in Cairo and stayed several days before heading on to the United States. The delegation's stay in Cairo represented the first real opportunity for representatives to build support for their cause outside Eritrea. During their stay in Cairo Ibrahim Sultan, Muhammad Uthman Hayuti and hajj Ibrahim Muhammad Ali made a point of seeking support from a broad spectrum of activists. Besides visiting with clerics at al-Azhar University, the delegates met with representatives from the Supreme Committee on Palestine and the Arab League. Ibrahim Sultan is said to have discussed Eritrean independence with Abdul Rahman Azaam Basha, the Secretary General of the Arab League who allegedly assured Sultan that the Arab League delegation at the UN would be "instructed to support Eritrea's demands of independence."<sup>425</sup>

Later, when Ibrahim Sultan met with reporters from Cairo's *al-Ahram* newspaper, he mentioned that he and the delegates had made a point to appeal to the Arab League as a means of gaining necessary support among other Muslim countries for

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<sup>425</sup> "Eritrean Muslims' delegation to the UN and their efforts for their nation's independence demands." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 28, 1949: 3-4.

their independence cause. During the same interview, Sultan also mentioned the contributions of pro-Independence Christians in the LPP and their joint struggle to achieve sovereignty.<sup>426</sup> Given the context, the admission is striking for both Sultan's candor and his attempt, even when presenting the League's case in the heart of the Arab world, to argue that Eritrean Christians were closely linked to the nationalist struggle. However, even with the League's internal agenda of supporting interreligious cooperation, its leadership clearly understood the value of linking their efforts as part of the wider struggle for independence as a predominately Muslim nation.

Eritrean representatives' visit to Egypt in early April 1949 marked a new period in which the League attempted to use Egypt's prominence in the Muslim world to gain support for its own nationalist objectives. More than a year after Sultan and other League delegates first met with leaders in Cairo, *Sawt al-rabita* proclaimed boldly in June 1950 that one of the best strengths to ensure Eritrean independence was the fact that even after the UN Commission of Inquiry had submitted its final report, "news coming from Cairo suggested that the Arab league was making a great effort in supporting Eritrean unity and independence" and that the overwhelming majority of the Arab league member nations at the UN, including the Egyptian government, were committed to the independence cause."<sup>427</sup> However, as the League's activities progressed throughout 1949 and 1950, its leadership also moved ever closer toward the aims and mission of the Pakistani state in its appeals for international Muslim solidarity. If nationalist activists in Egypt became an important strategic base from which to build upon sympathies in the

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> "Egypt and Arabic Countries Support Eritrean Independence." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 11, 1950: 1.

Arab world, Pakistan embodied the ideal result of what the Eritrean Muslim League hoped to achieve.

By August 1950, most League reports about the international support for Eritrea focused on Pakistan's efforts to express their solidarity with the League's cause and to build support among other nations.<sup>428</sup> League writers not only continued to build on Muslim solidarity in their own tract, but also in a substantial number of commentaries within the Independence Bloc's Arabic *Wahda Iritriya* newspaper. Many of the pieces illustrated the Muslim League's proactive role in garnering Pakistani support. For example, in August 1950 Ibrahim Sultan sent a personal message to the Pakistani government congratulating it on its third anniversary of independence. In September, the paper printed the text of the Pakistani government's response from the office of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan.

Dear sayyid Ibrahim Sultan, by his Excellency the Pakistani Prime Minister, we are thankful to you and the Eritrean Muslims for your kind wishes and congratulations included in your telegram to us on May 15, 1950 on the occasion of the third anniversary of Pakistan's independence. His Excellency the Prime Minister is very appreciative of the love and kindness and loyalty that the Muslim nations abroad have for Pakistan as a government and a nation. Yours truly, A.A. Hamid, secretary to the Prime Minister.<sup>429</sup>

In other instances, the paper followed the earlier tradition of the *Sawt al-rabita* by featuring articles previously published in Pakistani newspapers documenting the lives of national leaders such as Muhammad al-Jinnah.<sup>430</sup> Indeed, the fascination with Pakistan and its governments' support on the independence issue only increased in February 1950

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<sup>428</sup> "Eritrea's Future." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, August 4, 1950: 3.

<sup>429</sup> "Pakistan." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 6, 1950: 1.

<sup>430</sup> See "A Summary of the Life of the Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Great Leader and Founder of Pakistan." *Wahda Iritriya*, November 8, 1950: 3.

when delegates from the UN Commission of Inquiry arrived in Asmara and League writers took a particular interest in the observations of Mian Ziaud-Din, Pakistan's representative on the Commission. Beyond being merely celebrated in the nationalist press, Mian Ziaud-Din's public position in opposing Eritrean partition only helped increased solidarity between the League's base and the Pakistani government. At the end of the Commission's inquiry in late June, 1950 Ziaud-Din also addressed the significance of Muslim unity on the issue when he acknowledged in a press conference that the idea of Eritrean partition, apart from being an "injustice" and an illegal action, also represented an affront to the Egyptian government and other Muslim nations that expressed their "total rejection in any way to divide Eritrea."<sup>431</sup> Indeed, the idea of partition represented the most important political issue that united not only the general the Muslim league membership but also the wider nationalist constituency. This visceral reaction to the idea of partition, embodied best in public outcry against the Bevin-Sforza Agreement, actually allowed the League to augment its efforts in building Muslim support by tapping into the considerable resentment that the plan had on other nationalist groups and even moderate unionists.

### **The Bevin-Sforza Agreement and Nationalist Rejection**

Originally, the League delegation's arrival at Lake Success represented an opportunity to for members to finally present the organization's pro-independence cause in front of the UN General Assembly. While League leaders had been in close contact with other nationalist delegations, particularly the LPP and Pro-Italy Party, they had each come as representatives of their respective constituencies rather than as a single

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<sup>431</sup> "Pakistan Representative and the Eritrean Issue." *Wahda Iritriya*, June 28, 1950: 1.



nationalist consortium. The political dynamics soon altered, however, after news of the “Bevin-Sforza Agreement.” The product of secret negotiations between Britain’s Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and Italian Foreign Minister Count Carlo Sforza, the Bevin-Sforza Agreement addressed a broad range of issues on the future of Italy’s former colonies, including the return of Tripolitania and Somaliland to Italy as well as the agreement to partition Eritrean between Ethiopia and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.<sup>432</sup>

When news of the Bevin-Sforza Agreement first reached the nationalists at the UN, it set off an unprecedented campaign among representatives to unite in opposition to the proposal. Incensed that the agreement had been sent directly to the fifteen-member Subcommittee charged with deciding the Italian colonies’ fate, League delegates took a firm stand to denounce the secret agreement. In testimony before UN delegates, the lawyer turned nationalist spokesman Ibrahim Sultan charged that the Bevin-Sforza went against the very principal of self-determination as defined by the Atlantic Charter and requested that a new “United Nations committee be invited to decide” whether or not the agreement was even valid under the UN charter.<sup>433</sup> He also took the time to argue that partition itself represented an affront to the majority of Eritreans, as he contended that approximately seventy-five percent of all Eritreans were Muslims, and that the remaining non-Muslim population, being a heterogeneous mix of predominantly-Christian and

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<sup>432</sup> Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, 124. See G.A.O.R. Fifth Session, Ad Hoc Political Committee, Summary Records of Meetings, 30 September-14 December 1950, 332-337. Henceforth noted as G.A.O.R. Fifth Session.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. See G.A.O.R. Fifth Session, 332-334.

animist sects with an equally diverse linguistic mixture, “shared no affinities to the Ethiopian People.”<sup>434</sup>

Having thus no ethnic, religious, historical, or economic bonds with Ethiopia, the Eritrean Muslims were strongly opposed to the annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia. Owing to the different political structure of Eritrea and the contribution it might make to the equilibrium of that sector of Africa and the Middle East, the Eritrean Muslims request the United Nations to grant independence to their country.<sup>435</sup>

Although by May 1949 UN delegates had effectively neutralized the Bevin-Sforza Agreement by voting against the “wholesale disposition of all three colonies” as a viable option, the visceral reaction among Eritrea’s nationalist delegates and especially League representatives ushered in a new phase of political mobilization. As events transpired in Lake Success, the League press wasted little time in drawing support against the Bevin-Sforza Agreement and any possible plan to divide Eritrean territory. In the May 19<sup>th</sup> issue of *Sawt al-rabita* Hassan Mahmud Abu Bakr offered an extended argument concerning the “dangers” of partitioning Eritrea.<sup>436</sup> Besides explaining the various ways that Eritrea’s inhabitants would be weakened by being absorbed into such “foreign” entities as Ethiopia and Sudan, Abu Bakr also alluded to the growing movement within the League to tap into the widespread discontent and forge a new link with the other nationalist organizations.

It is important that all political parties should come together and discuss one united solution that would rescue the nation from the disastrous consequences of division. And after they reach a united agreement/opinion

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid. See G.A.O.R. Fifth Session, 92.

<sup>436</sup> Hassan Mahmud Abu Bakr, “Rescue Eritrea from Consequences of Division.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 26, 1949: 1.

(that is-complete independence and a rejection of Eritrea being divided) it should be presented to the United Nations in one voice.<sup>437</sup>

Even though the nationalist delegations at Lake Success began discussions in private about their respective concerns and need to unite against the possibility of partition, League members' commentaries in Asmara demonstrated that even before delegates returned from the UN in early June, the groundswell of support for a new nationalist umbrella organization had gained considerable support among the League's rank and file. In a piece entitled "Solidarity is Strength," Yasin Ba Tuq also addressed League fears about the dangers of both political and territorial fragmentation, claiming that "there is nothing better for nations in their progress than solidarity and there is nothing worse than division and fragmentation."<sup>438</sup>

In building support for a new nationalist coalition, he and other League writers also played on readers' feelings concerning the "glories" of Islamic civilization, emphasizing that many of the past achievements and strengths of past Muslim empires could not have occurred without Muslims putting aside their differences.<sup>439</sup> Even the BMA reported that the League leadership had been in close contact with activists from the other Italian colonies, particularly from Libya, and had observed and understood "the lesson of the apparent success" of public demonstrations in Tripoli and had begun planning their own public demonstrations across the country throughout May.<sup>440</sup> Other reports of the events at Lake Success emphasized the spirit of camaraderie between Muslim League representatives and delegates from the Arab League and other Muslim-

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, "Solidarity is Strength." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 26, 1949: 1.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 41 Monthly Political Report, Eritrea- May 1949," 1.

majority countries.<sup>441</sup> Although many League writers continued to play on local affinities about a shared Muslim history and bond between Eritreans and the Arab world to build political support, the push to prevent a recurrence of the Bevin-Sforza Agreement actually encouraged the League as a whole into widening its already inclusive approach to building nationalist support, including opening up the organization to other groups that many League members viewed as being inherently dangerous to the independence cause, particularly Italo-Eritreans.

### **Formation of the Eritrean Independence Bloc**

With both the UN General Assembly and Subcommittee locked in a stalemate over the future of Italy's former colonies, delegates from the nationalist parties and the UP returned to Asmara in early June 1949 without a clear verdict on Eritrea's fate. However, upon their delegation's return, two important shifts in the Muslim League's program took place. First, the perceived betrayal by the British government at Lake Success over the Bevin-Sforza Agreement permanently destroyed any remaining faith among League leaders that they could trust Britain to even arbitrate basic political rivalries in the region. Second, the League leadership emerged as the principal force behind the creation of a new organization designed to bring together the respective strengths of each pro-independence faction. Barely a week after returning to Eritrea, the Lake Success delegation and other members of the Executive Council called a general League meeting in Keren to discuss the events at the UN. Afterward, representatives agreed to support the creation of the soon-to-be Independence Bloc. In their efforts to

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<sup>441</sup> See "Delegation of the Eritrean Muslims to the United Nations and Their Efforts in the Independence Demands." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 28, 1949: 2.

build support and spread the news about the impending organization, League supporters made no secret to highlight their preeminent place in the new consortium.

It is worth noting and repeating that the Muslim League was the first to call for Eritrean independence and in their memorandum presented to the Four Power Commission, the first demand was for Eritrean independence. At the time, some of the weaker minds thought that this was an impossible demand. But only time could prove our precise vision and we will see more in the future.<sup>442</sup>

For their part, League writers went to great efforts to support the Bloc's objectives and clarify its position to the public. Yasin Ba Tuq argued that all of Eritrea's delegations, with the exception of the Unionist Party "were convinced after their meeting with the UN Assembly that the best way would be to unite their voices, especially when they saw how some nations pursued a complete rejection of the Eritrean people's wishes."<sup>443</sup> Consequently, the Bloc's founding ceremony at Dekemhare with representatives from the LPP on June 19 represented a moment of great optimism for League leaders who believed that the Bloc's principal position of unconditional independence would finally gain the support of the international community. The ambitions of the Bloc's leaders and Ibrahim Sultan in particular were not lost on BMA officials, who took exception to its notably "anti-British" attitudes and observed that Sultan's newfound zeal was the result of his own mental imbalance that had resulted from his "very swollen head" upon his return from Lake Success.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, "A Victory on the Horizon." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 30, 1949: 1. Other groups included the LPP, Independent Eritrean Party, New Eritrea Party, Italo-Eritrean Association, National Muslim Party of Massawa, Eritrean War Veterans Association and the Intellectual Association. See Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 75-76; Negash, "Italy and Its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-1950," 439.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 42 Monthly Political Report. Eritrea-June 1949," 3.

Composed initially of the League, LPP, the Pro-Italy Party and the recently-formed Eritrean War Veterans Association, the Independence Bloc was modeled on the Muslim League's internal structure and its leading representatives included several members of the Executive Council. Ibrahim Sultan's ascension as the main spokesman for the organization also illustrated how the League provided much of the organizational apparatus to steer its agenda, particularly during its most effective period from July through October 1949. Throughout the summer, the Bloc succeeded in bringing together its diverse constituency around the independence issue, expanding its membership and even incorporating former unionist supporters. Ironically, one of the first unionist figures to join the Bloc was sayyid Abu Bakr al-Mirghani.

Sayed Bakri el Morgani the religious leader and one time President of the Moslem League, who last November caused a stir in political circles by renouncing the aims of the League and joining the Unionist Party (See para. 754) has now caused only minor interest by reverting to the League and joining the New Eritrea Bloc in opposition to the Unionists. Owing to his previous change of front it is considered unlikely that he will exercise a great deal of influence within the Party.<sup>445</sup>

Regardless of the specific reasons for al-Mirghani's defection from the UP, his shift to the Bloc illustrated how UP membership as a whole steadily dropped during the summer of 1949, as support slipped in almost every region except in the parts of the Tigrinya-speaking Kebessa area. BMA reports observed that the UP had lost so much of its support that it "almost ceased to exist in the Western Province, and in addition has lost a considerable number of its supporters in the Red Sea (Massawa) Division."<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 42 Monthly Political Report, Eritrea-June 1949," 3.

<sup>446</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 44 Monthly Political Report, August-1949," 1-2.

Even attempts by Ethiopian officials to bolster material conditions in Muslim communities often failed to ignite unionist support. For example, after the Hirgigo Islamic School, initially financed by Saleh Kekiya through the Massawa waqf closed down in 1947 due to lack of funds, Ethiopian officials donated money to reopen it as the Haile Sellasie I School in August, 1949. However when Ethiopian officials held a public ceremony celebrating the School's reopening, less than 600 people (mostly Asmara-based Copts) came even though the ministers had sent more than 1500 invitations to Muslim representatives.

The affair has caused some indignation among the Moslems of Massawa and Archico [Hirgigo], who resent the blatant political maneuver and who have intimated their intention of boycotting the school.<sup>447</sup>

Largely because of the defection of former unionist supporters, UP officials lacked a coherent strategy for maintaining their agenda and activities as the Bloc continued to expand membership. BMA officials even took note of the diminished size of official UP gatherings in Asmara in comparison to the previous years. With the increased presence of Ethiopian delegates in Eritrea trying to reign in UP members and find new ways to stop the defections, British observers believed that the UP had actually been further weakened by Ethiopian intervention that caused resentment between Ethiopian and Eritrean officials.<sup>448</sup>

### **The Independence Bloc's Internal Challenges**

Despite the weakened condition of the UP and hadinet supporters, the Bloc's quick expansion also obscured the fact that significant divisions were already beginning

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

to emerge between the member organizations. Within the Muslim League itself, the issue of Italian participation in the Bloc's activities magnified tensions between rank and file members and League leaders.

By early July, the League announced that the Executive Council and other officials in the Independence Bloc would accept the membership of Italo-Eritrean community in the organization. Having been debated first among the League's Executive Council and later the general leadership of the Bloc, the League announced on July 7 that they recognized the "mutual benefits for all Eritreans for accepting the Italian Eritreans" into the Bloc. In their defense of the decision, the League made no secret of its hopes to utilize the economic influence of the Italian community in Eritrea to support the independence movement.<sup>449</sup> Despite the seemingly shrewd move to incorporate Italian influence, the decision also caused a serious disagreement within the League that ultimately helped bring down the Bloc less than a year later.

At its core, the debate over accepting Italo-Eritreans in the Bloc involved larger fears that Ibrahim Sultan had become too close to Italian authorities and that he had made promises that would leave Eritrea, even if independent, under continued Italian domination. Utilizing Italian government archives, scholar Tekeste Negash maintained that both the *Ministero dell' Africa Italiana* (MAI) in Rome and the secret Eritrean-based group *Comitato Assistenza Eritrei* (CAE), maintained a heavy presence over Sultan and his inner circle. Negash inferred that by mid-1948, both the settler community in Eritrea

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<sup>449</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, "Nationalist Political Party Conference Decides to Accept Italo-Eritreans in the Independence Bloc." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, July 7, 1949: 1.



and the Italian government had all but achieved their initial aims by influencing the League's sudden decision to include Italo-Eritreans in the Bloc.

By early July 1948 the Italian organisations could report back to Rome that the political situation was moving in their favour. For example, they had succeeded in toning down the anti-Italian stand of the ML and had neutralised the anti-Italian position of Ibrahim Sultan by persuading other leaders to challenge his views. Indeed, the Italian community now felt so secure that it decided to fund the ML's newspaper as well as its editors.<sup>450</sup>

While considerable support and funding from such external Italian parties did work to alter the Bloc's program as it related to the basic issue of membership, the true extent of Italian influence over Sultan's ultimate political objectives remains open to debate. Moreover, Italian financial influence did not translate into a wholesale corruption of the League's basic nationalist program or any meaningful control over the indigenous political leadership. Other members of the Executive Council and even many within the League's general membership were also well aware of Sultan's dealings and took the necessary precautions to address any possible negative ramifications that excessive Italian influence might have on their cause.

In a special meeting called by officials in Keren on August 28<sup>th</sup>, members discussed their worries openly with the Executive Council and even required Sultan to sign a "declaration on behalf of the Muslim League" that in the event of independence, no aid or support whatsoever would be accepted from the Italian government.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Negash, "Italy and its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-50," 425. Negash's comment about Italian funding of *Sawt al-rabita* is also important to note. In light of the League's well-documented financial troubles, the £300 pounds that the League allegedly received monthly from the CAE to continue the paper's circulation is more than plausible. Nevertheless, it seems to have had little if any effect on the actual content of what *Sawt al-rabita*'s editors published, as anti-Italian commentaries and accusations of unwanted Italo-Eritrean political influence were often featured within the paper. See Negash, "Italy and its Relations with Eritrean Political Parties, 1948-50," 439.

<sup>451</sup> FO 1015/187, "no. 44 Monthly Political Report, August- 1949," 1.

Nevertheless, concerns that Sultan and other League leaders had overstepped their bounds by tying their fortunes to Italian settlers did not dissipate. By late September, Sultan and his supporters remained on the defensive and felt the need to issue a general statement to League members to alleviate fears. Written by Muhammad Uthman Hayuti, the announcement attempted to “remove the clouds of doubt” and reaffirm the League’s commitment to the nationalist cause by stressing that its support for independence had never wavered. League leaders highlighted both their past accomplishments and attempts widening the objectives within the independence movement, including their support for including fellow Christian Eritreans. Hayuti affirmed that the League had proved that “at this important moment in the nation’s history, this kind of honest behavior shows their commitment in the shared national interest.”<sup>452</sup> Despite these attempts, rumors persisted that some in the League leadership had made secret deals with the Italian government in an attempt to avoid partition.

There has been a growing fear that IBRAHIM SULTAN (para. 925) may have already compromised the position by making vague, or even specific, promises to the Italians both at Lake Success and subsequently in Rome during his visit earlier this year, in return for their support.<sup>453</sup>

In the short term however the Bloc managed to hold together against internal rivalries long enough to worry colonial officials, who estimated by August that the Bloc commanded the allegiance of at least 60 percent of the Eritrea’s population if not more.<sup>454</sup> With a seemingly revitalized nationalist constituency, the Bloc sent another delegation

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<sup>452</sup> Muhammad Uthman Hayuti, “Since three years: this is the Muslim League.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September. 22, 1949: 3.

<sup>453</sup> FO 1015/187, “No. 44 Monthly Political Report, August- 1949,” 1.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

led by Ibrahim Sultan to the UN in September 1949 at the start of the General Assembly's fourth official session.

With its Muslim League-dominated composition, the Bloc's presentation before the UN General Assembly largely echoed the basic spirit of the League's earlier arguments about the fundamental unity of Eritrean society in nationalist language devoid of any particular religious rationale.

Eritrea is a unit which can, by no means be subjected to partition; because life had bound the inhabitants of the high lands to those of the low regions by vital economic necessities. So in the past as in the present, for the same reasons, they have always remained solidly together to a degree that makes their separation an impossibility. Another factor that had strengthened the social relations in all was the centralized administration of the regions for a period of nearly 60 years.<sup>455</sup>

Nevertheless, the perceived demographic realities did influence some League representatives' argument that Eritrea, by virtue of supporting a Muslim majority that controlled most of the territory, displayed a decidedly "Islamic character."<sup>456</sup> Ibrahim Sultan had contended previously and reiterated that approximately seventy five percent of all Eritreans were Muslim and had no desire to be joined with a foreign body under Ethiopia's monarchy.<sup>457</sup> His testimony thus attempted to disarm claims that Eritrea was historically and culturally tied to Ethiopia's imperial history.<sup>458</sup> Ultimately, the relative consistency between Sultan and other nationalist delegates' arguments illustrated to UN representatives that the independence issue could not be ignored as a marginal political

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<sup>455</sup> F.O. 371-69365, Appendix 103, Memorandum of the Muslim League.

<sup>456</sup> Yohannes, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics*, 113.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> This was a view held by many politically active Muslims, even those not associated with the Muslim League, including several members of the Pro-Italy Party. Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, 114; Yasin Ba Tuq, "Establishment of the Eritrean Popular Front." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 26, 1949: 1.

movement. The subcommittee's decision to establish its own Commission of Inquiry in November 1949 demonstrated that at the very least, the independence issue could not be decided exclusively by representatives' claims that Eritrea was a separate historical entity from Ethiopia.

The General Assembly's decision to send its own commission of inquiry presented Independence Bloc leadership with new challenges to mobilize for the commission's arrival while simultaneously working to quell their internal divisions. Having named representatives from Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and the Union of South Africa to the fact-finding mission, the Commission planned for its arrival in early February 1950 at a time when the Muslim League in particular had only recently reemerged to counter growing opposition from ostensibly new political competitors that began to emerge by late 1949, particularly the Independent Muslim League (IML) and later the Muslim League of the Western Province (MLWP).

### **Conclusions**

Beginning in 1948 and continuing throughout much of the following year, Eritrea's nationalist factions faced several unprecedented challenges. For the Muslim League, the previous gains that had been made throughout 1947 largely stagnated when confronted by basic political competition from new organizations, internal fragmentation, economic limitations and the notable increase in Ethiopian-sponsored political violence. On the surface, each of these challenges threatened the League leadership with losing control of their objectives and preventing leaders from building their membership throughout much of 1948 and into 1949.

However, neither the defection of Abu Bakr al-Mirghani nor the League's monetary crisis seriously compromised the organization's basic objectives. Moreover, the League found new life in the spring of 1949 with the news that the UN finally planned to take up deliberations on Eritrea's future. This realization, alongside the outpouring of public grief in the wake of the assassination of Muslim League leader Abdelkadir Kebire had a rousing effect on the League's rank and file. Spurred on by Kebire's martyrdom and the subsequent news of the Bevin-Sforza Agreement, the League subsequently went into high gear and led the push to establish the Independence Bloc in June 1949.

Although the Bloc and the core group of League officials around Sultan came under fire for their courting of Italian interests, the Bloc maintained its influence over the larger nationalist movement throughout much of 1949. While much of their success stemmed from the ability of League leaders in broadening their program and intensifying their political campaign, they also benefited from the growing sense of collective marginalization on the part of many Eritrean Muslims as the independence question took on more overtly religious overtones. Initially, the League found success in presenting their argument that Eritrea's status as a genuinely "Islamic country" required solidarity among all respective Muslim factions to avoid the dual threats of partition and union with Ethiopia. Yet by late 1949, the League also began to confront the serious limitations in their cause for solidarity as internal fragmentation challenged previous hopes for meaningful Muslim nationalist unity.

## CHAPTER 5: DELEGITIMIZING RIVALS AND MAINTAINING MOMEMENTUM:

### MUSLIM LEAGUE STRUGGLES, SEPTEMBER 1949-DECEMBER 1950

Despite the League's recovery in mid-1949 from the previous internal challenges, its newfound success soon threatened to come undone by the end of the year. This chapter discusses how the League's struggles against political fragmentation, continued shifta activity, and the less than favorable circumstances of the international deliberations on Eritrea's future each threatened the organization's existence and program as never before. However, it will also illustrate that despite the rise of counter organizations such as the IML and the MLWP, the League succeeded in limiting the damage of rival "Muslim" groups by maintaining significant grassroots support even in the supposed strongholds of the new organizations. More importantly, the League's struggles throughout the year ultimately induced significant intellectual discussions from among its members and supporters about collective Muslim responsibilities and the role of Islam in the push to secure Eritrean independence. Consequently, the League's external political troubles actually obscured the very substantial progress within the organization in helping concretize the League's ideological foundations.

#### **Countering the Rival "Muslim" Political Organizations**

League leaders had already taken important steps in late 1949 to address the first major challenge to the League's authority within Muslim-majority communities when the executive council voted to formally remove merchant and activist Muhammad Umar Kadi from its membership. Having been a major supporter of "conditional" union with Ethiopia and having founded the Independent Muslim League (IML) even prior to his

official dismissal, Kadi's expulsion was designed largely to send a message to the other mainly Massawa-based merchants that had followed Kadi's overtures to the Ethiopian government.<sup>459</sup> Having been one of the leading members of a delegation of pro-Unionist representatives from Massawa that traveled to Ethiopia in 1949, Kadi and his supporters were publically eviscerated for promising the Ethiopian government their support for union in exchange for certain conditions, including "a respect for Muslim institutions and an understanding that Arabic would be taught in the schools along with Amharic."<sup>460</sup>

Although many of its supporters claimed that the IML developed as a result of the relatively widespread merchant fears in Massawa that Ibrahim Sultan and his supporters would threaten Massawa's economic interests in an Italian-dominated independent Eritrea, the IML's program and membership estimates were highly suspect to both the League leadership and colonial authorities. British administrators noted that IML officials were "without exception rascals who have had very chequered political careers, and who have belonged to almost all parties in turn."<sup>461</sup> Moreover, the IML's supposed membership of sixty thousand people caused considerable controversy, particularly among League members who complained that their names had been placed on the IML's membership rolls without their knowledge. More impressive than the IML's supposed entry into Eritrea politics however was the grass roots response that emerged to counter the organization's claim that the League had lost popular support. Contradicting Kadi and other IML leaders' claims, the League's urban members came out publicly and even

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<sup>459</sup> "Complaint filed by the Muslim League." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 8, 1949: 1.

<sup>460</sup> Lloyd Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism, 1941-1985," (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1986), 78.

<sup>461</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 45 Monthly Political Report September – 1949," 2.

organized themselves politically against many leaders who officially switched their affiliation from the League to the IML.

By early September, *Sawt al-rabita*'s commentary sections featured a series of reports from members in and around Massawa who refuted the IML's claims that they had joined the organization. One of the more memorable pieces, authored by a group of Massawa residents, mentioned that while some of the local Muslim League leaders including, Umar Abdu Abas, Muhammad Anwar Muhammad Saleh Offendi and Bakri Hassan had recently switched to support the IML, their switch in allegiance had been against the wishes of most League members and represented a betrayal of the covenant that they had made with their constituents.<sup>462</sup> In response to their "betrayal," local members dismissed the officials and decided to elect an entirely new leadership to represent their views to the League Executive Council. In addition, the new representatives went on record and stated that the overwhelming majority of League members in Massawa rejected any possibility of conditional union and affirmed their support for the basic aims of the Independence Bloc.<sup>463</sup> For their part, *Sawt al-rabita* writers dismissed the IML as a small, inconsequential movement of "disillusioned" leaders mainly from the prominent Na'ib family, who much like the previous movement under the National Party of Massawa that had ignored the opinions of the majority of residents who remained steadfast supporters of the League and its strategy within the Bloc.<sup>464</sup> Even the BMA noted with suspicion the sixty thousand claimed by the IML and observed that its leaders had "little or no following" in the region. Officials took

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<sup>462</sup> "May God Bless the People of Massawa." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 22, 1949: 1.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.



particular exception to the organization's claim that the majority of Afar-speaking communities in the Danakil, known for their historical rejection of Ethiopian influence, supported the IML's pro-unionist policies.<sup>465</sup>

Even with the rumblings of some leaders in the Massawa area, the IML's presence did little to alter both the League and the Bloc's basic trajectory in building support among Italo-Eritreans. The argument in favor of Italian participation in the movement was cited by some Muslim League members as evidence that the League's overall strategy had worked to strengthen the Independence Bloc against more immediate threats, particularly the British plan of partition. Muhammad Se'id Umar, a League representative from Keren, noted that the League's efforts within the Bloc to gain the backing of the Italian settlers had made it increasingly difficult for Britain to stop the "widespread rejection" against the partition scheme.

Consequently, the League's efforts had even pushed former members of the UP to join the Bloc and allegedly gave the nationalist parties support among at least seventy-five percent of the population.<sup>466</sup> At the very least, the movement against the UP continued well into 1950 and pushed the balance of influence in political affairs to the pro-independence groups. Despite claims about Muslim concerns regarding Italian-domination within the Bloc, several former unionist Muslim clan heads publically endorsed the Bloc throughout January and February 1950. In late February, at least eight shaykhs from the Bet Musa and Bet Sereh clans came out publically against the UP,

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<sup>465</sup> FO 371/ 73847, J 7730, 30 September 1949. See *Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea*. G.A.O.R., Fifth Session, Supplement No. 8(A/1285): 119-127. Henceforth noted as *Report of the United Nations Commission*.

<sup>466</sup> Muhammad Se'id Umar, "Declaration and Warning." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, July 17, 1949: 2.

renounced their previous membership and promptly joined the Independence Bloc.<sup>467</sup>

The steady trickle of former unionist Muslim clan heads and merchants into the Bloc throughout late 1949 and early 1950 suggests that Italian influence in the Bloc did not dissuade a significant number of members from abandoning the independence cause.

Part of the reason for the continued shift away from the UP also involved the growing instability caused by shifta activities in both urban and rural areas. While attacks continued throughout the summer and fall of 1949 against Italian settlers and leading Independence Bloc officials, they also took on a seemingly anti-Muslim character, at least in the eyes of Muslim League writers. The League reported that establishments in several Muslim-majority cities in the coastal areas had been the focus of continued attacks, including properties that were even owned by pro-unionist merchants and officials in the IML.<sup>468</sup>

### **Challenges from the Muslim League of the Western Province**

Despite the relative success in containing the IML and in even building further nationalist support among former unionist Muslim leaders, the most pressing challenge within the Bloc and particularly for the Muslim League occurred when shaykh Ali Musa Radai, a founding member of the League, announced the creation of an entirely new political organization, the Muslim League of the Western Province (MLWP). Although much of the momentum for creating the organization has been attributed to the secret actions of BMA administrators, many League members on the ground also believed that Ibrahim Sultan and his supporters had overplayed their hand by allying with Italian

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<sup>467</sup> "Dangerous Announcement." *Wahda Iritriya*, February 18, 1950: 1.

<sup>468</sup> "Countryside News: Shifta in Hirgigo." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, July 14, 1949: 4.

elements and still expecting support for their actions from among the clans across the Western Province. For their part, BMA officials reported that the League's decision to court Italian influence via the Bloc had caused considerable unrest, observing in late November that there were "indications that the inarticulate masses of the Moslem League in the Western Province may be becoming restless; there is talk of them throwing Ibrahim Sultan (who has not yet returned from New York) over board."<sup>469</sup>

The MLWP's creation continues to be debated in terms of the actual degree of support that its leaders commanded across the Western Province. Lloyd Ellingson first claimed that the group broke away over the widespread fears that Ibrahim Sultan had allowed for too much "Italian influence in the Moslem League" and sought to tie its fortunes to British administration for at least ten years.<sup>470</sup> According to Ellingson, the MLWP's worries were in part grounded in the historical fears that clan fighting between the Beni-Amer and Hadendoa would increase if British authorities annexed the Western Province to Sudan. However, Alemseged Tesfai observed that the MLWP's origins were directly tied to the efforts of some British officials to break up the Independence Bloc and halt the nationalist momentum during the UN Commission of Inquiry's stay. The main actor in the drama of the supposed creation of the MLWP was British diplomat Frank Stafford. A career officer with experience in diplomatic postings across the Middle East and who later served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Stafford worked as a British

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<sup>469</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 47. Monthly Political Report, November 1949," 1.

<sup>470</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 79.

delegate during the Four Power Commission before returning to Eritrea as a British advisor for the UN Commission.<sup>471</sup>

Although Stafford had gone to great efforts to thwart Eritrean independence by trying to encourage an internal split in the Bloc since late 1949, he had largely failed until the following February. In the previous months, Stafford's efforts to "infiltrate" the Muslim League leadership by encouraging division had failed. He found little if any support for a separatist movement among either Asmara's League leaders or the senior leadership within the LPP and turned his attention to the disaffected clan leaders across the Western Province.<sup>472</sup> To be sure, dissatisfaction with Ibrahim Sultan had increased among some who felt that the Muslim League leadership would abandon its largely rural base for the largely urban Italo-Eritrean and merchant communities. Moreover, some League representatives maintained a long-held rivalry with Ibrahim Sultan and his faction over the League's direction. One of these leaders, shaykh Ali Musa Radai had been a notable critic of the Bloc's recent activities. Although he had been a founding League member, served as the Secretary General for the League's Keren Branch and had travelled with the League delegation to Lake Success, his relationship with Sultan was, according to several members of the Executive Council, "by no means fine" and plagued by rivalry and disagreement.<sup>473</sup>

Radai appeared most receptive to Stafford's encouragement. By February 1950, Stafford and (allegedly) Kennedy Trevaskis visited with Radai and other concerned shumagulle and nazeraat (chiefs) who had previously joined the Bloc. Apparently,

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<sup>471</sup> See Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 583.

<sup>472</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 106.

<sup>473</sup> Ahmed Kusmallah, interview with Nebil Ahmed.

Stafford stoked fears that Sultan had planned to remove them from their positions in the clans and “keep power for himself among the tigre.”<sup>474</sup> In his study, Alemseged Tesfai cited the testimony of the one nazeraat, shaykh Umar Nashif, who claimed to have attended a secret meeting between several of the clan leaders and Stafford in mid-February at a village in Gash-Barka. At the meeting, even many of the local shaykhs had complained to Stafford that most of the tigre remained loyal to Ibrahim Sultan and that their own support did not carry beyond more than ten chiefs in the Western Province. According to Alemseged Tesfai, either Stafford or Trevaskis responded to their concerns by saying “ten is enough for us” and later even suggested to the chiefs that they name their organization the Muslim League of the western Lowlands.<sup>475</sup>

Called Teksum (division) by its members, the MLWP elected Ali Musa Radaï as Secretary General and qadi Hamid Abu Alema as President in late February, dealing a major blow to the League’s morale. The perceived betrayal by Radaï represented one of the “lowest moments” for many League leaders who had steered the organization since its founding.<sup>476</sup> Ahmed Kusmallah recalled that this period represented the darkest hour for many League officials who had been “financially, physically and emotionally drained” during the previous months and many feared that the League as a whole was heading toward complete fragmentation.<sup>477</sup> Nevertheless, the actual numeric influence of the MLWP suggests that its creation was more of a symbolic rather than strategic blow to the League. Ultimately, estimates that only ten of the more than twenty-three clan chiefs

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<sup>474</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 430.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid, 433. Nashif claimed that the meeting could have been called by Trevaskis rather than Stafford but that regardless, Stafford had been the primary one to execute such policies.

<sup>476</sup> Ahmed Kusmallah, interview.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

in the Western Province joined the MLWP support Alemseged Tesfai's basic argument that despite the defection, the League's efforts were not fatally compromised.<sup>478</sup>

While MLWP's failure to mobilize was in part due to Ibrahim Sultan's own skills as a nationalist leader who continued to be admired as the primary defender of tigre interests, it also illustrated that both the Muslim League and Independence Bloc had succeeded in undercutting possible support the MLWP by continually rejecting partition when it was first proposed under the Bevin-Sforza Agreement during the previous year. Although the defection of any group from the Independence Bloc could have been considered a new source of strength for the UP, its own weakened state in the Western Province and the MLWP's rejection of union with Ethiopia made it cause even more vulnerable. Consequently, the MLWP never developed into a political force that could seriously compete with the League, even among the majority of clan leaders in the Western Province. Ultimately the MLWP's claims of more than 215,000 members proved so exaggerated that both pro-Union and pro-Independence-leaning factions within the UN Commission dismissed such estimates as fanciful.<sup>479</sup> In addition, the inability of the MLWP to field a steady stream of representatives during the Commission's six week stay further revealed that even in areas supposedly dominated by Radai's new group, the Muslim League maintained a commanding influence and party membership across the Western Province.<sup>480</sup> By August 1950, the MLWP received another blow when much of its already negligible non-shumagulle membership abandoned the organization after

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<sup>478</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 435.

<sup>479</sup> *Report of the United Nations Commission*, 20. Ironically, US officials estimated that the MLWP had attracted a total membership of 275,000 people. Ellingson, *Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism*, 80; US Department of State, 777.008/1850.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix 17, 119-127.

Radai's fellow shumagulle supporters requested that local British authorities abolish the recently-implemented "tribal councils" that had previously been enacted during the clan-restructuring movement to safe guard land-claim abuses.<sup>481</sup> The League's ability to rally tigre support again demonstrated that the success of its nationalist program rested on broader issues than simply elite concerns over the strategy of League leaders in working with Italian settler interests. Ultimately, both the Bloc and the League maintained its relative strength against internal divisions. The major challenge to their agenda and basic safety came largely as a result of external factors tied to the continued threat of shifta activity.

### **Muslim Responses to Shiftanet**

Ironically, the increased shifta presence only seemed to encourage greater camaraderie among the various political and social factions within the Independence Bloc. This unity between the Bloc's disparate groups again demonstrated the cornerstone of the Muslim League's basic agenda as the primary leadership faction within the group.

This influence also revealed itself when the League, in conjunction with the LPP leadership, launched the Bloc's own newspaper in late January 1950. Appearing in both Arabic and Tigrinya, *Wahda Iritriya/Hanti Ertra*, became the Bloc's most effective tool to address the organization's broad political aims. Featuring an illustration on its front page of a Muslim lowlander and Christian highlander shaking hands in friendship, the newspaper represented the most tangible example of the Bloc's push to stem threats of sectarianism.

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<sup>481</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 80.

In its inaugural issue on January 22 1950, editor Woldeab Woldemariam expounded on the importance of Bloc's three primary directives, including a rejection of partition, complete Eritrean independence and the implementation of a "free and democratic" government of the citizens' choosing.<sup>482</sup> Yet beyond repeating the Bloc's basic positions, both the Arabic and Tigrinya commentaries addressed the growing crisis of *shifanät* across the country. Bloc members used the paper to both publically condemn Ethiopian-backed attacks as well as provide updates on the status of nationalist supporters who had been injured or whose property had been damaged. The League and especially the LPP leadership began authoring pieces in which Bloc members pledged financial contributions to members whose homes, cattle and possessions had been stolen and/or destroyed by unionist shifta.<sup>483</sup> For the Arabic literate public, *Wahda Iritriya*, under the supervision of section editor Hassebela Abdel Rahman became especially preoccupied with addressing the scourge of shiftanet against Muslim communities and especially those living in and around the League's stronghold in Keren.

Most troublesome for nationalists was the reality that the attacks developed with far greater intensity and precision than in previous years. While the previous months of political shiftanet were categorized by robberies and shootings against many of the more well to do pro-independence supporters, the attacks reported in late 1949 and throughout 1950 took on an entirely new dimension of targeted raids and even political kidnapping. For example, in early July 1950 a group of shifta kidnapped a delegation of Arabic instructors and school administrators from Keren while en route to the village of Haylib

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<sup>482</sup> Woldeab Woldemariam, "Hanti Ertra." *Hanti Ertra*, January 22, 1950: 1.

<sup>483</sup> "Relief to the Members of the Independence Bloc from Injuries from the Shifta." *Hanti Ertra*, February 18, 1950: 3.



Mentel. After being subdued, the shifta leader told the group members to “step forward” if they belonged either to the Muslim League or were Jabarti, so that they could be executed.<sup>484</sup> Although the educators denied having any political position and were later released after only having been robbed of their watches and jackets, the kidnapping illustrated how the armed attacks throughout 1950 increased and were being directed more and more at residents in the Western Province that could provide both material and political aid to the nationalist movement.

One commentary in *Wahda Iritriya* in early October 1950 proclaimed that the previous week had been “the most dangerous week in the history of the city” because shifta attacks on residents, traveling merchants and even local police had practically paralyzed the daily routine of the city’s inhabitants. The instability only fueled further resentment among nationalists against both the raiders and the BMA as residents became increasing unhinged at the seemingly never-ending acts of terrorism.

Some people might ask what the motivations for all of these shifta are and what is the objective of these activities that are taking place right under the eyes and ears of the government? This is the question that every nationalist is asking and their thoughts are taking them in different directions. What is confirming their thoughts however is what is taking place on the ground.<sup>485</sup>

Some shifta leaders also targeted nationalist officials by kidnapping them from their homes and holding members for ransom until village and city residents could pay.<sup>486</sup>

One of the more graphic incidents reported by Muslim League writers told of how three

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<sup>484</sup> “Educators in the Hands of Shifta.” *Wahda Iritriya*, July 12, 1950: 3. The group included Beshir al-khalifa Mahmud, the head of Keren’s Islamic school and future ELM activist Adem Melekin.

<sup>485</sup> “Operations of Shifta in Keren.” *Wahda Iritriya*, October 4, 1950: 3. See “Is there any end to these attacks?” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 11, 1950: 3.

<sup>486</sup> “Terrorist Actions.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 11, 1950: 4.

members of the Independence bloc were abducted while traveling in their taxi on the outskirts of Asmara in early February 1950. The men were allegedly stopped by a blockade of more than twenty shifta, forced out of the car at gun point and were stripped of their clothes, beaten and tortured for more than five days while being told to join the UP or be killed.<sup>487</sup> By all accounts, shifta activity only increased throughout the rest of the year, as even some BMA administrators observed that the Muslim/Christian dynamics between residents and raiders only served to fuel further animosity.<sup>488</sup>

Despite the increased hostilities, both Independence Bloc and League members across the Western Province during this period began addressing wider concerns for social reform beyond the immediate political crisis of shiftanet. Part of the explanation behind their calls for radical societal change even in the midst of intensified shifta activity rested on the fact that the ongoing political violence represented one of several concerns for Muslim communities across the region. With critics arguing that Muslims had failed to live up to their calls for independence, many of the subsequent commentaries within the nationalist press interpreted Muslim victimization at hands of shifta as merely as an indication of how they, collectively, had remained in state of social lethargy. These criticisms, coming on the heels of both the broad surge in shiftanet in the heart of the League/Bloc's base of support, served to fuel increasing self doubt that Eritrean Muslim nationalists had kept pace with unionists in achieving their ultimate objectives.

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<sup>487</sup> "Shifta." *Wahda Iritriya*, February 7, 1950: 1. See "Operations of Shifta in Keren." *Wahda Iritriya*, October 4, 1950: 1. It is important to note that the rise of shifta activity also featured a significant number of seemingly non-political raiders, including those who later went on to be identified with Eritrean nationalism. The most prominent of these raiders was Hamid Idris Awate.

<sup>488</sup> See FO 1015/540, 80883, J.F. Benoy, "Eritrean Police Force."; "Shifta Activity December, 1950."

### Muslim Self Reflection

As they had done prior to the creation of the Independence Bloc, League writers and members of the public used the growing political momentum to address the perceived deficiencies in Eritrea's Muslim communities. In this respect, some writers continued to emphasize the need to continue to develop education within their communities to meet the challenges of independence. However, many of the commentaries appearing in late 1949 and 1950 also differed from earlier efforts. While previously writers had encouraged and expressed their hope that Muslim youth would take advantage of their situation and increase their interest and overall enrollment in schools, much of the later commentaries, derided students for their alleged intellectual laziness and inability to "progress" from their current situation.

One article authored anonymously by a student from Asmara's Islamic Institute wrote that Muslim youth had ignored calls by their elders to "get education."<sup>489</sup> The writer berated his colleagues for not having prepared to meet the requirements for independence, arguing "now independence is here and you will be slaves for the Ethiopians. We told you that the prerequisite for freedom and independence is education..."<sup>490</sup> Disheartened by the comparatively low enrollment of Muslim students in most cities, the writer also positioned intellectual development as an integral component for moral well-being.

God really reveals himself and his perfect art is the human mind. So if you look at any human being and look at their movement, stillness and daily routine, you can observe that they are guided by a supreme being...and that is the mind. The mind actually manages the body and

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<sup>489</sup> Young Soul, "People of Intellect will be in Comfort." *Wahda Iritriya*, July 26, 1950: 3.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

moves it the way it wants...guiding the body to avoid the bad and pursue the good. So if the mind is enlightened and executes God's commands carefully, then it will avoid failure and be granted success by wise actions.<sup>491</sup>

Disenchantment with the state of Muslim education took on even more aggressive and seemingly "bold" pronouncements by students. One of the most significant student contributions occurred in a September issue of *Wahda Iritriya* when editors included the first ever article authored by a Muslim women.

Entitled "The Eritrean Muslim Female" and written allegedly by a young girl from Ghinda, the article expressed the author's disappointment with the "cultural backwardness" that had resulted from denying Muslim girls education and not encouraging their participation in the political activities.<sup>492</sup> Having decided to end her silence and "break her chains" the student, writing under the abbreviation F.M., called upon all Muslim fathers and brothers to help "elevate" the Muslim female. That being said, her pleas for assistance were overshadowed only by the frankness of her discontent at the situation.

Dear fathers, I'm telling you, in truth, you are in darkness..how can you live? You see the daughters of competitors (unionists) making constant progress and you see your best educated Muslim sons chasing after the least educated Christian females and leaving behind the ignorant and uneducated Muslim females. And the reason is you, because you ignore to educate your daughters and that is why any educated man does not want to associate with them.<sup>493</sup>

In a similar manner to many of the previous commentaries, the author chastised those whose failure to embrace education illustrated, in her view, the inability of Eritrean

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> F.M. "The Eritrean Muslim Female." *Wahda Iritriya*, September 6, 1950: 3.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

Muslims as a whole to keep up with the perceived accomplishments of Eritrean Christians, particularly girls living in the major cities. She continued her prodding, “look at the Christians, compare yourselves to them, you will find that you are greater than them in wealth and money but that you don’t have the motivation. You don’t understand the importance of education.”<sup>494</sup>

At a deeper level, the student’s anger also tied into a recurring concern prevalent among some activists by 1950 that Muslims’ collective inability to take advantage of educational opportunities under the BMA revealed a deeper, moral deficiency among community members. For F.M., this moral stagnation had direct consequences on the political realities, warning Muslim elders, “You spend your money on entertainment and worldly things, forgetting what is going to happen when we get independence.”<sup>495</sup> Perhaps most striking about the piece was the author’s own apology to readers and admission that she did not possess an advanced knowledge of Arabic.

I conclude by asking the readers to forgive me if there are any mistakes because I do not really speak very good Arabic and the reason is my father. He did not make any effort in educating me, but I read the Koran and some stories and with the reading of the Koran I learned a little Arabic.<sup>496</sup>

Surprisingly, the first instance of a Muslim female addressing the educational shortcomings among nationalist supporters resonated with officials. Hassebela Abdel Rahman welcomed the inclusion of F.M.’s commentary and claimed that he hoped more Muslim women and girls would contribute pieces to *Wahda Iritriya*. One week later, a commentary appeared in *Sawt al-rabita* that also supported the broad goal of Muslim

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

female education, albeit in a much more conservative manner. The author of the piece claimed that although many Muslim fathers supported female education in both Qur'anic schools and primary institutions, many had forbid their daughters from receiving an education because they rejected the idea that any non-Qur'anic school would have mixed classes.<sup>497</sup> Downplaying F.M.'s previous accusations about the resistance to female education among Muslim elders, the writer instead argued that the lack of Arabic-language Muslim schools "stood in the way of future progress" for *all* students, not just girls because did it not provide the necessary institutional support for the youth.<sup>498</sup>

Other contributors proved even more sympathetic to the cause of Muslim female education. One writer from Keren said that he agreed with F.M.'s argument for the simple fact that "the daughters of today will be the women of tomorrow" and that it was in Eritrea's interest for women to become educated and benefit society.<sup>499</sup> In spite of the ongoing struggles in ascertaining how Muslim women with both the League and the Independence Bloc contributed to the political events, there seems to have existed a large enough base of support among many League writers and officials that were willing to entertain serious questions about why, unlike Christian unionists, Muslim women were continually kept out of both educational and political involvement. However, the question of women's exact place in the nationalist movement represented only one of several questions on Muslim collective responsibility that the League began to address on an internal level.

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<sup>497</sup> M.S.A. "Muslim Education." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 14, 1950: 1.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> Aqbdobay, "Women and Education." *Wahda Iritriya*, November 15, 1950: 3.

### Guarding Against Islamists and Defending Islam

If some nationalist supporters believed that's Eritrea's Muslim elders had become too lenient in adhering to their faith and in ensuring the education of the youth, others seemed to hold an even greater fear that the recent politicization of religion would invite the threat of Islamic radicalism into Muslim communities. In June 1950 shaykh Hamid al-Emin, a League supporter from Agordat, penned a public warning against the "followers of Muhammad Ibn al-Wahab" and warned Eritreans about the growing danger presented by Wahabist supporters. Labeling them as "kaffirs" (infidels) for having spoken ill of their mainly Sufi-oriented brethren, al-Emin gave a harsh warning to members of the fundamentalist sect.

We understand that you, a group of rebels, who pervert the text and misinterpret the Qur'an and cheapen the blood, wealth and honor of the Muslims, you totally embody the Satanic agenda and you are the Satanic party and the party that will lose.<sup>500</sup>

Although al-Emin's accusations about Wahabi influence did not materialize in any significant degree within the Muslim League Leadership, some supporters did occasionally rally under a more rigid interpretation of Islam and its significance to Eritrea's cause against Ethiopia. Beginning in mid-1949, some contributors to *Sawt al-rabita* reflected upon the growing attacks against Muslims by shifta and openly questioned the League's decision to continue to embrace non-Muslim nationalists in their movement. Some members even objected to its editors' decision to include occasional Tigrinya language texts within the newspaper, arguing that the featured Tigrinya articles symbolized an "invasion of the newspaper" and represented a grave insult against "all

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<sup>500</sup> al-Harathi Hamid al-Emin, "Alert and Warning." *Wahda Iritriya*, June 21, 1950: 3.

Muslim peoples in general.”<sup>501</sup> In some supporters’ view, only Arabic could be used to unite all “east African Muslims” because it represented the most effective means to achieve political success.<sup>502</sup>

In most instances, the more hard line Islamist opinions appeared only when the League editors included publications from other Arabic newsletters in their own tract. One article, written by Egyptian writer Ahmed Hassan al-Ziyad and taken from a previous issue of Egypt’s *al-Rassala* magazine, discussed the importance of establishing a broad and forceful Islamic movement across Africa and the Middle East, noting that within this movement “Arabic is its tongue, which silences all others.”<sup>503</sup> The rigid promotion of Arabic’s supremacy, in combination with the inferred distrust of non-Muslim nationalists represented the most common form of Islamist-themed commentary.<sup>504</sup> Yet in spite of these occasional commentaries, al-Emin’s previous attack on Wahabism and other forms of radicalism echoed the League’s overall defense of interreligious cooperation. At best, the majority of the League’s discussions on Muslim unity and “Islamic culture” manifested not in attacks against non-Muslims but in describing the historical oppression of Muslims in Ethiopia.

Almost immediately after the League resumed operations of its newsletter in April 1949, activists attempted to connect the plight of their own Muslim communities with the historical legacy of Ethiopian suppression of Islam. Yasin Ba Tuq highlighted the historical oppression of Ethiopian Muslims, particularly those in and around the

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<sup>501</sup> Amru, “From Amru.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 5, 1949: 1.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

<sup>503</sup> Ahmed Hassan al-Ziyad. “Islam is Strength.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 5, 1949: 1.

<sup>504</sup> See “The Arabic Language.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 2, 1949: 1.



Tigray region who had been “dispossessed from all means of resistance and defense and choked in such an unimaginable way.”<sup>505</sup> He elaborated in detail on many of the supposed instances of mass killing and “forced conversion” of Muslims during the late nineteenth century under Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes IV and warned that “the crisis of Islam in Ethiopia cannot be equated with any crisis in any other nations of the earth!”<sup>506</sup> In spite of its alarmist tone, the piece illustrated how many within the League watched with trepidation as Muslim communities came under direct physical threat from unionist and Ethiopian-supported groups. Beginning in April and May 1949 and continuing throughout 1950, other League writers intensified their efforts by playing up the anti-Muslim policies of the Ethiopian government and arguing that only independence could spare Muslims from the same fate in Eritrea.<sup>507</sup> Set against the backdrop of Muslim League apprehension at both the activities of Islamists and especially the prospect of Ethiopian authority being imposed over Eritrea’s Muslim communities, the League leadership seemed only to further embrace an inclusive nationalist agenda to build political momentum.

The continued rationale to include Italo-Eritreans in the Bloc thus reflected the basic aims of Sultan’s careful, if often frustrating, strategy to avoid partition by promoting an even broader, inclusive view of Eritrean nationalism that had been established during the League’s initial outreach efforts with the LPP. The Muslim League’s continuing financial struggles throughout this period also support the idea that his courting of Italian influence was largely an act of political necessity that revealed the

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<sup>505</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, “Muslims in Danger!” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 5, 1949: 1.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> See “Muslim Ethiopia.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 12, 1949: 2.

fragility of the Bloc's leadership as a whole. Perhaps the most succinct observation about Sultan's fragile strategy came in an August 1949 BMA intelligence report regarding meeting between Sultan's faction and worried League members just prior to the Independence Bloc delegation's trip to New York.

At this meeting IBRAHIM SULTAN was required to sign a declaration on behalf of the Moslem League to the effect that in the event of independence being achieved aid of any sort would not be accepted from Italy. After considerable hesitation he signed and he is now in complete harmony with his former critics. He has been astute enough to explain to them that he was only keeping in with the Italians in order to be sure of the votes of the Latin-American States in U.N.O. The Italo-Eritreans and the local Italians apparently do not yet know of these proceedings.<sup>508</sup>

Ibrahim Sultan's actions, as well as those of the Muslim League leadership in general, support the idea that their agenda remained malleable and open to program changes if deemed practical. Yet for all of the talk about Sultan's increasingly friendly relationship with Italian settlers, he continued to seek, even at the height of his supposed alliance with Italo-Eritreans, the official backing nationalist supporters in the Arab League as well as from representatives of the Pakistani government in residence in Cairo.<sup>509</sup> His uncompromisingly nationalist language both in public and private suggests that the BMA provided an accurate picture of Sultan's careful politicking between Eritrean and Italian supporters throughout 1949 and 1950. His ability to walk a sometimes treacherous line between the two constituencies did not present a tremendous challenge for either the Muslim League or the larger nationalist constituency, at least not for the remainder of the year. In fact when Sultan, Woldeab Woldemariam, Yasin Ba

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<sup>508</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 44 Monthly Political Report, August-1949," 1. Officials noted later that "his signed of this document has not precluded his acceptance of Italian money to pay for passages for himself and others to New York." FO 371/73847, "From Asmara to Foreign Office." September 19, 1949.

<sup>509</sup> FO 1015/187, "No. 45 Monthly Political Report, September 1949," 3.

Tuq, as well as Eritrean War Veteran's President Ali Ibrahim and Dr. Vincenzo Di Meglio of the Association of the Italo-Eritreans pled their case again before the UN in September 1949 as members of a united Independence Bloc, they presented a new dilemma for the Assembly that could not come to an agreement on the independence issue.<sup>510</sup> Unable to reach consensus, the UN body agreed in November to establish and send its own commission of inquiry to Eritrea and decide on its fate.<sup>511</sup>

### **International Deliberation and UN Commission of Inquiry**

Composed of representatives from Norway, Guatemala, Pakistan, Burma and the Union of South Africa, the members of the UN Commission of Inquiry arrived in Asmara on February 9, 1950 and commenced their duties less than a week later, eventually holding more than sixty public hearings with political representatives in the major cities and towns. Their arrival represented the culmination of international engagement on Eritrea's future.

The Commission's stay also occurred at a time when the tensions within the Independence Bloc had increased substantially than in earlier months. For example, Muslim League leaders had spent much of the previous five months chastising many of the small groups of merchants who rallied to the Independent Muslim League of Massawa, calling their actions a "betrayal" against the Muslim masses. At almost the exact same time, the League downplayed rumors about the growing discontent among some members in the Western Province who viewed the inclusion of Italo-Eritreans in

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<sup>510</sup> For their part, British officials appeared especially worried about the implications of the impending political unity between the groups represented by the delegates. See FO 371/73847, "From Asmara to Foreign Office." September 19, 1949.

<sup>511</sup> See Yohannes, *Eritrea, A Pawn in World Politics*, 133-36.

the Bloc as a threat to Muslim interests. That being said, the Bloc's interreligious quarrels were not confined exclusively to Muslims. During the public hearings with Bloc representatives, members of the UN Commission noted that several Coptic Christian members claimed that they had been "excommunicated because they did not hold the same political views as those of the Unionist Party."<sup>512</sup> Carlos García Bauer and Mian Ziaud-Din, the Commission's delegates from Guatemala and Pakistan respectively, also recorded that in several instances "priests and monks complained that they had been threatened or actually excommunicated by the Abune of the Tewahado Coptic Church for refusing to support the Unionist Party."<sup>513</sup>

In addition, even supposedly "non-political" Muslim leaders such as the Grand mufti appeared before the Commission during closed-door meetings whom delegates identified as official supporters of the Muslim League.<sup>514</sup> Although the Commission had already noted the significance of religious leaders' alliances to both the nationalist and unionist causes, the politicization of religion did not reach a climax until the outbreak of the largest sectarian conflict in Eritrea's modern history: the Asmara riots of late February 1950.

### **Sectarianism and the Asmara Riots**

The Asmara riots symbolized the most extreme example of the politicization of religion in the early nationalist period. While several confrontations between different Muslim and Christian groups had erupted in previous years, most famously during the

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<sup>512</sup> *Report of the United Nations Commission*, 30

<sup>513</sup> In the Commission's report, delegates noted that Mohamed Hamid Taghè, the former tigre activist from the 'Ad Takles, served as a ML representative to the Commission during its inquiry in the village of Kemchewa in the Western Province in mid-March, 1950. *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

confrontations with SDF soldiers during the summer of 1946, the disturbances in February 1950 illustrated that even the Independence Bloc's efforts could not completely stem the tide of sectarianism that corresponded to the arrival of the UN Commission of Inquiry. Less than a week after the Commission set up residence in Asmara, Muslim League official shaykh Nusrehin Se'id had been beaten and purportedly shot by a group of unionist supporters while working his shift at the railway station at Emba Derho on the northern outskirts of the city.<sup>515</sup> A prominent League member, Se'id had been warned previously to switch his party membership and join the UP, and the attack was widely believed to be retaliation for his refusal. After Se'id died from his injuries on February 20, Asmara's nationalist supporters paid their respects to Se'id by closing their shops and gathering at the hospital.<sup>516</sup>

The next morning on February 21, a crowd of mourners carried Se'id's body to the Palacio Governario, the temporary residence of the UN Commission. There, according to Jordan Gebre-Medhin, the "bullet-ridden body was displayed" before the Commission's representatives, who urged calm and restraint to the crowd.<sup>517</sup> By 3 p.m. a funeral procession had had formed. The crowd had swelled to include not only Asmara's League regulars but the leading officials within the Bloc, including the Asmara leadership of the Muslim League's Executive Council and the LPP. In addition, students from Asmara's King Farouk Islamic Institute, the mufti and several visiting scholars from al-Azhar joined in to attend Se'id's funeral. Flanked by members of shuban al-rabita and

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<sup>515</sup> "The February 21 Incident." *Wahda Iritriya*, February 25, 1950: 1.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, 147. See also "The Commission of the UN-Advice and Council to the people of Eritrea." *Hanti Ertra*, February 25, 1950: 1.

LPP youth, the procession was estimated by League officials to have numbered around ten thousand people and remained peaceful for more than a hour and half after beginning its march.<sup>518</sup>

However, League officials noted that when the procession entered into a heavily unionist neighborhood along Mancini road, unionist supporters began yelling insults and throwing stones at marchers, including shuban al-rabita members and especially at the Christian LPP youth in the procession. When some Muslim League youth drew their swords in retaliation, mourners claimed that unionists lobbed grenades into the crowd, injuring and killing dozens of mourners.<sup>519</sup> According to Alemseged Tesfai, events turned violent only when one *Muslim* member of the unionist youth threw a grenade near one of the local unionist offices near the procession in an attempt to assign blame on shuban al-rabita members.<sup>520</sup> After mourners reached the cemetery and buried Sei'd, several Muslim youths collected stones and returned back to the fighting that had intensified near the Mai Bela' area.<sup>521</sup> By the evening, Muslim youths continued gathering in the western part of the city despite pleas from city elders to disperse. Although the BMA announced an emergency curfew between 5 pm and 6 am, it did little to stop the hostilities that continued into the evening and began again the next day. By February 24, more than thirty members of shuban al-rabita and sixteen unionist youth had been killed and more than one hundred casualties were reported.<sup>522</sup> While a February 23 meeting between BMA governor Francis Drew, mufti Ibrahim al-Mukhtar and Abune Markos began the

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<sup>518</sup> "The February 21 Incident." *Wahda Iritriya*, February 25, 1950: 1.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 441.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 444.

process of bringing local youth under control, acts of violence were reported up until the 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>523</sup>

For the Muslim League, the riots placed great stress on their ability to control and mobilize supporters. When the fighting began on February 21 many League members who had initially made their way back from the cemetery gathered in the Aberra-owned Red Sea Pearl Hotel to escape the fighting.<sup>524</sup> Many top League officials were forced to wait out the fighting until order could be restored. Nevertheless, community and business leaders made efforts to help where they could. For example, during the riots Aberra Hagos allegedly helped procure food to send to families in the nearby Akria neighborhood that had been blockaded by unionists. Having first contacted a nearby bakery on Villa Palermo, Aberra and other League members contracted an Asmara taxi service to deliver bread to neighborhood residents.<sup>525</sup> It was also during this time that some leading League officials including Suleiman Ahmed Umar and hajj Imam Musa began making secret overtures with some of the city's Christian leaders to establish a truce to end the fighting.<sup>526</sup> According to Ellingson, the BMA estimated that at least forty-seven people had died and more than two-hundred and twenty had been injured from the hostilities.<sup>527</sup>

If sectarianism had indeed played a role in helping fan the flames of conflict, Asmara's elders, Muslim and Christian alike, still proved capable of using their standing as community leaders to bring the masses under control at a time when portions of the

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>524</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 77.

city seemed to be engulfed in a mini-civil war. With the backing of the mufti and the Abune, sixty-two representatives were chosen evenly between the Muslim and Christian community members and assigned the task of reestablishing order to prevent future outbreaks in their respective sections of the city. On March 2 representatives met and, echoing the spirit of early agreement between members of the MFH in 1944, representatives swore on a Qur'an and a Bible that they would guard against future attempts at inciting division and violence. In an interview recalling the events of February 1950, degiat Gebreyohannes maintained that the fighting in Asmara took place between Unionists and Nationalists, not between Christians and Muslims.<sup>528</sup>

While local hostilities resulted from the long-standing political rivalries that only intensified with the Commission's arrival, the religious character that defined many of the altercations cannot be overlooked. Christian unionist youths attacked Muslim-owned shops and businesses near the downtown market and set fire to several storefronts. Other Muslim residents living near the market reported that they were attacked even inside their homes.<sup>529</sup> Although by the end of March Asmara's elders had succeeded in organizing a peaceful solidarity demonstration throughout the city, the events of the previous month made a lasting impression on the Muslim League. Months after the riots, League writers provided updates about the victims of the attacks and helped organize funding efforts in most majority Muslim cities, particularly around Massawa. The Islamic Charity Organization posted notices asking Eritrea Muslims to provide additional money and

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<sup>528</sup> Tesfai, *Aynfelale*, 446; interview.

<sup>529</sup> Aberra Osman Aberra, interview.



resources to help Asmara's Muslim community.<sup>530</sup> Donations, particularly from the more prominent merchant families in Massawa and Hirgigo continued to trickle into Asmara to the victims as late as the following October.<sup>531</sup>

### **Deciding Eritrea's Future and the League's Subdued Reaction**

When the UN commission of Inquiry submitted its final report on Eritrea in late June 1950, the previous months of political mobilization again shifted as the groups within the Bloc again returned to their day-to-day operations rather than attempting to organize massive, nation-wide activities before an international audience. With the Commission members presenting a split verdict of supporting union with Ethiopia (Burma, Union of South Africa), independence (Pakistan, Guatemala) and a compromise Federation system (Norway), the debate on which option to approve continued in the General Assembly. For their part, the League tried its best to rally support for a sustained lobbying effort to UN delegates. Their efforts received a particularly bitter blow in October 1950 when the League published a news report from Cairo explaining that the Egyptian government had abruptly reversed its previous position in the General Assembly by publically calling for Eritrea to be united with Ethiopia.<sup>532</sup> Despite the news, the League leadership pressed on and Ibrahim Sultan requested in early November that the public once again rally behind the League and the Bloc as the leadership planned to send yet another delegation to the UN.<sup>533</sup> Despite the success of Sultan and other leaders in again reaching the UN and presenting their appeal in late November, the

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<sup>530</sup> Islamic Charity Organization, "Call." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 11, 1950: 4.

<sup>531</sup> "Massawa Donates to Victims of February 21, 1950." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, October 4, 1950: 4.

<sup>532</sup> See "Egypt agrees for Muslim Eritrea to Join Christian Ethiopia!" *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, October 5, 1950: 2.

<sup>533</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, "Call to the Eritrean People." *Wahda Iritriya*, November 8, 1950: 1.

ultimate passage of Resolution 390-A on November 2, 1950 effectively ended nationalist hopes of an unconditionally independent Eritrea.

Ironically, news of the UN's decision did not initially seem to register on the public discussions among most Muslim League writers. Throughout much of December 1950, *Sawt al-rabita* largely focused on issues related to the League's ongoing political activities in the major cities. In particular, the League devoted several issues to notices and commentaries celebrating the beginning of its fifth year of existence. On December 3, the League's Executive Council, in conjunction with Independence Bloc leaders sponsored celebrations commemorating the League's anniversary in all major cities.<sup>534</sup> When representatives returned to Eritrea on December 13, most League reports continued to omit any discussion of the actual decision to establish the Federation system between Eritrea and Ethiopia and instead continued to focus on the speeches and celebrations taking place in Eritrea itself. Only details of the League's final appearance before the UN received mention. In particular, League writers expressed admiration for Ibrahim Sultan's decision to provide his closing argument in Arabic, a point of which both Unionist and Ethiopian representatives took exception. League writers commended Sultan on his statement and its symbolism to the nationalist cause and provided an explanation of the Secretary General's actions.

This is actually a point of pride, no one you can feel or understand and cannot attain it from your leaders because you are all parasites. You live off of the foreign languages but the leaders of al-rabita, with his true nationalism, his noble self could not do anything less than something such as speaking his national language in front of sixty nations. And after that,

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<sup>534</sup> High Council of the Muslim League, "The League Celebration of Five Years." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 21: 1.

he talked in a European language to prove he could speak in another language.<sup>535</sup>

Other reports of the delegation's appearance also noted Sultan's confrontation with Ethiopian delegates and his insistence that only complete independence could guarantee Eritrean security. In a dramatic foreshadowing of the abuses that later surfaced within the yet-to-be established Eritrean-Ethiopian Federation, Sultan argued to the assembly, "we demand Eritrean independence and we are here requesting from this entity to do the necessary justice. We are not asking for an artificial agreement whose harm will be guaranteed in the future."<sup>536</sup> Although the League leadership as a whole did not address initially the political implications of Resolution 390-A, some commentators took heart by placing the recent course of events in a broader perspective and offering a mildly optimistic picture of Eritrea's "historical" success in resisting outside control. One anonymously written piece, appropriately titled "Eritrea was ruled by nine countries in thirteen centuries," went into detail to explain to readers that various empires had claimed Eritrea as part of their own territory through conquest and that all had ultimately failed to control Eritrea.<sup>537</sup> Other smaller commentaries that did address the UN decision implied that Eritreans' autonomy as whole had not been compromised by the plan to create a Federation government. Indeed, as 1950 gave way to 1951 League leaders themselves came to rally behind assurances of local control and cultural autonomy in the Federation as evidence that the League itself had succeeded in guaranteeing many of the basic objectives of the nationalist movement.

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<sup>535</sup> "This is True Nationalism." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 28, 1950: 4.

<sup>536</sup> "The Speech of the Muslim League and Independence Bloc Secretary." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 21, 1950: 1.

<sup>537</sup> "Eritrea was ruled by 9 nations in 13 Centuries." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, December 23, 1950: 2-3.

## Conclusions

Only with the coming of UN Commission of Inquiry and the creation of splinter groups such as the MLWP in early 1950 did the Bloc truly fracture and lose its advantage in the political rivalry. Yet despite the setbacks that plagued the nationalist movement throughout the year, both the Muslim League and other groups within the Bloc continued to embrace their broad nationalist message and maintain their core membership. Much of the evidence also illustrates that the League leadership remained vigilant and aware of the dangers of inviting too much Italian influence.

In both their public testimonies and private actions, League leaders managed to preserve the core elements of their program and even began to shape new understandings about Muslim “identity” in an increasingly hostile environment. Even more so than in previous years, League supporters began to focus on Muslim oppression as both a fundamental element of the unionist cause and as a reflection of their own past failures to rally their constituencies. Members also continued to rally behind the organization’s core objectives of defending of tigre emancipation and the protection of broad Muslim “interests,” including educational institutions and promotion of Arabic, from Ethiopian influence. Through these strategies, League writers reframed the debate within the nationalist contact zone by drawing the focus on Ethiopia’s historical oppression of Muslim peoples to argue against the unionist cause.

While the UN’s passage of Resolution 390-A effectively neutralized the independence issue, it placed the League and its allies in the Bloc in a new position where they began to shift their tactics from focusing on unconditional nationalist efforts

to ensuring Eritrean autonomy in the Federation. In addressing Muslim rights, religious autonomy and political freedom within the Federation, League activists remained focused and proactive in their operations by challenging the public discourse on Eritrean Muslim identity even as the nationalist community prepared for Eritrea's still vague status as an autonomous region in a Federal system with Ethiopia.

CHAPTER 6: THE FIRST LINE AGAINST SECOND CLASS CITIZENSHIP: THE  
MUSLIM LEAGUE, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND POLITICAL  
REPRESENTATION ON THE FEDERATION'S EVE, JANUARY 1951-  
SEPTEMBER 1952

"I ask the members of this committee why European colonialism is being fought and opposed? Is it in order to replace it by an African form of colonialism?"<sup>538</sup>

In the aftermath of the UN's passage of Resolution 390-A, which established the guidelines for a Federation government between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Muslim League and other nationalist groups began salvaging their nationalist program by moving away from supporting outright independence and charting a new course toward protecting regional autonomy within the new federal structure. In the brief period between January 1951 and the inauguration of the Federation government in September 1952, the League struggled to adjust to the changing circumstances of nationalist politics.

In its cause, the League intensified its efforts in arguing that autonomy for Eritrea's religious and educational institutions represented the cornerstone of a viable, functioning federal system. Consequently, the focus on Muslim institutional integrity became its main rallying cry as League members more overtly promoted Muslim representation and political rights identity as the Federation's implementation drew closer. While embracing a more aggressive defense of Muslim rights and cultural representation within the planned government, the League also branched out from its previous efforts in the nationalist dialogue by working with Eritrea's fledgling labor

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<sup>538</sup> "Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea made at the 55<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ad Hoc Political Committee on 24 November 1950 in reply to questions which had been asked by members of the Committee," 7. RDC/006872.

movement, remaining pro-independence Christian elements, and other segments of civil society to strengthen their agenda.

Despite the transformation in the political realities much of the League's actual tactics and nationalist language remained consistent with its previous efforts. Its leaders continued to appeal to the Muslim grassroots, particularly those across the Western province as well as in the cities through carefully crafted arguments that went right to the heart of Muslim civic and religious concerns. The preservation of Arabic as an official language and the need to guarantee viable Muslim representation in the expanding civil service remained major points of contention, as did the League's argument that it still represented the true voice of Muslim interests rather than the "opportunists" in rival Muslims organizations such as the IML or the MLWP. Yet both League leaders and the organization's wider membership also confronted the realization that its principal aim of unconditional independence could no longer be achieved. This recognition forced the Muslim League to embrace the Federation while carefully working to ensure that the still vague promises of autonomy and religious freedom would be protected. This chapter examines how the League's shifting program and tactics contributed to a more aggressive defense of Muslim rights and broad participation in the political system during the crucial period after the UN's passage of the Federal Act and before the Federation's actual implementation in September 1952. It will also illustrate how this brief period represented the last true era for unrestrained pro-independence discourse among League intellectuals engaged in the nationalist contact zone.

### Muslim Responses to Resolution 390-A

For League officials and the broader nationalist constituency within the Independence Bloc, news of the UN's decision did not immediately discourage hopes that the basic objectives of independence would not be ensured through the new proposed federal system. In light of the alternatives of partition and and/or full scale incorporation with Ethiopia, League leaders and rank and file members appeared ready to embrace the Federation in spite of its shortcomings. One commentary appearing in *Hanti Eritrea* on December 5 reflected the League's basic view and framed the decision in positive terms.

The United Nations' decision and its declaration concur with the rights and capacity of [the people of Eritrea's] governance and administration of their own country. As a result of such decision and declaration, the fear and terror of "partition" that was posing threat to all Eritrean people and the country, that the Independence Bloc strongly fought for, and sacrificed many lives and properties, has completely cleared out!

... based on the United Nations resolution and declaration, we know that we did not receive the complete independence of Eritrea that we pleaded. However, we believe that we have the right to claim that the victory of the people of Eritrea is our victory as we were the ones who were able to avoid partition and brought blessings to the people of Eritrea to govern the land.<sup>539</sup>

Other reactions were nothing short of jubilant. One Bloc supporter, degiat Sebhathu Yohannes, claimed that the UN decision had been received with “overwhelming happiness” by the general population who were finally relieved that the long-awaited decision had been made which promised to bring both “success and freedom” to all Eritreans.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> “Victory for the Eritrean People.” *Hanti Ertra*, December 5, 1950: 1. See also Alemseged Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya: kab Matienzo ksab Tedla 1951-1955* (Asmara: Hdri Publishers, 2005), 28-29.

<sup>540</sup> Degiat Sebhathu Yohannes, “The Voice of Eritrean Independence is filled with Joy.” *Hanti Ertra*, January 17, 1951: 4.



Such commentaries support Alemseged Tesfai's basic argument that for the Independence Bloc (and consequently the Muslim League), true victory had meant "the non-partition of Eritrea, not the Federation and its rights that came with it."<sup>541</sup> Nevertheless, the sudden about-face in both the League and the Independence Bloc's rhetoric on the merits of an autonomous federal system ran counter to the ideas that representatives had espoused only weeks earlier. In his final appearance before the UN Committee on November 24, Ibrahim Sultan had laid out the Bloc's firm opposition to the very idea of Federation, stating that representatives refused to accept such an "ambiguous scheme" on any level.<sup>542</sup> He added that "a federal union, as we understand it, can only arise willingly between two independent states of equal sovereign rights, and not between an independent state and one which is being denied independence."<sup>543</sup> Largely because of the League's initial recalcitrance in even considering the possible merits of a Federal system, the silence in much of *Sawt al-rabita* commentaries throughout the following December suggests that the League leadership struggled, at least initially, to find a way to articulate a response that could acknowledge the decision's shortcomings but also give its members encouragement to look ahead to the future.

Having mobilized an extensive network of branches and affiliated members of its youth association throughout the country, the early responses to the decision did little more than describe the details of the UN Resolution rather than speculate on the political ramifications for Muslims. Echoing the Executive Council's previous efforts, most

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>542</sup> "Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea made at the 55<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ad Hoc Political Committee on 24 November 1950 in reply to questions which had been asked by members of the Committee," 9.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

League leaders carefully avoided any talk of possible sectarianism and instead redoubled their efforts to present a united front with the other member groups within the Independence Bloc. Nearly a month after Sultan's unilateral rejection of the Federal system, he and other members of the Executive Council publicly joined with other independence bloc representatives to embrace Eritrea's future status as an autonomous region within a federated Ethiopia.

In framing their response to the UN decision, the League and its allies claimed that the approaching Federation could achieve the basic demands that nationalists had sought in the previous months. Bloc representatives went so far as to meet with the other political parties on December 30 in Asmara and agreed to establish an "Evaluation and Peace Committee."<sup>544</sup> According to *Sawt al-rabita's* editors, the news of the Committee's creation had already helped ease political tensions in the weeks following the UN vote and "the news started spreading that all Eritrean nationals and their leaders realized that it is for the benefit of the nation that people disregard their differences and receive this new chapter in Eritrean history with peace and harmony."<sup>545</sup> At a celebration ceremony held in Asmara's Cinema Impero, the League's Executive Council and several of Asmara's Muslim religious clerics commemorated the recent course of events. Days later, representatives of all the major political parties issued a joint declaration that outlined where they intended to take the political debate as the transition from the BA to Federal rule approached.

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<sup>544</sup> "The Day of Peace." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, January 4, 1951: 1.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

All of the political parties emphasize the importance of brotherhood and peace among the public and in light of the UN decision regarding the future of Eritrea decided the following:

- 1-To respect the federal system between Eritrea and Ethiopia in all aspects, according to its principals and objectives and its formulation.
- 2-To do their best in cooperation with the UN envoy to work toward the formation of the Eritrean government
- 3-Make the mission of the British administration easy in regards to the security of the country.
- 4-To promise to direct all Eritrean peoples' efforts to achieve objectives toward the mission of prosperity and progress of the Eritrean nation.<sup>546</sup>

Taking their public commitment even further, the Independence Bloc, allegedly due to Ibrahim Sultan's encouragement, announced on January 11 that their umbrella organization had decided to formally change its name to the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF) to better "suit the times" and as an act of faith in the Federation's legitimacy. Representatives proclaimed that they looked forward to the "uncorrupt implementation of the UN decision" as a means to guarantee "peace and prosperity to the Eritrean People."<sup>547</sup> And while the League leadership still claimed that many of the other unionist groups had represented nothing more than "the tools of special interests and motives which are contrary to the wishes of the people," its leaders now seemed poised to embrace their former rivals and prepared to make the best of Eritrea's political future.<sup>548</sup>

By stressing above all "cooperation" with the authorities in creating a tenable federal system, both the League and newly named EDF appeared willing to engage in the next stage of political dialogue. In fact, much of the Muslim League's reports and

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> "Speech of the Independence Bloc." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, January 11, 1951: 2.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> "Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea made at the 55<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ad Hoc Political Committee on 24 November 1950 in reply to questions which had been asked by members of the Committee," 7.

commentaries had already begun reflecting on its leaders' successful attempts to avoid partition and set the stage for meaningful autonomy in the new government. During a speech commemorating the organization's fifth anniversary, Massawa member Hussein Ali Nehari noted that the previous efforts of Sultan and other League leaders had worked with "selflessness and efficiency" in fighting for Eritrean independence and boasted, "it will be written in gold that they did their best for their country."<sup>549</sup>

Yet in the midst of celebratory reflections by representatives, Ibrahim Sultan and other League leaders in Asmara privately worried that the news of the impending Federation would only encourage British efforts to create further divisions in the nationalist consortium as they had done with previous groups such as the MLWP. On January 2, 1951 Muhammad and Adem Kusmallah hosted a secret meeting called by Sultan and other EDF leaders in their Asmara compound. Of particular concern to the attendees was the fear that degiat Abraha Tesemma would be appointed by the BA as the first indigenous Governor General of Eritrea. Although the League and other EDF leaders had previously approached Tesemma to join the Front (of which his father remained a highly regarded leader), fears that pro-Unionist elements would try to further infiltrate the group only stiffened nationalist leaders' anti-British sentiment, particularly among the League. One BA intelligence report noted that part of the Front's reservation about Tesemma included his alleged connection with other "disloyal" political opportunists that had broken away from the EDF in previous years.

Degiac [SIC] Abraha Tesemma has been suspected as being a tool of the British Administration from the day he was sent to Addis Ababa during

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<sup>549</sup> "Transcript of the Speech that Hussein Ali Nehari gave in Massawa on the celebration of the Fifth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Muslim League." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, January 4, 1951: 2.

the stay of the U.N.O. Commission. Furthermore, he is accused by the Eritrea Democratic Front of conniving with Ali Reddai of the Western Province with a view to forcing Partition- accepted as the basis of British policy in Eritrea.<sup>550</sup>

In part because of fears that the EDF and especially the League's base could again fracture under pressure from the BA in the aftermath of the UN decision, Ibrahim Sultan embarked on a targeted campaign to rally League constituents while explaining the ramifications of the UN decision on Muslim communities in general.

From late February through mid-March, Sultan travelled across the country visiting the organization's major branches in Agordat, Keren, Tessenai, Massawa, Ghinda and elsewhere. League writers reported optimistically that "the news coming from these places was very well received, which indicates that people's feelings were high [not frustrated] and shows their attachment and loyalty to the Muslim League."<sup>551</sup> Beyond merely meeting with branch leaders and members, Sultan's trip also demonstrated the League's continuing efforts to build a more supportive coalition beyond its core membership in the cities. Sultan participated in several celebrations among Muslim religious leaders in several of the smaller towns and villages throughout western and coastal Eritrea, where he was met by representatives from regional khalwaat, youth schools and other civil society groups.

In addition to meeting with clan chiefs, merchants, and Sufi authorities allied with the League, Sultan also took the time to discuss the Federation with members of the Pro-Italy party and other organizations that he felt could help ensure greater Muslim representation in the new government. On February 28, 1951 Sultan even met with

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<sup>550</sup> FO 742/25, J. E. Eccles, "Subject: Degiac Abraha Tesemma." January 8, 1951.

<sup>551</sup> "About the League's Political Activities." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, March 22, 1951: 1.

representatives from the Na'ib family, long a thorn in the side of the League leadership, to discuss the stipulations of the Federation in an effort to garner additional support for the EDF's platform.<sup>552</sup> If Eritrean unionists had reasoned that the Federal resolution would once and for all resign the League and its leaders to a tacit role as a minor opposition party, they failed to appreciate the extent to which Sultan and the Executive Council attempted to redirect the nationalist discourse as a vital tool in arousing support for regional autonomy among Muslim citizens. Alemseged Tesfai argued that this urgency helps explain why League leaders from the outset of the UN Resolution began a "campaign for their members to work towards guarding the internal independence or autonomy given to Eritrea from dwindling."<sup>553</sup> He also noted that in a public address given by Sultan at a celebration of 'Eid al-Adha in 1951 that the League leader remained adamant about the need to protect against continued threats to Eritrean independence as the Federation government took shape. He noted that the real work still lay ahead as supporters still needed to guard against the political obstacles that could prevent a legitimate self-reliant government from forming. In Sultan's view, political autonomy could only be assured if activists remained vigilant of the on-going unionist efforts to derail the federal plan by dividing the population.<sup>554</sup>

Although Sultan's warning addressed Eritreans of all faiths, it carried particular meaning for his closet adherents within the League who represented the heart of Muslim awareness against any possible compromises against Eritrean autonomy. Consequently, the League's redoubling of its political efforts included a revitalized push to emphasize

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 62.

<sup>554</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, "Word of Greeting to the Muslim People of Eritrea." *Hanti Ertra*, October 3, 1951: 4.

that Muslim culture be protected in the Federation. The very fact that activists believed that Muslim interests needed to be protected also spoke to the relative success within Eritrea's wider Muslim community during the previous BMA period, as the flourishing of civic life through the expansion of education, legal institutions, Muslim youth associations and cultural groups. Although their focus on safeguarding Islamic interests included a wide discussion about how religious and Muslim cultural life would be protected, activists' most forceful arguments developed through the League's emphasis on protecting Arabic as an official Eritrean language.

### **Protecting Arabic as an "Eritrean" Language**

In the midst of shifting political debate from one of outright independence to Eritrean autonomy as an equal partner in the Federation, League writers continued to defend Muslim rights and cultural practices as an integral part of regional sovereignty. Not surprisingly, concerns over the preservation of the use of Arabic only increased in the months after the UN decision. In written commentaries, branch meetings and public gatherings, Arabic's centrality again developed as a key issue among supporters in remaining a separate entity from Ethiopia. Yet what also emerged included the basic belief that Eritrea's national identity and character would be compromised if the Federation failed to allow Muslims to use Arabic in any official capacity. One commentary boasted that Arabic could and must be protected solely for the fact that "the language of every nation is the spring of its life and the source of its strength, and a space in which the degree of civilization this nation has reached is manifested."<sup>555</sup> Likewise, League writer Ahmed Muhammad Haji Feraj concluded that Arabic's place as one of the

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<sup>555</sup> "We and the Arabic Language." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 5, 1951: 1.

leading international languages held an important practical purpose for Eritreans as a way to “open doors” for Muslims’ success in the wider world.<sup>556</sup> Recalling previous arguments by League leaders and branch representatives, supporters also defended Arabic to as one of the major cultural hallmarks of Eritrea’s unique historical experience.

The Muslims in this nation, in spite of the diverse dialects, realized this and adopted Arabic as a lingua franca in which they can communicate. This is because they realized that it represented the sacred heritage of their ancestors and that they should maintain it in same way that they maintain their own lives, and they know that based on it [the language] both their lives and the lives of their children depend. They were so adamant about this that even the Italians had no choice but to consider Arabic as the official language of the Eritrean Muslims.<sup>557</sup>

As many League commentaries illustrate, the rationale for promoting and protecting Arabic was directly linked to supporters’ embrace of a nation-state both separate and unique from Ethiopia. It also reflected the growing fears about threat of “Amharization” against Eritrea as a whole. Indeed, longstanding fears that the Ethiopian government would force residents to learn Amharic, Ethiopia’s official language had been alluded to in many previous commentaries within *Sawt al-rabita* concerns that Eritreans would be forced to learn Amharic within the schools and speak the language within all government institutions only strengthened Muslim resolve that Arabic be given the status of official language as a means of ensuring their separate “national” identity. Echoing this spirit, the League’s post-1950 efforts continued to follow along this same trajectory while also downplaying the historical connections between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This de-emphasis also helps explain why the League’s most forceful

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<sup>556</sup> Ahmed Muhammad Haji Ferraj, “What is the Arabic language.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, August 20, 1951: 4.

<sup>557</sup> “We and the Arabic language.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 5, 1951: 1.



proponents of Arabic also showed a relative open-mindedness in accepting that other indigenous Eritrean languages such as Tigre and Saho be included in the Federation government as a way of showing how the region's linguistic and cultural diversity ran counter to the Ethiopian government's attempts to force the full-scale Amharization of its subjects.

By late July 1951, even the mufti Ibrahim al-Mukhtar began to engage more forcefully in the public discussions over Arabic's centrality in an autonomous Eritrea. *Sawt al-rabita's* editors began publishing a serial of his work, "A Detraction of the Traitors concerning the Arabic language in Eritrea and Habesha," from its July 23<sup>rd</sup> issue until October 28.<sup>558</sup> Although published anonymously, the mufti's widely recognized efforts to explain the historical significance of Arabic as a viable national language demonstrated that both the League and the wider Muslim populace perceived Arabic as being far more significant than a matter of religious ceremony. The mufti's serial revealed the widespread fears within the League and among Muslims in general that the Ethiopian government would, if given the chance, interfere in Eritrea's Islamic religious affairs, just as authorities had done previously in Ethiopia. In particular, the mufti described the various ways in which Haile Selassie's ministers had outlawed the use of Arabic within Ethiopia's Islamic courts and replaced it with Amharic. He also noted that

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<sup>558</sup> See Jonathan Miran and R.S. O'Fahey, "The Islamic and related writings of Eritrea," In R. S. O'Fahey and J. O. Hunwick (eds.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 13, III, Fascicle A. The Writings of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003): 4.

rapid decline of Arabic in public schools across Ethiopia after the Emperor re-established his power after Italy's defeat.<sup>559</sup>

Although the League's Executive Council and Ibrahim Sultan in particular continually embraced the idea of a dual language policy, the tone of the mufti's serial also reflected the growing feeling among many League supporters who were increasingly resentful of the perceived historical advantages of Tigrinya speakers during both the Italian and British periods.<sup>560</sup> Specifically, the mufti's writings addressed the widely held belief that Muslims had been largely shut out of any institutional advancement because of both the BA's neglect of Arabic and in failing to incorporate a greater number of Muslims into its administrative ranks. As a result of the supposed privileging of Christians, English gradually "overtaken Arabic as the dominant language in most institutions" which ultimately benefited Tigrinya speakers, who "convinced the British that Tigrinya was the language spoken in Eritrea."<sup>561</sup> According to the mufti, Muslims in Eritrea were effectively "marginalized" for much of the 1940s due to (1) the general lack of English-speaking Muslims available to work with the BMA and (2) the relative

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<sup>559</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "Part 3: Detraction of the Traitors Concerning the Arabic Language in Eritrea and Habesha." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, August 13, 1951: 3. See also Alessandro Gori, "Arabic in Ethiopia," in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 301-304.

<sup>560</sup> Ironically, the perception that Muslims had by and large been overlooked by colonial authorities ran counter to the historical record on Italian colonial policy. Miran noted that Italian authorities in Eritrea, as elsewhere in Africa expressed an "inherently contradictory discourse depicting Italy as a colonial power 'protecting' Islam and Muslims" and consequently gave significant authority and funding to religious authorities to gain the support of its colonial Muslim subjects. This process continued and reached a high point during the 1920s and 1930s when Italy's Fascist government "deployed explicit pro-Muslim propaganda" to achieve its political objectives, including the building and renovation of Mosques and schools throughout Eritrea. Miran, "A Historical overview of Islam in Eritrea," 201-202.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

ignorance among the majority of the political leaders about the “conspiracy against their language and rights” that many of the leading Tigrinya Christian intellectuals pursued.<sup>562</sup>

In late June the mufti had met with the UN Envoy Anzo Matienzo to discuss his concerns and later composed a letter in August, 1951 again defending the use of Arabic as the ideal language to articulate Muslims’ “conditions and history.” The mufti reminded Matienzo that in the past, “the Turkish and Egyptian rulers of Eritrea wrote and published documents for the Eritrean population only in Arabic, as there were no other written languages during that era.” Reflecting the League/EDF’s position on the language question, he argued that Arabic represented

the language of all real Muslims in Eritrea and Abyssinia, and the oldest of all languages now in Eritrea and the only one in which Muslims can understand each other and communicate with the peoples and nations of Asia, Africa and other continents than by using dialects.<sup>563</sup>

Also noteworthy was the mufti’s mentioning of the importance of Arabic in disseminating Islamic law and regulations within communities. He emphasized that Arabic’s official status was necessary because of its significance to Eritrea’s “judicial Islamic courts” relating to the “issues and judgments, records and other correspondence” among the local population. He also noted the historical precedent for Arabic’s use in “all Islamic organizations, whether cultural, sporting, political or national.”<sup>564</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid

<sup>563</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, “Mufti’s Speech to the United Nations Representative in Eritrea about the Arabic Language,” Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=58&category=letters\\_mukhtar](http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=58&category=letters_mukhtar) (accessed December 20, 2008).

<sup>564</sup> Ibid. See Muhammad Uthman Bakr, *Judhur al-thaqafa al-‘Arabiyya wa’l-Ta‘alim fi Iritriya* (Cairo: Mk. Al-Misr li-tawzi‘ al-matbu‘at, 1997); Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 66-70; Jonathan Miran, “Endowing Property and Edifying Power in a Red Sea Port: Waqf, Arab Migrant Entrepreneurs, and Urban Authority in Massawa, 1860s-1880s,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 151-178.

Beyond the mufti's efforts to recall the supposed inequities among Arabic speakers during the early BMA period, his accusations also reflected a growing discontent among Eritrean Islamic clerics in general who feared for the viability of Eritrean Islamic institutions even prior to the Federation. On May 19 1951, the mufti helped organize a meeting of all regional clerics in Asmara and established the 'ulama' Front. Composed of Islamic scholars, jurists and community leaders (including several members of the League's Executive Council), the Front was primarily designed to "refine Islamic institutions" in Eritrea by expanding the participation of all Muslim scholars in religious affairs and rituals beyond the immediate circle of qadis.<sup>565</sup> In the organization's seven-point charter, representatives made their pledge to ensure that first and foremost the organization would serve to "monitor the situation of public and religious affairs" among all Muslims. Moreover, the Front also allegedly tried to strengthen Eritrea's ties with instructors and officials at Cairo's al-Azhar University. Building on the mufti's previous efforts, Front members sought to renew the steady trickle of Arabic teachers and jurists that had travelled from Egypt to improve Islamic education, particularly in the major cities and towns.<sup>566</sup> In bringing together Islamic clergy, former al-Azhar students and community leaders to strengthen Islamic education, the organization reflected the growing political nature of Muslim civic activism even

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<sup>565</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "The Establishment of the Eritrean Front Scholars" [http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=187&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=187&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed March 3, 2010).

<sup>566</sup> Ibid. During the previous August Muslim leaders received news that Ali Mustafa al-Gharabi, the head of the al-Azhar mission in Eritrea, had been called back to Cairo. Having taught students at the King Farouk Institute in Asmara and been praised for his promotion of "Islamic culture" and substantial charity work, Gharabi's departure was taken as a shock to many within the League, who worried that his return to Egypt represented "a great shock to the hopes of the Muslims of this nation." See "al-Azhar Council calls back the Head of al-Azhar Mission in Eritrea." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 3, 1951:1.

prior to the Federation's inauguration.<sup>567</sup> The group's aims were also largely an extension of the mufti's earlier efforts in bringing greater standardization and continuity to Islamic practices, and many of the Front's basic objectives also called for both the autonomy of Muslim institutions such as schools and courts and broader protection of religious rights. The organization's reliance on legal precedent also reflected the general pattern of protest that emerged from those in the Muslim League.

Despite the particular differences between these religious and political organizations, their mutual suspicion of the perceived Ethiopian marginalization against Muslims further illustrated how religious and political rights increasingly merged as leaders challenged such "intrusions" into religious and cultural affairs in the months prior to the Federation's start. While the 'ulama' Front attempted to defend Islamic practices as well as protect Arabic, some of the language's defenders within the League also went on the offensive, even going so far as to attack the legitimacy of Tigrinya. In one commentary, Adem Musa Berhanu openly ridiculed proponents of a Tigrinya-only policy, observing that such criticisms were themselves irrelevant since Tigrinya represented "only one of many regional dialects" and lacked any legitimate claim as a formal language appropriate for official use.<sup>568</sup>

This language only reached this point because of the care of the Italians. Until today, they do not have a script to write numbers, but instead have to write them in Latin. Despite efforts to promote the language, it has failed

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<sup>567</sup> Ismael al-Mukhtar, "Establishment of the Eritrean 'ulama' Front," [http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=187&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=187&category=hawadith_mukhtar) (accessed January 4, 2009). See "Progamma del Consiglio Islamico Superiore per l'istruzione," FO 742/23. Several internal memos between staffers in the British Military Administration (BMA) suggest that both before and after creation of the Federation, British officials were concerned about the local influence of the visiting Egyptian scholars, particularly those associated with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>568</sup> Adem Musa Berhanu, "About the Arabic language." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, August 30, 1951: 2.

to be anything more than one regional language, let alone to be a national language.<sup>569</sup>

Echoing this spirit, one commentator derided critics of Arabic's official use by charging that those against its implementation were part of a wider "conspiracy against the Arabic language" that sought to merely privilege Tigrinya over others that had an equal, if not greater claim to be official languages. The author observed that those who supported implementing Tigrinya merely wished to elevate their own status over equally legitimate languages such as Saho, Afar, and particularly Tigre.<sup>570</sup> Pushing the debate even further, the writer concluded "if we really think about this language question, we should conclude that justice requires that Tigre be the first language, and Saho and Danakali (Afar) the second languages," and that those who spoke Tigrinya simply did not want a "Muslim language" to take precedent in the Federation.<sup>571</sup> Most League members' defence of Arabic mirrored earlier efforts before the passage of the Federal resolution, many of the commentaries took on a more aggressive and at times even boastful attitude that Arabic represented the spiritual cornerstone of Eritrea, as one writer conveyed.

You are the sun and others are stars,  
With your light our nights became light  
Upon the light of your lamp we worship God in the Mosques  
And using you in the sermons like a bell ringing  
You are sugar for writers they cannot find anything similar.  
Your life spring gives us clarity and eloquence  
So let us go forward, we are behind you  
We swear by God to protect you.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> "And I say you work." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, November 18, 1951: 1.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> Hamid Mahmud Ibrahim, "The Arabic Language." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, November 18, 1951: 1.

Another major influence in this attitude revolved around the widely held belief that although not indigenous to Eritrea, Arabic essentially performed the function of a “local” language because of its significance in regional history among Muslims and non-Muslims alike.<sup>573</sup> As early as January 1951, Ibrahim Sultan declared in a meeting with the then BA Governor General Duncan Cumming that Arabic should be protected within the Federation because of its status already as the “official language” of all Eritrean Muslims.<sup>574</sup> Throughout 1951, several of the League’s branch representatives submitted their own memoranda that included references to the priority of Arabic as being the official language within Eritrea and at least one of the official languages within the Federation. One September 1951 memorandum written by League representatives from Akkele Guzay of the “83 tribes of the Arabic Islamic Saho” even noted that all official meetings and press releases among its constituents were conducted exclusively in Arabic.<sup>575</sup> Only days earlier on August 21, members from the League’s Executive Council cosponsored a general meeting along with representatives from the EDF and MLWP with Matienzo in which attendees demanded that Arabic be declared as at least one of the official languages.<sup>576</sup>

The League and its allies’ concerns about the fate of Arabic continued well into the following year when Matienzo first presented his draft of the proposed Federal

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<sup>573</sup> See “Question: Presented to the Author of the Open Letter Published in the Last Issue of the Arabic Daily Newspaper.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 10, 1951: 3-4.

<sup>574</sup> “Governor General meets with Eritrean Political Party leaders.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, January 15, 1951: 1.

<sup>575</sup> “A Letter from the Muslims of Akkele Guzay to the UN.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 3, 1951: 3.

<sup>576</sup> “Representatives of the Hal-Hal Tribes Present their views in Front of the UN Envoy.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, October 1, 1951: 1. Curiously, several representatives also stated that they were open to the idea of allowing both Arabic and Amharic to serve as the Federation’s official languages, rather than Arabic and Tigrinya.

Constitution. When meeting with representatives at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Assembly meeting in Asmara in June 1952 to discuss Article 40 concerning the language issue, the majority of League supporters and other Muslim representatives from the affiliated EDF groups expressed support for a dual language policy provided that the constitution included Arabic.<sup>577</sup> Rejecting claims that Arabic represented a foreign language that should be excluded from official and daily use, qadi Ali Omer (EDF-Akkele Guzay) reiterated the League's basic argument that Arabic was "no more foreign than Tigrinya" and that both languages deserved official status based on their supposed common origins among the original Yemeni settlers that had first come to Eritrea centuries earlier.<sup>578</sup> Other League representatives echoed the basic spiritual of an Arabic-Tigrinya policy while the majority of Unionists supported Tigrinya as an official language alongside Amharic.<sup>579</sup> Although Matienzo had hoped to reach a compromise on the issue, the continuing controversy on addressing Arabic's precise place in the new government demonstrated that the language question had developed parallel to other apprehensions among Muslims who believed, as a matter of principal, that they would not be given equal footing in the Federal system with Christians.

In a memorandum composed by the League's Executive Council in October 1951, officials conveyed to Matienzo their anxiety that the integrity of Eritrea's Islamic communities was already under attack by unionist elements within the proposed Federal

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<sup>577</sup> For his part, Jabarti leader and League activist Berhanu Ahmedin purportedly claimed that only Arabic be considered as Eritrea's official language. Even several of the conference's unionist attendees expressed an openness to allow Arabic as an official language, at least temporarily. Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 169.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.



government.<sup>580</sup> League members rejected the proposal to allow the use of the Ethiopian flag simultaneously as the flag of the Federation on the grounds that, in addition to “having the colors of the Coptic flag, it bears the Lion of Judah, symbol of the Hebrew people and the said lion carries a cross over one shoulder.”<sup>581</sup> The Council demanded that the “flag of the federation must be far removed from any religious or racial symbol” as a necessary measure to guarantee that “all forms of religion will be respected by all sections of the population.”<sup>582</sup> Although they had largely supported Matienzo’s initial proposals in the previous June, the Executive Council also took exception to several additional stipulations within a sample booklet of proposals that the UN envoy had distributed. The council’s fears thus mirrored Sultan’s belief that Matienzo, by way of his concessions to unionist elements, had ensured that “the threat of annexation to Ethiopia” remained a palpable reality.<sup>583</sup>

As with their previous efforts, League officials demonstrated their knowledge of the historical legacy and implications of federation-style governments, explaining that unlike other variations of other systems in Europe and North America, the Eritrea-Ethiopian Federation could be implemented in such a way to ensure a “wide autonomy” and thus guarantee a way for their government to thrive beyond supposedly successful Federal systems.<sup>584</sup> However, in responding to the UN envoy’s booklet, the League also noted that its Executive Council had recently “decided energetically to oppose such

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<sup>580</sup> High Council of the Moslem League of Eritrea, *Memorandum of the Moslem League in Eritrea to Commissioner of United Nations for Eritrea H.E. Eduardo Anze Matienzo* (Asmara: 1951).

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>583</sup> Mulcahy to State Department, “Ibrahim Sultan’s current Line of Thought,” 777.00/12-651, December 6, 1951. See also Fessehatzion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1962*, 18-20.

<sup>584</sup> High Council of the Moslem League of Eritrea, *Memorandum of the Moslem League in Eritrea to Commissioner of United Nations for Eritrea H.E. Eduardo Anze Matienzo*, 4-5.

interpretations which, should they materialize, would surely and rapidly reduce Eritrea to a status of vassalage and domination by Ethiopia.”<sup>585</sup>

Representatives also cited the preamble to Article 15 of Resolution 390-A which prescribed that the Federation would “guarantee the inhabitants of Eritrea the fullest respect and safeguards for their institutions, traditions, religions, and languages, as well as the widest possible measure of self-government” as a necessity for all sections of the population.<sup>586</sup> In drawing attention to the shortcomings between the rhetoric and the reality of the institutional safeguards, League leaders again placed their primary focus on issues of language and religious identity. Continuing with their previous arguments, League representatives again made a simultaneous effort to respect the “wishes of the Tigrinya-speaking population” while reiterating their long-standing position of guaranteeing Arabic’s place in the Federal system. Taking a slightly different approach than the previous efforts of League writers and the mufti, the Executive Council provided a justification for Arabic less for its religious importance and more for its stature as an international and common vernacular.

Arabic is not only a language for religious use, as it is claimed, but is a language spread widely throughout the whole world and used as an official language by Christian people, as for instance in Lebanon (Middle East) whose population is about 90% Christian. On the other hand, it is the language used by the majority of the Eritrean people.<sup>587</sup>

Although the memorandum proved to be only the latest in a series of public statements on the part of its leaders, the League’s efforts to challenge Matienzo on maintaining an autonomous administration within Eritrea demonstrated that the language

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., 13.

issue also addressed wider concerns about the underrepresentation of Muslims at all levels of Eritrean political and civic life.

### **“Eritreanization” of the Civil Service and Muslim underrepresentation**

Widespread concerns that Muslims would be shut out of the Federation’s administrative workings also developed out of the long-standing fears that the Ethiopian government wished to exploit the cultural and religious connections with Tigrinya-speaking Christians as means of limiting Muslim influence within the Federal system.<sup>588</sup> In the context of the growing debates about the very structure and character of the federal system, the political ramifications of the Christian-Muslim imbalance within the civil service only increased throughout 1951.

Although by April 1951 British administrators began increasing their public recruitment drives across the country to fill “administrative, technical and clerical positions,” the actual results of their efforts to incorporate Eritreans into the civil service only seemed to confirm the mufti’s earlier accusations about the underrepresentation and marginalization of Muslims by the BA. Lloyd Ellingson noted that although “between July 1951 and July 1952, 1,973 Eritreans were inducted into various departments,” a substantial majority of the new recruits within the civil service came from exclusively Christian backgrounds.<sup>589</sup> In light of the fact that the majority of the new postings for Eritreans continued to be under the authority of the small but influential group of British

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<sup>588</sup> Ellingson, “Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism,” 142. Haile Selassie validated the League’s fears when his government announced in September 1952 that it intended “to send a large number of Amharas to Eritrea to assume jobs in the federal services, ignoring Eritreans who were qualified to fill these posts.”

<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 121.

and Italian managers in the “high level administration,” any particular Muslim influence within the federal government was limited to workers in clerical and translation services.

By mid-1952, the “Eritreanization” of the administration and most institutions was achieved less than three months prior to the official transfer of power in mid-September, as “the total number of Eritreans employed by the Eritrean Government, either salaried or hourly, was 7,947 (96%)” with approximately 354 non-Eritreans employed in the aforementioned “high level administration and technical positions.”<sup>590</sup> Despite the success, the religious imbalance confirmed to the League that its members’ apprehensions about the lack of Muslim representation had been justified. Despite the fact that in conversations with BA officers Matienzo had “stressed the importance of endeavouring to induct Moslems and Christians into the Administration in approximately equal numbers,” the numerical imbalance proved considerable.<sup>591</sup> Indeed, the overall estimates revealed that Christian Eritreans were represented at almost three times the rate of Muslims in the civil service. For example, a June 1951 clerical training course in Asmara began with only 40 of the 189 attendees coming from a Muslim background after an initial candidate pool in which only 24% of the 1,140 applicants were Muslim.<sup>592</sup> In spite of British efforts to integrate the civil service and Matienzo’s belief that the

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<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 122. UNGA, A/2233, *Report of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the General Assembly Concerning the Administration of Eritrea, 1952*, 8, no. 52. Henceforth cited as UNGA, A/2233. Trevaskis provided slightly different statistics of this shift, claiming “at the time of the transfer of power only 348 foreigners remained in the employment of the Administration, as against 2,217 who have been serving it a year earlier.” Trevaskis, *Eritrea: a Colony in Transition*, 125.

<sup>591</sup> MSS Brit. EMP s. 367, 2(B) Trevaskis. “Section 4: The Organization of an Eritrean Administration and the Induction of Eritreans into the Administration,” 25.

<sup>592</sup> Ellingson, “Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism,” 121; UNGA, A/2233, 68. The League also made a point of drawing focus on the success of Eritreans, particularly Muslims, by publishing the results of entrance exams to the civil service. See “About the Employment of Eritreans in Administrative jobs.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, January 20, 1952: 4.

Federation would invite broad participation from the public to eventually “guarantee of the rights of free expression, habeas corpus, religious belief and political organization,” the religious imbalance in the Federal civil administration only increased perceptions both within and outside the League that Muslims were heading toward permanent second class citizenship.

Based in part on these fears and the continued rivalry with several of the Massawa-based leaders, the League again expressed its palpable resistance to conditional unionist Muslims who tried throughout mid-1951 to chart a new political course for wider Muslim “interests” at the expense of the League. When news reached the League’s Executive Council that IML President Muhammad Umar Kadi and several colleagues had organized their own “Islamic Conference” in Massawa in June 1951 to challenge the League’s policies within the EDF, supporters launched a public campaign to discredit the meeting as nothing more than a power grab that would only instigate further division among Muslims. Yasin Ba Tuq argued that the June conference had less to do with any genuine concern for Islamic practices than it did with establishing a new counter organization to the League. Composed of Kadi, Muhammad Hassan Na’ib and several other long-time League opponents, the meeting represented –for the League leadership– little more than the most recent attempt to surrender Muslim protection by tacitly accepting an Ethiopian-dominated Federation rather than establishing a legitimate, sovereign system. Putting the group’s motivations in context, Ba Tuq observed,

saying this movement is an instigation is something without doubt and the fact that we are calling it this way is not because of our bias against it but because in the past the leaders of this movement have indicated that they are against Muslims’ interests. So we have no way but to call this an

instigation. Because sooner or later it will lead to division, distrust and weakening of the Muslims of this nation.<sup>593</sup>

In later weeks, other League supporters made efforts to discredit the Massawa gathering, stating that the overwhelming majority of members in the regional branches were “deeply opposed” to Kadi’s actions.<sup>594</sup> Additionally, several high profile Islamic clerics within the League purportedly spoke out against the conference and refuted Kadi’s attempts to speak on behalf of the region’s Muslims.<sup>595</sup> Ironically, the League’s aggressive treatment toward the “Islamic Conference” organizers, particularly conditional unionists within the IML, occurred at a time in which many of these rival leaders to the Muslim League began to finally take a more aggressive position against the prevailing unionist sentiment and the vagaries of Matienzo’s promises regarding Muslim representation.

Even IML president Muhammad Umar Kadi voiced scepticism in June 1951 about the federation government’s ability to provide viable safeguards needed to guarantee Arabic’s official use and the autonomy of Muslim religious institutions and schools. Kadi’s emergence as a sceptic of Muslim “protection” evolved gradually from the generally optimistic tone that he and his organization expressed as late as November 1950, which embraced union between Eritrea and Ethiopia provided that Muslims be given assurances, including the “recognition of the Arabic language as our own language,

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<sup>593</sup> Yasin Ba Tuq, “The Heads of the Instigation.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 4, 1951: 1.

<sup>594</sup> M. A’, “The Heads of the Instigation, Part 3.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 28, 1951: 4.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

the recognition of the personal rights of Moslems, and with appropriate guarantees for their protection.”<sup>596</sup>

After Matienzo had met with political leaders throughout June and July, Kadi raised worries on several occasions about the powers of the Ethiopian Emperor and his representative to the Eritrean government. As Alemseged Tesfai explained, Kadi received widespread criticism for his public concerns from his other fellow Unionists and was the object of a scathing editorial written by degiat Gebreyohannes Tesfamariam, the editor of the Unionist *Ethiopia* newspaper. According to Alemseged Tesfai, Tesfamariam’s attack against Kadi as a “traitor” to Ethiopia came largely in a response to a specific statement by Kadi when he claimed that the planned arrival of the Emperor’s representative in Asmara would lead to “an uprising and chaos.”<sup>597</sup> In response to Tesfamariam’s editorial and public attacks, Kadi responded with his own somewhat compromised rationale in an August 15 edition of *Hanti Ertra*, claiming that those who supported the promised safeguards of “federal unity” represented the group that most sincerely expressed their “loyalty” to both Ethiopia and Eritrea.<sup>598</sup>

The growth of political tension between “conditional” Muslim unionists and the wider UP membership developed largely as a result of the inherent contradictions in establishing a federal system that would supposedly allow Muslim religious and cultural institutions to thrive under the auspices of an Ethiopian-dominated government.

Matienzo noted that during initial discussions with Muslim representatives about the

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<sup>596</sup> “Memorandum of the Independent Islamic League to the UN Committee,” 6. RDC/01850.

<sup>597</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 58.

<sup>598</sup> Muhammad Umar Kadi, “Open Letter to Ato Gebreyohannes Tesfamariam.” *Hanti Ertra*, August 5, 1951: 3. See also Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 59.

structure of the Federal system, IML members and representatives from the Massawa-based National Party submitted a joint memorandum petitioning for the creation of two wholly independent administrations in Eritrea based on religious affiliation. For their part, MLWP representatives also submitted an “identical” tract calling for two administrative units while the capital Asmara would fall under its own special administrative unit.<sup>599</sup> Both tracts proposed that the administrations include legal guarantees to protect religious institutions among the respective minority population.<sup>600</sup> Yet despite Kadi’s and other unionist Muslims’ efforts to address religious and cultural concerns, their inability to articulate a coherent policy in the aftermath of the UN Resolution only encouraged the League to take the initiative in leading calls for greater Muslim autonomy. This became particularly evident as Matienzo began meeting political representatives in mid-1951 to develop Eritrea’s constitution.

The growing tension between representatives reflected the extent to which Muslim fears of exclusion within the coming Federation became major points of contention in both daily and political life. The fact that these tensions actually encouraged further divisions within the country’s broad Muslim nationalist community also illustrates how several emerging interpretations of what constituted Muslim “interests” emerged among the different political factions. These various interpretations also influenced the ways in which nationalists began to confront the challenge of crafting the Eritrean Constitution, as both the League members and members from rival

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<sup>599</sup> Trevaskis Papers, MSS Brit. EMP s. 367, 2(b), “Section 4 (d) Consultations with the inhabitants of Eritrea,” 46.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid.



organizations sought to establish a viable Constitution that could protect their respective Muslim constituents from possible marginalization in the Federal system.

### **Drafting the Constitution**

By May 1951, BA chief administrator Duncan Cumming expressed privately to Matienzo his concerns that although much of the armed violence had “lost the political complexion formerly attributed to it” from previous years, shifta activity remained an ongoing problem for the administration and a challenge for basic public safety, particularly in the rural areas where the BA exercised less direct control.<sup>601</sup> After consulting with other British administrators, Cumming announced on June 19 the terms of a general amnesty directed to “all shiftas in respect of their past lawless activity, linked with vigorous measures to be taken against shifta who failed to surrender or who committed offenses following the proclamation.”<sup>602</sup> By issuing the amnesty along with a concerted effort among several chiefs and community leaders to convince shifta to cease activities and turn in their arms, the security situation improved throughout the following month with approximately 1,330 shifta surrendering to authorities and with nearly 100 arrests made.<sup>603</sup>

The BA’s success in improving security in the midst of Matienzo’s tour also presented political representatives with a greater opportunity to address their concerns about the constitution without significant fear of reprisal. In addition to the sudden drop

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>602</sup> Ogbasellase, “Shifta Problems in the Kebessa Region of Eritrea (1947-1952),” 60. Many shifta arrested after the amnesty’s expiration were tried, convicted and sentenced to hanging by the administration. See *Trevaskis Papers*, MSS Brit. EMP s. 367, 2(b), “Section 4 (d) Consultations with the inhabitants of Eritrea,” 66.

<sup>603</sup> *Trevaskis Papers*, MSS Brit. EMP s. 367, 2(b), “Section 4 (d) Consultations with the inhabitants of Eritrea,” 67.

in politically-motivated attacks, “active communal and tribal disputes” and instances of petty theft and robbery all but disappeared by the following August.<sup>604</sup> Although this drop in shifta activity has been largely attributed to the Federal Resolution’s passage (and thus providing unionists with a self-perceived victory in “acquiring” Eritrea that required less armed campaigns against pro-independence supporters), the broader nationalist constituency nonetheless took advantage of Matienzo’s tour and pressed the UN commissioner on virtually every aspect of the planned constitution. For Muslim League representatives across the Western Province, Matienzo’s tour represented the first significant occurrence where the UN commissioner could observe the signs of a broad “manifestation of Moslem solidarity” among *both* the League and the supposedly rival members within the MLWP.<sup>605</sup> Indeed, the League and the MLWP largely shared the same set of basic concerns about issues of representation, language and religious freedom that emerged during the negotiations.

While Matienzo had first proclaimed during his arrival the previous February that he hoped that Eritrean political factions could come together and work toward a unified agreement, the actual process of formulating the new federal system faced resistance even after Matienzo “composed a list of recommendations that he thought should be a starting point and part of the Eritrean Constitution that was to be drafted.”<sup>606</sup> In negotiations that began between the UN envoy and representatives in July 1951, Eritrea’s factions aimed to resolve several long standing concerns, most of which “comprised issues on human rights, political freedom, the question of official languages, the issue of

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>606</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 37.

power boundary between Eritrean government and federal government” and issues related to regional autonomy.<sup>607</sup> After discussions commenced on July 12, Matienzo’s proposals only seemed to reinforce the basic points of contention between the two major factions. According to Tesfai, the split continued largely along the previous lines of the pre-Resolution era in which unionists still sought to guarantee that “it was not even a question that the federation government be an Ethiopian government” while the League, MLWP and others insisted on a Federal system that guaranteed *de facto* independence with particular leniency for Muslim religious autonomy.<sup>608</sup> Beyond pressing Matienzo to guarantee that the Ethiopian Emperor’s representative to the Federation “be positioned in the executive body of the Eritrean government,” most unionist delegates also reiterated their position that Tigrinya be Eritrea’s official language and Arabic “be confined only around religious and commercial aspects.” In contrast to the various groups within the EDF, the UP even rejected the idea that Eritrea should have its own national flag.<sup>609</sup> Matienzo’s inability to offer a detailed draft to participants that addressed the major concerns between the two constituencies only increased dissatisfaction among both camps.

Although the UN envoy expressed optimism that most of the standing issues between the two factions could be resolved through further negotiations, Matienzo’s confidence left the Muslim League constituencies largely indifferent. By August, some League writers publicly expressed their worry that Matienzo’s vague promises of

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid. Alemseged Tesfai also noted that the MLWP and the League approached an almost identical policy on the language issue.

compromise only served to provide unionists with greater opportunities to derail institutional autonomy.<sup>610</sup> Weighing in on the growing Muslim discord, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar also objected to several of the stipulations, particularly the UN Envoy's plan to designate the Ethiopian Emperor's representative to the Federation in Asmara, which the mufti alleged would only lead to greater social conflict.<sup>611</sup> Some Muslim League branches outright rejected the possibility of compromise on several key issues, including the appointment of an Ethiopian representative to the Eritrean government, which some members argued was both "non-sense" and a contradiction of the original UN resolution.<sup>612</sup> While Matienzo remained hopeful up until his eventual departure from the country that the various factions would come together to preserve what he termed the meaningful "balance between the federal government and an autonomous Eritrea," his inability to address the League and the EDF's fundamental incongruities and speak to the issue of Ethiopian political influence already within the country ultimately increased apprehensions that Eritreans, and Muslims in particular, would be left with only second-class citizenship in the new government.<sup>613</sup>

Their apprehensions also heightened fears among other conditional unionist Muslims, a trend which demonstrated the inherently tenuous relationship between the Federal system and Eritrean Muslim autonomy. Because Eritrea's Muslims had by and

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<sup>610</sup> "Open letter to his Excellency Anse Matienzo, the UN envoy." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, August 6, 1951: 1.

<sup>611</sup> Salim al-Mukhtar, "Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar Ahmed Umar: The British Administration, 1942-1952." *al-Dawlia*, Part 6.

<sup>612</sup> "A letter from the Muslims of Akkele Guzay to the UN." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, September 3, 1951, 3. See also "Representatives of the hal-hal tribes present their views in front of the UN Envoy." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, October 1, 1951: 1.

<sup>613</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 245. See also UNGA, Seventh Session, Supplement No. 15 A/2188.

large “accepted a federal association with Ethiopia reluctantly,” the perceived vagaries connected to the language issue, institutional autonomy and equal religious representation continually surfaced as part of concerns that expanded among both former unionist and pro-independence factions throughout Matienzo’s mission.<sup>614</sup> In the context of this apparent political stagnation, some League members began expanding their initial activities with more broad-based reform efforts, particularly in regards to the country’s fledgling labor movement.

### **Muslim League Participation in Labor Activism**

Complementing the League’s attempts to put on a brave public face in the aftermath of the UN decision, several members also involved themselves with early efforts to unite workers and improve general labor conditions in the country. While their involvement developed as only part of the deteriorating economic conditions across the country, labor activism also represented a key aspect in protecting “Muslim” interests during the early 1950s, particularly among merchants in the major cities. Although much of the Muslim League leadership had been involved since the early 1940s in business organizations such as the Asmara chamber of commerce or had addressed issues of workers rights as part of the League’s activities, 1951 represented a marked increase in both the scale and political nature of labor mobilization among the League.

When Asmara-based activists formed Hara Zekhone Semret Kefletat Serahatenyatat Eritrawiyan or the Syndicate of Free Eritrean Workers in November 1951, Muslim League members contributed to the Syndicate’s early efforts to mobilize the various segments of the economy and to establish religious harmony within the

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<sup>614</sup> Trevaskis, *Eritrea: a Colony in Transition*, 130.

organization. In their respective analyses of Eritrean labor activism, Tom Killion and Alemseged Tesfai rightly noted that the impetus behind the Syndicate's creation involved workers' previous attempts to procure equal employment opportunities for both Muslim and Christian laborers. Both authors alluded to the high degree of interreligious cooperation and the ability of labor activists to avoid sectarian rivalry even when faced with potentially volatile labor disputes. Their ability was best evidenced when a group of mainly Christian workers tried to secure employment with job recruiters from the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO).<sup>615</sup> After failing to arouse interest and support from leaders in Asmara's "Arab" (Hadrami) community, labor activists received the support of Woldeab Woldemariam in their cause, who used his influential position as *Hanti Ertra's* editor to help the group published an editorial in November 1951.<sup>616</sup> In their public testimony the group carefully aired its grievances about being discriminated while continuing to embrace the need for religious unity in their cause.

In writing such words and notifying the people, we, the Christians who are writing a complaint are not doing so because we envied our Muslim brothers. Because they are also our Eritrean brothers, their harmony is our harmony and their happiness is ours too. However, as the people understand deeply, those Arab people who could be close to us through lineage; and geographically, they are very close neighbours. As we used to be since the ancient times, we ought to be cooperative in the future as well; however, while they come to our county, work in peace and freely and get rich, the moment few Eritreans go to their country to work... we are extremely saddened and astounded that when they [Eritrean Christians] requested permission to work, they [Arabs] gave an order to

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<sup>615</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 116.

<sup>616</sup> Alemseged Tesfai noted that activists' attempts to win the support of Asmara's "Arab" merchants were limited because they had believed falsely that the majority Yemani/Hadrami merchants could intervene in the political affairs in Saudi Arabia. *Ibid.*, 119.

the company and it has been decreed to deny any Christian from Eritrea to enter their land.<sup>617</sup>

Although several delegates from the Syndicate did eventually engage in a bitter public quarrel with representatives of Asmara's resident Hadrami Community, the group managed to avoid turning the spat into a sectarian dilemma by arguing that the resident "Arab" merchants had demeaned all Eritrean workers by both not assisting them in their efforts to gain employment abroad. Syndicate representatives accused many of the Hadrami leaders of simply extracting Eritrea's resources and wealth through their own merchant activities and for having allegedly lied about their influence in ARAMCO's hiring process.<sup>618</sup> The situation escalated to the point where *Hanti Eritrea*'s editorial staff announced that they would temporarily stop printing the commentators so that the feuding parties could address the issue among themselves in an "appropriate manner."<sup>619</sup>

Labor activist Tsegaye Kahsey alluded to the fact despite the initial conflict with the hadrami community, Woldemariam encouragement of the group precipitated the wider involvement from other nationalist "intellectual Eritreans" who helped advise the group on how to go about strengthening their organization.<sup>620</sup> The group also received considerable support in many of the commentaries featured within *Hanti Eritrea* by late 1951, as EDF supporters reasoned that the "severe economic situation" across Eritrea required more proactive involvement from the labor section to address the public's

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid. Tsegaye Kahsay, Kefila Beraki, Tesfai Zerai Cristos, "Conditions that people should pay attention to regarding employment." *Hanti Ertra*, November 7, 1951: 1.

<sup>618</sup> Delegates of the Eritrean Workers, "Audacious Locust Stays out on the door even after eating all your crops." *Hanti Ertra*, November 28, 1951: 4.

<sup>619</sup> "Regarding Eritrean workers and Saudi Arabia." *Hanti Ertra*, November 14, 1951: 1. See also "Notice About Eritrean Workers and the Arab Association." *Hanti Ertra*, December 5, 1951: 4.

<sup>620</sup> Tsegaye Kahsay, interview with Günter Schröder. Rome, Italy, May 28, 1988.

needs.<sup>621</sup> By seeking to unite both Muslim and Christian merchants, business owners and workers, the very spirit of the labor movement ran parallel to the political ideals among the EDF and especially the League's urban-based branches. Its large youth base also reflected Sultan's previous discussions that a robust civil society needed to be harnessed from among the country's youth, whom he believed were the ones with "the most responsibility and challenges regarding the federal plan" and whose success would determine whether or not the federation would survive.<sup>622</sup>

Several editorials implored the Syndicate to continue its efforts to build unity to help remedy the employment crisis that faced most workers, especially in the major cities.<sup>623</sup> With Tsegaye Kahsay and Muhammad Abdelkadir Kiyar appointed as the main representatives to facilitate worker negotiations actions with the BA, the labor leadership received considerable support from Asmara's Muslim community and Jabarti leaders in particular.<sup>624</sup> According to Alemseged Tesfai, the group attracted widespread support from among the wider pro-independence and even among many unionists despite the fact that "there was not any clear understanding" among the movement's leaders about what specifically constituted a legitimate worker to qualify for the organization.<sup>625</sup>

Although some leading Unionist leaders, particularly Tedla Bairu and Haregot Abbai participated in and supported labor activities throughout 1951 and 1952, the Syndicate's internal organization included the influence of leading LPP and Muslim

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<sup>621</sup> "Eritrean Workers Association is needed." *Hanti Ertra*, October 31, 1951: 1.

<sup>622</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, "Word of Greeting to the Muslim People of Eritrea," 4.

<sup>623</sup> "Advice on Unity of Eritrean Workers Association [Regarding Lack of Employment]." *Hanti Ertra*, December 26, 1951: 1.

<sup>624</sup> See Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 305.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid



League officials and resulted in the labor movement essentially “becoming an institutional base for an emerging pan-Eritrean nationalist movement.”<sup>626</sup> In an effort to stem possible religious divisions, syndicate founders opted to elect an eighteen person Executive Council composed of an equal number of Christian and Muslim members, which each group consisting of five labor representatives and four advisors, respectively. Among the members of the Syndicate’s first advisory board, League leaders hajj Suleiman Adin and Adem Kusmallah held formal positions on the Executive Council while several League veterans such as degiat Hassan Ali served in informal roles as outside advisors and facilitators between merchants, workers and British authorities.<sup>627</sup> Later, League member Muhammad Seraj Abdu served as the Syndicate’s vice-president.<sup>628</sup>

The Syndicate’s wider objective of encouraging the participation of broad segments of civil society to “preserve and enlarge not only workers’, but all Eritreans’, democratic rights under the Ethio-Eritrean Federation” conveyed the basic spirit of both the EDF and League’s basic platform.<sup>629</sup> Although the full ramifications of the League’s participation in the labor movement did not materialize immediately, its contribution to the formation of the Syndicate demonstrated that its core agenda of building a viable consortium of both Muslim and Christian activists in civil society remained alive and well despite the growing political challenges.

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<sup>626</sup> Killion, “Eritrean Workers’ Organization and Early nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958,” 17. See also General Union of Eritrean Workers, “Constitution of the General Union of Eritrean Workers.” RDC/04607.

<sup>627</sup> Tsegaye Kahsay, interview.

<sup>628</sup> Killion, “Eritrean Workers’ Organization and Early nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958,” 18. Abdu also served as Syndicate President after Woldeab Woldemariam fled Eritrea in 1953 due to repeated assassination attempts.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 17.

### **Muslim League Troubles in the Constituent Assembly Elections**

Compounding League members' concerns over the language issue, civil service employment and labor unrest, the impending election of the Eritrean Constituent Assembly also represented a further challenge to the wider Muslim concerns across the country. In theory, the BA's decision in early 1951 to proceed with the UN resolution's demand for a popularly elected Eritrean legislature should have represented a significant step toward regional autonomy and a triumph for the League's self-proclaimed grassroots strength. The establishment of two hundred thirty eight administrative units, to be represented ultimately by sixty eight assembly seats from across the country also promised that the League would have a strong chance to influence much of the legislature's agenda. Ellingson noted that twenty-three of the planned assembly seats were set aside for constituencies in the Western province, offering the League an opportunity to capitalize on its supposed appeal across the region.<sup>630</sup> In addition, League candidates running under the EDF banner also sought election among large Muslim electorates in Asmara and especially Massawa and the wider Red Sea region.<sup>631</sup> Yet despite the apparent advantages for the League and the EDF, the results of the assembly elections demonstrated that despite its rhetoric and proactive measures to rally supporters, the League still suffered from the long simmering divisions between its leadership and former supporters now aligned with the MLWP.

While BA officials claimed that the MLWP benefitted from "a large number of supporters" across the province, particularly in the Agordat, Tessenei and Nakfa districts,

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<sup>630</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 124.

<sup>631</sup> See Fessehatzion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation*, 1952-1962, 21.

the inability of the League to field a stronger showing in part resulted from both the considerable influence of a small number of religious and clan leaders from across the province whose own personal histories revealed a mixed rationale for their opposition to the League.<sup>632</sup> For example, MLWP President qadi Hamid Muhammad Nur Abu Alama had maintained a long-standing rivalry with both Ibrahim Sultan and several of the leading Islamic clerics affiliated with the League, particularly the mufti.<sup>633</sup> MLWP leaders, particularly those in positions of authority as clan chiefs such as Saydna Saleh Mustapha and others, continued to use their influence to pressure their respective constituencies into voting against League/EDF candidates. Moreover, BA interference also seems to have played a role in explaining the League's electoral troubles in the months leading up to the elections.

Although he eventually secured a seat in the Assembly, even Ibrahim Sultan faced unexpected difficulty in election to the legislature. According to Lloyd Ellingson BA officials had attempted to block Sultan's nomination by misinforming electors from Sultan's own Rugbat clan about the correct date to cast their ballots. Later, some of the Rugbat electors were allegedly bribed into switching their votes. Alemseged Tesfai explained that even American officials stationed in Asmara suspected members of the BA, chiefly Frank Stafford, had been involved in influencing some of the electors from the Rugbat into switching their votes from Sultan to other candidates during the three-

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<sup>632</sup> Trevaskis Papers, MSS Brit Emp S. 367, Box 2(b), "Section 4 (d) Consultations with the Inhabitants of Eritrea," 54.

<sup>633</sup> FO 403/473-18351, "Leading Personalities in Eritrea," 106. Allegedly, Alama's tensions with the mufti resulted in his resigning as qadi of Massawa. He was allegedly transferred to Agordat at the Mufti's request. Ibid.

week period prior to the election.<sup>634</sup> Although Sultan managed to win a seat in the elections, his experience reflected the broader challenges among the League's core constituency in showcasing their electoral strength.

For example, beginning in February 1952 more than 20,000 members of the Bet Asghede clan complained to BA officials that they had not been provided with their own candidates for the Assembly elections. Having been one of the earliest groups to participate in the tigre emancipation movement during the early 1940s and a key support group for the League/EDF in the Western province, Bet Asghede representatives were summarily ignored by BA officials throughout the two months leading up to the elections. Finally, the clan representatives "were told by the UN Commissioner that the BA did not regard the Bet Asghede as a tribal unit" and subsequently dismissed their objections and partitioned the clan members with representatives from outside their own communities mainly affiliated with the pro-Unionist and BA-backed MLWP.<sup>635</sup> The long-standing links between Bet Asghede leaders and the League, coupled with high probability that any legitimate inclusion of Bet Asghede representatives would have tipped the balance in the Assembly to a clear Muslim majority that could have seriously compromised the unionist lobby, illustrates that many of the political rivalries stemming from before the UN Resolution remained as contentious as ever. Edward Mulcahy thus accurately summarized the dilemma of the Bet Asgdede representatives in stating that their renunciation of the MLWP candidates had effectively incurred the wrath of BA administrators concerned only with limiting League/EDF support from expanding across

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<sup>634</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 140. See also Mulcahy to State Department, 777.00/4f/4-2952, April 29, 1952. During this period Stafford worked as a special adviser to the Chief Administrator.

<sup>635</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 127.

the Western province.<sup>636</sup> He even professed his belief that Stafford “was not beyond rigging the election results to advance the Ethiopian cause.”<sup>637</sup>

Even the BA’s basic requirements for political parties to nominate and put candidates on the ballot proved particularly challenging for the League. First, the BA’s decision to only hold direct elections in Asmara and Massawa put the League at a disadvantage by minimizing its primary base of electoral support in and around Keren. Furthermore, the BA’s requirement that candidates deposit 200 shillings “which would be forfeited upon failure to poll ten percent of the total votes cast” also put an additional financial burden on the already cash-strapped League.<sup>638</sup> Lacking funding parity with unionist candidates and even those within the British-backed MLWP, the first assembly interactions resulted in a disappointing showing for the ML/EDF constituency, commanding just 19 of the 68 assembly seats. Ultimately, the elections lay bare the decline of the EDF as a meaningful consortium on a national level. Compounding the League’s aforementioned troubles and rivalries with the MLWP, the wider EDF membership suffered from internal division amongst many of its leaders and largely failed to present a united force on par with Unionist candidates.<sup>639</sup>

Nevertheless, the League’s disappointing showing in the election did not necessarily demonstrate that the organization’s anti-unionist program had been rejected,

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<sup>636</sup> Mulcahy to State Department. 777.00/4-1752, April 17, 1952. See also Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 141.

<sup>637</sup> Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1962*, 22. See Mulcahy to State Department, “Instances of Moslem Discontent in Current Eritrean Politics,” 777.000/4-2952, April 29, 1952.

<sup>638</sup> Ellingson, “Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism,” 124.

<sup>639</sup> Woldeab Woldemariam acknowledged that the real decline of the EDF was due to internal divisions. He also downplayed the importance of the alleged underhanded ways of the BA, arguing that they went about the wider electoral process in a “commendable way.” See Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 140-142.

but rather that its leaders had failed to address the longstanding concerns that had caused so many constituents to support the MLWP in the first place. Observing the political infighting, Matienzo made note of the fact that for all of their rivalry the two parties held nearly identical programs, including agreeing on major points of contention such as being “in favour of the two assemblies, no interference by the Emperor, a new federal flag, a distinctive flag for Eritrea, and Arabic as the official language.”<sup>640</sup> Yet the inability of the League to calm fears of continued clandestine Italian influence contributed to the awkward split within the Muslim community that insured Unionist control of the Assembly. Even Trevaskis believed that the MLWP’s relatively strong electoral showing did not imply that constituents had opted for a vastly different political program.

Although its leaders shared many of the Bloc’s views, there was so much bitterness and rivalry between them and Ibrahim Sultan than an alliance could not easily have been brought about. If the Unionist leaders had adopted the extreme Ethiopian line they and the Bloc would certainly have come together. As it was the Unionist Party was at this time subject to the pressure of a growing body of its supporters who, though pro-Ethiopian, were determined that Eritrea’s interests should not be subordinated to Ethiopia’s.<sup>641</sup>

Beyond revealing the still considerable gap between Sultan’s faction and former League members now embracing the MLWP, the election results also demonstrated that the League largely failed in its efforts to reassure a significant portion of its constituents through the spirited debates both within the nationalist press and in the public discussions. For all of the League’s bold proclamations about being at the forefront of protecting Muslim interests and still remaining the most sizable nationalist force, its

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<sup>640</sup> Trevaskis Papers, MSS Brit. EMP s. 367, 2(b), “Section 4 (d) Consultations with the inhabitants of Eritrea,” 54.

<sup>641</sup> Trevaskis, *Eritrea; a Colony in Transition*, 120.

position by April/May 1952 revealed that its previous influence within the intellectual parameters of the nationalist contact zone had dropped considerably. Ironically, only with the growing dissatisfaction among many of the League's political rivals did its program begin to finally gain traction as a wider "Muslim" struggle to preserve Eritrean autonomy.

Despite the League's continued opposition to the MLWP and IML's activities and its own failure to subdue fears of Italian encroachment within the nationalist camp, the growing apprehension among many conditional unionist Muslims provided a much needed boost for the League in countering the perceived compromises that had already emerged during the political negotiations. In a commentary appearing in the April 27 edition of *Sawt al-rabita*, longtime League rival Muhammad Umar Kadi expressed his concern that although a significant number of Muslim representatives had been elected to office, many of the new representatives lacked the political experience, ability and willingness to safeguard Muslim rights. He even questioned whether or not the new Muslim delegates "would have the same rights as others" once the assembly began its official session.<sup>642</sup> Later commentaries also suggested that the equal number of Christian and Muslim seats within the assembly (34-34) did not reflect the actual demographics in the country and that the lack of Muslim seats in the assembly only revealed a concerted effort to limit Muslim input into the Assembly.<sup>643</sup> Reflecting on Stafford's efforts, Tekie

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<sup>642</sup> Muhammad Umar Kadi, "Call to all Muslims." *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, April 27, 1952: 1.

<sup>643</sup> See *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, May 11, 1952.

Fessehazion noted that the British official simply “did everything he could to help elect members committed to union.”<sup>644</sup>

Consequently, League writers increasingly began to focus on how the Assembly’s actions sought to further relegate Muslims to second-class citizenship. In *Sawt al-rabita*’s coverage of the Assembly’s weekly activities throughout the late spring and early summer of 1952, writers often made note of the rising hostility between Muslim and Christian representatives, especially in regards to the language issue and when debating laws perceived as being too favorable to Muslim interests.<sup>645</sup> Ellingson noted that even during the Assembly’s first day in session, the language controversy erupted in full force when authorities removed Kadi Ali Umar Osman, an EDF representative from Senafe, after he tried to shout out Ethiopian representative Andemikael Dessalegn for beginning his introductory remarks to the Assembly in Amharic rather than in one of the assemblies working languages of Arabic, Tigrinya, English or Italian.<sup>646</sup> Another report took note of Ibrahim Sultan’s alleged attempts to get the assembly to approve a land reform law that would have allowed Muslim communities across the lowlands and the Western province to purchase private property rather than continue to reside on government-owned land.<sup>647</sup> Despite Sultan’s efforts, League writers lamented that many of the Christians in the Assembly rejected the motion and refused to even call for a vote before they adjourned from their session.<sup>648</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1962*, 21.

<sup>645</sup> See “The Assembly in a Week.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 22, 1952: 4.

<sup>646</sup> Ellingson, “Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism,” 127. See Mulcahy to State Department, 777.00/4-2952, 29 April 1952.

<sup>647</sup> “The Assembly in a Week.” *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June 15, 1952: 1.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.



Other contributors worried openly that the Assembly's Unionist majority and public proclamations to minimize Eritrean autonomy had already created an atmosphere in which Eritrea's most "fanatic" unionist supporters were attempting to marginalize Muslims from government offices, schools and other institutions in the same way that the Ethiopian government had done to Muslims living within Ethiopia. For League observers, this sudden and pronounced encroachment into Eritrea's cultural and political life revealed how extremism was "now so apparent in our country that it appears just as the Sun in the middle of the sky."<sup>649</sup>

### **Eroding Sovereignty on the Federation's Eve**

While the months following the Assembly elections brought additional concerns about the curtailed autonomy within Eritrean political institutions, the weeks both preceding and following the formal transfer of power from BA to Federation rule on September 15 1952 revealed the extent to which Ethiopian and Unionist authorities had already crushed several mediums of nationalist discourse. Particularly damaging to the League was the suppression and ultimate banning of *Sawt al-rabita* in early September. Discontinued initially because of recurring funding difficulties, the paper's death knell came following League leaders' public complaints of Ethiopian and Federation officials' attempts to squelch the newspaper's continuation in the following months.

Given the nature of much of the content in many of the paper's latter issues during August and September, its discontinuation could not have come at a better time for the Federation's most ardent unionist supporters. Reports began surfacing in late August in *Sawt al-rabita* about the presence of Ethiopian troops already within Eritrea's

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<sup>649</sup> Ali Berhanu, "Who are the Extremists?" *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya* June 8, 1952: 1.

borders. The paper's August 24 edition featured several commentaries about the military's arrival, including one editorial authored by Imam Musa that discussed the possible ramifications of Ethiopian soldiers' presence in the still supposedly "independent" Federal government.<sup>650</sup> Just weeks later, the League's worst fears were confirmed when Haile Selassie issued proclamation 130, stating that the Ethiopian Federal court would supersede the authority of the Federation judiciary. Apart from directly contradicting Articles 85 and 90 of the Eritrean constitution, as Ruth Iyob illustrated, the ruling also represented a troubling turn for League constituents by limiting the ability of Eritrea's Islamic courts to operate without direct Ethiopian interference.<sup>651</sup>

Validating the earlier concerns of the Mufti and many of the qadis that had come together and created the 'ulama' Front, Eritrea's Islamic clerics soon discovered the proclamation's implications on Ethiopian intrusion into the inner workings of Eritrean Muslim religious institutions, including the appointment of qadis and the management of the various waqf administrations. By late September, even rank and file League members emerged as vocal critics of the Federation's already apparent failings. Members openly complained and sent written complaints to the assembly about the already apparent violations against the constitution, including the refusal of several government offices to raise the Eritrean flag, protesting Ethiopian control of key industries and properties within Eritrea and especially in voicing concerns about the presence of Ethiopian armed units.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Iman Musa, "Truppe Etiopiche in Eritrea?" *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya* August 24, 1952: 3.

<sup>651</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 88.

<sup>652</sup> See *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*, June- September, 1952; Mulcahy to State Department, 777.00/9-552, September 5, 1952.

The Federation's very beginning coincided with the end of one the most powerful and effective political tools available to the League. Although Tekeste Negash has argued that there remained "ample opportunities" for the organization's members to continue to voice its objections to the perceived inequalities of the Federation, both the League and the wider EDF constituency suffered almost immediately in the aftermath of the clampdown.<sup>653</sup> Coupled with the earlier discontinuation of *Wahda Iritriya/Hanti Ertra* and the departure of Woldeab Woldeamariam from Eritrea after having barely survived the seventh (and final) attempt on his life in early 1953, the Federation's official establishment represented the virtual end of Muslim League activism within the dynamic intellectual exchanges of the nationalist contact zone. Previous discussions about how Muslims, the Islamic religion and Arabic could serve to build a viable, independent Eritrea now gave way to more defensive posturing about the need to insulate Muslims from the already apparent state-sponsored discrimination.

Although critical Arabic and Tigrinya commentaries by League supporters continued throughout much of the next two years following the launching of *Hanti Ertra*'s successor paper, *Dehay Ertra* in late September 1952, most of the League's leading intellectuals found themselves forced to operate in an unprecedented atmosphere of political repression.<sup>654</sup> Positioned with the symbols of a functioning independent government, including a system of supposed checks and balances and legal institutions, Eritrean's nationalist factions already faced the challenges of a gutted federal system in which Eritrean autonomy, particularly for Muslim residents, existed in name only. The

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<sup>653</sup> Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 93.

<sup>654</sup> See Deborah Johnson, "Dəhay Erətra" in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 127-128.

virtual annihilation of the nationalist contact zone in late 1952 also had a profound effect on the League's ideological trajectory in the coming years, as its constituents' concerns about protecting Islamic educational and religious institutions and the preservation of Arabic took on even greater urgency after the transfer of official power.

### **Conclusions**

The brief but tumultuous period between the UN's passage of Resolution 390-A in December 1950 and the formal transfer of power from British to Federal Authority in mid-September 1952 witnessed a considerable transformation both within nationalist movement and in the League. Having lost the wider battle for unconditional independence the nationalist camp, led largely by the Muslim League and its affiliates within the newly formed EDF, redoubled efforts aimed at guaranteeing the greatest possible autonomy for Eritrea within the Federation government. While the League leadership continued to embrace an inclusive nationalist vision, its constituents began concerning themselves with what the Federation would mean specifically for Muslim fortunes. Set against the backdrop of deteriorating political autonomy even prior to the Federation's actual implementation, many League activists only intensified their efforts by publically working to ensure Arabic's survival as an official language, involving themselves in the growing labor movement, encouraging greater inclusion of Muslims within the civil administration, and by consistently challenging the UN envoy to guarantee greater autonomy for Islamic leaders and religious institutions.

Despite the League's efforts to remain relevant, its political influence continued to decline amidst growing Unionist and even direct Ethiopian pressures. By the time of the

Constituent Assembly elections in March/April 1952, the Muslim League leadership had lost its ability to formulate a coherent policy to combat the wholesale demolition of Eritrean autonomy. While the League remained a vocal force of political opposition, its minority standing in the assembly, coupled with its diminishing resources and the weakened state of its political allies ushered in a period of decline. By September 1952, the discontinuation of *Sawt al-rabita* signalled the virtual end of the League's place as the centre of formal Muslim nationalist intellectual discourse. Its closure, coupled with Ethiopia's already palpable military presence, the reduced authority of the Eritrean assembly and still unresolved issue of Muslim underrepresentation in the civil service and Federal government forced the League to continue its agenda as political freedom continued to dissipate with the Federation's inauguration. Still, the deteriorating political situation also presented the League with an opportunity to rework its previous failings by redirecting much of its program from political to more religious-based issues. Consequently, the League's reformation throughout 1953 and subsequent years as an outlet to address concerns among both the Islamic leadership and the public demonstrated how leaders reacted to increased Ethiopian domination by learning "the political value of their Islamic connexions."<sup>655</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> Trevaskis, *Eritrea; a Colony in Transition*, 130.

CHAPTER 7: NEGOCIATING AUTONOMY WITHIN THE FEDERATION,  
OCTOBER 1952-DECEMBER 1957

For the Muslim League and nationalist supporters in general, the official transfer of power from British to Federal authority in September 1952 offered little reassurance that violations against Eritrean sovereignty would dissipate. At the outset of the Federation, longstanding concerns among nationalists that the new government represented little more than a rubber stamp for Ethiopian policy only increased. Through the limited political mechanisms of the Federation, League leaders remained a relevant force despite the external and internal challenges, to its agenda. Yet despite its limited success during the early 1950s in maintaining its anti-unionist program, the transformation of the Federation's executive, legislative and judicial branches from independent federal authorities into quasi-extensions of the Ethiopian government convinced many within the League that Eritrea risked being taken over by the "backwardness and feudalism" of Ethiopian rule.<sup>656</sup>

The Muslim League nevertheless continued pursuing a policy that emphasized the need to protect Muslim religious freedom by highlighting the cultural autonomy of the Islamic religion from Ethiopia as its main political message. While their approach represented a continuation from the previous period before the Federation's implementation, the virtual collapse of nationalist intellectual dialogue in the public sphere after September 1952 limited the organization's ability to direct a new course of activism. Nevertheless, the League's actions after September 1952 reflected the general consensus among Muslims that their respective constituencies now needed to put aside

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<sup>656</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 130.

their previous differences about independence and conditional union to develop a strategy aimed at preserving the integrity of regional autonomy. As a result, the League rallied around the question Eritrea's legal status as an "autonomous unit" by emphasizing its own jurisdiction over regional institutions and public affairs. According to Tekeste Negash, League leaders developed this strategy through a "scrupulous defence [sic] of the United Nations Resolution of 1950 and of the Constitution of Eritrea which emanated from the UN Resolution."<sup>657</sup>

This chapter analyzes how the League and its affiliates maneuvered through the new political atmosphere dominated by increasingly authoritarian policies of the Federation government during its first four years, as both internal rivalries and external threats nearly destroyed the League and neutralized broader Muslim political activism. Surprisingly, the League both survived these challenges and reshaped itself as grassroots members pushed for organizational reforms to adapt to the realities of the new federal system. At the heart of this push was the League's investment in what Kibreab termed the "associational life" of federal-era Eritrea. This proved especially true in regards to the broad mobilization against the exclusion of Muslims in the political process and dissatisfaction over Eritrea's continuing economic troubles. As Muslims' collective political misfortunes merged increasingly with economic instability, many League members began to take more proactive measures in addressing how the Federation represented an affront to their religious rights and a hindrance to their economic progress.

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<sup>657</sup> Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 112.

### **League Participation with the Syndicate of Eritrean Workers**

Even prior to the Federation's official inauguration, labor activists across the country expressed their apprehension about possible Ethiopian inference in Eritrea's economy through the new government structures. While the two years prior to the Federation saw the Muslim League begin to address its members' apprehensions about the country's economic future, critics now voiced specific opposition to the takeover of key aspects of the country, which they argued could not be given over to Ethiopian authority. Of particular concern to Muslim nationalists both in the League and in Eritrea's Constituent Assembly was the fact that Andargatchew Messai, the Emperor's first designated representative to Eritrea and son-in-law, now exercised direct influence over institutions that were designated originally as joint federal enterprises including regional telecommunications, railways, defense forces and even customs.<sup>658</sup> Beyond the initial complaints of members within the Federal Assembly, discontent with Ethiopian dominance in the economy and the obstinacy of Federal Chief Executive and long-time unionist leader Tedla Bairu in addressing the crisis aided the growing labor activism and helped establish an organized labor movement.

On November 23, 1952 more than six hundred representatives from the Syndicate of Eritrean Workers met in Asmara to inaugurate the new organization, which concluded after Woldeab Woldemariam finalized their draft constitution. Two weeks later on December 7, Syndicate leaders held a ceremony at Asmara's Cinema Impero commemorating their recent accomplishments and pledged to use the organization to

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid., 78.



“better their moral, social and economic conditions” as a united force.<sup>659</sup> The subsequent celebration of the first Eritrean Workers’ Day on January 1, 1953 represented both the high point of the organization’s activities and its position as a legitimate “pan-Eritrean” organization, one that even reached across the unionist and nationalist divide and fielded more than 20,000 supporters in its first public demonstration.<sup>660</sup> Nevertheless, the Syndicate’s operations benefited from League constituents’ input, both at the executive ranks and the grassroots.<sup>661</sup> When the Syndicate staged labor strikes in early 1953 to protest low wages and to petition for the implementation of a federal labor code, the League supported striking salt workers in and around Massawa even as many of the Syndicate’s more hard-line unionist members began doubting the merits of labor protests. Later, when Woldeab Woldemariam recovered from another assassination attempt in mid-January, League member Muhammad Seraj Abdu took over the Syndicate’s leadership until Federal authorities closed the organization’s main office the following November.<sup>662</sup>

Throughout the Syndicate’s struggles in late 1952 and 1953, League members aligned their political program with the wider labor unrest. During the celebrations in early December 1952 commemorating the seventh anniversary of the Muslim League’s founding, members addressed the ongoing economic troubles and praised those who had begun to organize and protect Eritrea’s internal interests. In Asmara, branch President shaykh Ahmed Saleh gave a speech to supporters alluding to the need to address the

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<sup>659</sup> Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 309.

<sup>660</sup> Killion, “Eritrean Workers’ Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958,” 18. See also Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 131.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid., 18-19; Tesfai, *Federation Ertra ms Etyopiya*, 309-319.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid.

material conditions of the country along with the ongoing political struggles. Likewise, speakers in Keren, Agordat, Massawa and other major cities stressed the League's official position that meaningful employment and decent wages for all workers remained a priority that both the constituent assembly and the Office of the Chief Executive needed to address.<sup>663</sup> Commenting on the chronic unemployment, inflation and lack of government action on the economic crisis, *Sawt al-iritriya* editor Muhammad Saleh Mahmud argued that Eritrean Muslims faced a two-front crisis in that both their economic and political livelihoods were threatened by the lack of available work across the country. Consequently, the newfound "economic reality" represented just as much of a danger to the well-being of the Muslim community as it did to the survival of an independent federal system.<sup>664</sup> By 1954, as the Syndicate devolved into a quasi-secret organization without government sanction, many League members in Asmara clandestinely supported the group while workers in other major cities took more aggressive measures to protest the economic conditions.

Muslim dockworkers became a source of increased antagonism against federal authorities as economic concerns merged with political and religious factionalism. In early January 1954, Massawa-based workers from Hirgigo refused to adhere to a new regulation made by Federal Port Administrator Abebe Bitew requiring workers to carry federal identity cards.<sup>665</sup> Tensions increased further with the administration's decision to hire mainly Christian unionist labor from Asmara to work in the city. In his article on

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<sup>663</sup> "Celebration of the Seventh of the Anniversary of the Muslim League." *Sawt al-iritriya*, December 18, 1952: 3.

<sup>664</sup> Muhammad Saleh Mahmud, "The Economic Reality." *Sawt al-iritriya*, November 8, 1952: 3.

<sup>665</sup> Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," 22.

Eritrean labor history, historian Tom Killion noted that tensions between workers and the administration eventually boiled over into wider conflict by early February, as activists affiliated with the League “made an apparently politically-organized attack on the monthly Unionist Party meeting at a Massawa tea house,” the result of which led to wider “intercommunal violence between Muslims and Christians that left three Muslims dead, thirty people from both groups injured, and hundreds arrested.”<sup>666</sup> Despite the occasional violence between Muslim and mainly Christian unionist laborers, both the Muslim League and the Syndicate of Eritrean Workers succeeded in avoiding attempts by federal authorities to split the labor movement along religious lines. In the following years, many of the Syndicate’s most articulate Christian leaders augmented the labor coalition to include substantial numbers of both Muslims from within the League and Christian supporters, particularly among Asmara’s youth. While the early success of joint Muslim-Christian cooperation in the labor movement reflected the overall severity of the economic reality for all residents, it also benefitted from considerable Muslim League participation in promoting its long held position of stressing the common cause that both Eritrea’s Muslim and Christian communities had in insuring regional autonomy. This strategy became crucial to how the League presented its case during the middle of the decade when leaders did in fact argue that the Federation did represent a specific cultural and economic threat to the country’s Muslim communities.

### **Addressing Muslim Rights as Federal Citizens**

Labor unrest in several Muslim-majority communities contributed to the Muslim League’s reemergence by late 1953 as the main nationalist organ to address the

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid., 23

Federation's already apparent political and economic failures. In October the League led a delegation of several organizations in writing a memorandum to the Office of the Chief Executive. Although Tekeste Negash argued that the memorandum included signatures from several nationalist groups besides the League, including the IML and the National Party of Massawa, much of the document's grievances echoed objections that League leaders had articulated for more than a year prior to the Federation's establishment. This included opposition to key issues still being debated within all branches of the Federation government, including the supposed primacy of Ethiopian courts over Federal jurisdiction, the presence of Ethiopian soldiers in the country and concern for the overall autonomy of the various departments and bureaus within the federal civil service.<sup>667</sup>

Nearly a month after the groups presented their grievances, the Muslim League sent a memorandum directly to the Ethiopian government offering a similar list of complaints and noting that now under federal authority, Eritrea's Muslim population had been "deprived of its civil and religious rights" in much the same way that Ethiopian Muslims had historically been marginalized by the imperial government.<sup>668</sup> Also significant to the League's argument was the fact that in its discussion of the violations, members now linked the previous British administration with Ethiopian authorities as being complicit in transferring Eritrea's wealth and resources outside the country.<sup>669</sup> Negash summarized

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<sup>667</sup> FO 371/102633. British Consul, Asmara to British Embassy, Addis Ababa. September 12, 1953. See also Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 86.

<sup>668</sup> FO 371/108196. British Consul, Asmara to Foreign Office. December 24, 1953. Federal authorities ultimately responded to the public complaints from the Muslim political leadership by sentencing Sultan, Muhammad Umar Kadi and National Party Secretary General Ahmed Abdelkadir Beshir to short-term prison sentences for their alleged transgression of subverting Federal authority. Edward Clark to Secretary of State. February 3, 1956. 775A.00/2-356.

<sup>669</sup> For information on this issue, see Sylvia Pankhurst, *Eritrea on the Eve; the past and future of Italy's "first-born" colony, Ethiopia's ancient sea province* (Essex: Woodford Green, 1952).

the League's complaints as an attempt to present a new, counter history of the Federation's beginnings and inherent failures.

The ML charged that the British Administration had conspired with the Ethiopian government and handed over to the latter both moveable and immovable property of the Italian state. Such property should have been transferred to the Eritrean government. In contravention of the Federal Act and the Eritrea constitution, the Ethiopian authorities had taken possession of Eritrean railways, post and telephone communications which were part of internal communications, and, therefore, under the sphere of the Eritrean government.<sup>670</sup>

Yet despite the League's efforts within its various memorandums to recast the Federation as a prearranged prelude to annexation, much of the actual protests and objection toward federal authorities from 1953-55 reflected the still widely held belief that the Federation could provide the basic mechanisms of independence for Muslims if given the chance. These attitudes emerged throughout the first year of Federal rule in the pages of *Sawt al-iritriya/Dehay Ertra*, which also served as the last legitimate outlet for public dialogue for the League and other concerned Muslims.

### **The Last Gasp of Muslim Nationalist Media**

Within the news reports and commentaries of *Sawt al-iritriya/Dehay Ertra*, federal autonomy appeared as a constant topic of discussion among writers who argued that Ethiopian interference represented the main impediment to regional autonomy. Although printed as a joint Arabic-Tigrinya publication, the Arabic commentaries of *Sawt al-iritriya* gradually assumed a fixation with the historical conditions of Muslim

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<sup>670</sup> Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 94. Negash also alleged that during this period, Ibrahim Sultan was "virtually excluded" from the rest of the ML leadership because of his supposed connections with Unionist leader Keshi Dimetros. Beyond providing a British document mentioning his supposed troubles with the League leadership over the issue, no other documentation on Sultan's alliance with Dimetros has been found and Sultan nevertheless retained his position as Secretary General. *Ibid.*, 95.

“self-governance” and the need to adhere to the local autonomy guaranteed in the original Eritrean constitution. While often highly critical of the political developments, much of the Tigrinya literature within *Dehay Ertra* remained focused largely on the day to day mechanisms of government and usually excluded commentaries concerning how violations against the federation constitution explicitly targeted religious freedom. This dissimilarity aside the two also reflected the reality that for the Muslim League, *Sawt al-iritriya* served as the only major available outlet for members to address the ongoing political developments. Even then, the paper’s limited circulation in and around Asmara had the effect of minimizing much of the organization’s press releases even at a time when the public discussions about the need to protect Muslim from Federation government violations increased.

One commentary written by League Executive Council representative and Adi Keyh branch member hajj Ibrahim Muhammad addressed widespread concerns about the extent to which Muslim rights could even be guaranteed by Federation authorities who appeared so willing to defer to Ethiopian authority and express solidarity with the unionist cause rather than perform their federal functions. Consequently, protecting Muslims and their respective community institutions such as mosques and schools represented the virtual foundation of “Federal rights” in the new government.<sup>671</sup> Likewise, League member Uthman Asholani argued that Eritrea’s major domestic concerns could not be addressed as long as the Constituent Assembly and its unionist majority continued to refuse to fully implement all stipulations of Eritrea’s

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<sup>671</sup> Hajj Ibrahim Muhammad, “How is it going to be with our Rights in the Federation?” *Sawt al-iritriya*, January 17, 1953: 2.

constitution.<sup>672</sup> One May 1954 editorial in *Dehay Ertra* included a speech by Ibrahim Sultan in which the Secretary General proclaimed that the Federation, as defined by the 1952 constitution, had yet to be truly implemented because of the Ethiopian government's refusal to guarantee full freedom of political expression.<sup>673</sup>

Other League members were more direct in their arguments, noting that because Eritrea's Muslim communities and religious institutions had historically been outside the realm of Ethiopian control, regional self-governance represented the "ideal" condition for Muslims by allowing for a truly independent government to function without outside interference.<sup>674</sup> Some observers reasoned that because Eritrea's constitution already provided a guarantee of regional autonomy, particularly in regards to freedom of religion and the right of religious groups to maintain their own institutions, the basic structure for Muslim "self-determination" had already been achieved and now required Eritrean Muslims as a whole to come together and put pressure on Federal authorities to adhere to the enforcement of their constitutional rights.<sup>675</sup>

Despite League members discussions over the constitutional violations through *Sawt al-iritriya* authorities effectively "silenced" Eritrea's freedom of the press by May 1953 as result of the Federation government's crackdown against editors for publishing critical commentaries and petitions against both the Federation and Ethiopian government's alleged "abrogation" of the federal system. Ellingson noted that nearly two months earlier federal authorities first shut down the paper against the legal objections

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<sup>672</sup> Uthman Asholani, "Apply the Constitution, Parliament Members!" *Sawt al-iritriya*, March 26, 1954: 2.

<sup>673</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, "People of Eritrea Rejoice and Guard your Loins." *Dehay Ertra*, May 22, 1954: 1.

<sup>674</sup> "Muslims and self-rule." *Sawt al-iritriya*, July 3, 1954: 3.

<sup>675</sup> Self determination-how do Eritrean Muslims benefit from it?" *Sawt al-iritriya*, May 4, 1954: 4.

from its chief editor Muhammad Saleh Mahmud. In the midst of the controversy, Muslim leaders defended both the newspaper and the need to safeguard autonomous federal institutions for the benefit of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Shaykh Saleh Karrar, the headmaster of Asmara's King Farouk Islamic Institute addressed the controversy, and argued that Eritrea's "autonomous" status as a partner within the Federation necessitated the continuation of a free and independent media.<sup>676</sup> Although Asmara's district court eventually sided with the paper's editors and nullified the government's actions to block publication, the paper nevertheless remained closed under government pressure and only occasionally recommenced with printing until the paper ceased operations permanently by August 1954.<sup>677</sup> *Sawt al-iritriya/Dehay Ertra's* closing in August, 1954 represented, for Eritrea's Muslim communities, only the latest in a series of intrusions by authorities to effectively limit criticism against the Federation's increasingly anti-Muslim, blatantly pro-unionist policies. Even more significant than the destruction of independent media, the government's push to take control over the country's Islamic religious, legal and educational institutions struck at the heart of one of the core issues among both pro-independence and even conditional unionist Muslims.

### **Federation Government intrusion into Islamic Religious Institutions**

Although several of Eritrea's leading qadis expressed concern about the future of Islamic religious institutions even before the formal transfer of power, clerics intensified their efforts throughout late 1952 in objecting to Ethiopia's intrusion into the waqf administration. Arguing that the waqf system was previously under the control of Italian

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<sup>676</sup> Saleh Karrar, "Freedom of opinion and press, as inspired by independence." *Sawt al-iritriya*, March 6, 1954: 4.

<sup>677</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 245.



administrators, Ethiopian-backed Federal officials assumed authority for the regulation, administrative duties and distribution of waqf funds against the objections of Islamic leaders. Most prominently, grand mufti Ibrahim al-Mukhtar decried the actions and proclaimed that the waqf's administrative authority belonged solely in the hands of religious authorities, as defined by Eritrea's constitution.<sup>678</sup>

Because Haile Sellassie's government was determined, according to Bairu Tefla, to "undermine the new structure" of the Federation at all costs by cementing permanent control over Eritrean institutions, influence on the waqf represented just one facet in the broader push to establish control through every possible aspect of regional authority.<sup>679</sup> The indignation against government intervention became even more pronounced during the Federation's first two years after the Mufti's written protests to Federation authorities. Following a dispute in August 1954 in which a government inspector forced the qadi of Asseb to transfer the city's endowments to government officials, the Mufti intervened, examined the qadi's complaints and appealed in a letter to the Federation Interior Minister. In his correspondence, the Mufti made a point of accentuating the waqf's legal autonomy, pressing the minister to "abolish these conspiracies committed by the

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<sup>678</sup> Salim al-Mukhtar, *Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar during the Time of the Federation* (Asmara: Research and Documentation Center), 1-2. Much of this interpretation was based on Article 28 of the Eritrean constitution, which recognized religious bodies as persons before the law and allowed such entities to "establish and maintain institutions for religious, educational and charitable purposes." See Habtu Ghebre-Ab, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: A Documentary Study*, 201-232.

<sup>679</sup> Bairu Tafla, "Eritrea: Remote Past and Present," *Eritrean Studies Review* 3 (2004): 92. For more information about the *waqf* system in the Eritrean highlands, see Abera, "Muslim Institutions in Ethiopia: The Asmara Awqaf."

inspector and order back all documents, endowments, and accounts that have been taken by the alleged committee to the judge's authorities."<sup>680</sup>

Muslim leaders' defense of the legal autonomy of Islamic legal institutions was an attempt to continue the tradition of relative autonomy that the Muslim clergy had enjoyed since Italian colonialism, when local leaders thrived under administrators who provided "subventions to Mosques and monthly stipends to Muslim community leaders and granted shar'ia courts autonomy in matters of personal status, family and inheritance" in exchange for local political allegiance.<sup>681</sup> However, this concern over government intrusion into religious institutions was also a matter that pertained to the religious integrity of Eritrea's Islamic clerics. The mufti alluded to this in a May 1956 protest letter which he sent to the Interior Minister after officials, upon overruling the authority of local qadis who wished to delay prayers for 'Eid al-Fitr, issued a royal decree acknowledging the Islamic holiday. The mufti informed the Minister that the government's proclamation that the delay of 'Eid prayers was lawful only in the event of "rain, a threat, or aggression" was erroneous. He referred to the incident as a "clear intrusion into Islamic religious affairs and the duties of the mufti."<sup>682</sup>

Fears of federal subversion against the affairs of regional Islamic religious authorities increased throughout the Federation's first two years as the government began

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<sup>680</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "The Mufti's Speech in Protest of the Inspector's Inference in the affairs of the Waqf," Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=176&category=letters\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=176&category=letters_mukhtar) (accessed December 12, 2008).

<sup>681</sup> Miran, "A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea," 195.

<sup>682</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "The mufti's Letter to the President of the Assembly in Protest at Interference in the Matter of 'Eid Prayer." [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=116&category=letters\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=116&category=letters_mukhtar) (accessed December 14, 2008).

restricting foreign teachers and instructors from carrying out religious missions across Eritrea. The relatively steady trickle of missions from al-Azhar University that came into the country throughout the BMA era now slowed as the Federal government's denial of licenses to delegations became so frequent that it made entry into the country virtually "impossible" for non-Eritrean Islamic scholars. The mufti became so concerned about federal authorities' involvement that he pleaded for assistance directly from the Egyptian government. In a May 1954 letter written to Egyptian authorities, the mufti revealed his worry about the threat of losing total support from al-Azhar. Despite previous government attempts to keep out the al-Azhar missions, he affirmed that the current mission "found a great acceptance, turnout and appeal from Muslims" that he believed "must be further developed" so as to not deprive the community of Islamic education.<sup>683</sup> The mufti also requested that al-Azhar officials delay calling back the representatives that were still inside Eritrea before their replacements could be guaranteed admission, he believed that federal authorities would again try and prevent their entry.<sup>684</sup>

The mufti's concerns reveal a great deal about the perceptions among Eritrea's leading Islamic savants in how they linked the repression of Islamic activities and marginalization against institutions with the transfer of independent federal political authority to Ethiopian control. The waqf controversy and the struggle to allow religious teachers and Arabic instructors into the country only served to highlight the League's objections to the continued institutional interference.

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<sup>683</sup> Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "The mufti's Letter to the Prime Minister of Egypt on the Scientific Missions of al-Azhar," [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=60&category=letters\\_mukhtar](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=60&category=letters_mukhtar) (accessed December 3, 2008).

<sup>684</sup> Ibid.

Despite the assault against the authority of Muslim religious officials and their administrations, much of the writings and public statements among Muslim League members were devoid of divisive language concerning the privileging of Christians. Even violations against Islamic protocol, including the abovementioned intrusions into the waqf system, were argued through emphasizing the institutional autonomy of the waqf and omitted any reference to the supremacy of Islamic practices, instead highlighting the connection between Islamic institutions and the laws established by Eritrea's constitution. This conviction only intensified with more explicitly anti-Muslim measures throughout the decade. As early as 1953, Muslim complaints of federal inference even extended beyond the previous controversies surrounding the waqf as some activists complained that many Eritreans were even being prevented by officials in the major coastal cities from leaving the country to participate in the hajj.<sup>685</sup>

By the middle of the decade, the League intensified its efforts and appealed directly to the Emperor to explain how “the outstanding problems of the Rights of Eritrea in the domestic and Federal fields” constituted the “prime concern” of the citizenry, especially Muslims.<sup>686</sup> Representatives stated their belief that Eritreans at all levels of society needed to be allowed to “participate in the defence, foreign and diplomatic affairs, Currency, Finance, Commerce and Foreign Communications including the administration of the Eritrean Ports as provided in Article 3 of the United Nations

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<sup>685</sup> “Important, dangerous declarations- the Eritrean Treasurer who Prevents Muslims from going on Hajj.” *Sawt al-iritriya*, June 4, 1954: 2.

<sup>686</sup> FO 371/118744. Memorandum submitted by the Moslem League to H.I.M. The Emperor of Ethiopia, Asmara. January 3, 1956.

Resolution.”<sup>687</sup> Representatives also requested that the Emperor adhere to the Federation’s separate legislative powers as granted by Article 18 of Eritrea’s constitution by allowing for a review of “all the new drafts of proclamation, laws, and Federal application” issued after September 11, 1952 so that the “concerned Eritreans” within the Federal government could reassess their validity.<sup>688</sup> Echoing the ongoing financial hardship throughout their constituencies, the League also made a point of bringing to the Emperor’s attention their concerns that the disregard for institutional autonomy across the country continued to adversely affect the regional economy.

The situation of Eritrea as to the standard of living, employment, economic and commercial activities need to be the concern of Your Majesty in that the different classes of people could secure the necessary means of living, find new projects to work on, thereby improvements in economics and commerce could be had.<sup>689</sup>

The League’s emphasis on the need to protect legal and political autonomy while allowing for greater economic opportunity thus illustrated how leaders continued to embrace institutional protection as the primary concern of the nationalist camp despite the fact that by 1956 “the successive dismantling of the building blocks of the Federation” had largely been achieved with the exception of only a handful provisions that allowed the region any semblance of autonomy.<sup>690</sup>

### **Federal Political Institutions and Muslim Marginalization**

Particularly worrisome for both League members and the wider Muslim community was the fact that even when effective in passing its own legislation, the

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<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid.

<sup>690</sup> Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991*, 163.

Constituent Assembly seemed only to further infringe on Muslim economic livelihood and political freedom. Even well known conditional unionists like Muhammad Umar Kadi could no longer ignore reality that the unionist-dominated assembly had produced an aggressive political program that simultaneously sought to eviscerate regional political autonomy by targeting Muslim rights. In Kadi's hand written, self published monograph *Tarikh Hagerkha Meflat (Knowing the History of your Country)*, the IML President laid out a detailed account of how throughout the early and middle years of the decade the Assembly had devolved from its supposed independent role as Eritrea's legislative branch into a virtual arm of the Ethiopian state, focused almost solely on limiting regional autonomy by pursuing an explicitly anti-Muslim program with help from "the dictatorship" of Chief Executive Tedla Bairu.<sup>691</sup> Observing the developments, Kadi argued that the legislative body, as early as 1953, did not encompass "pro" or "anti" unionist factions as much as it was split between "standard members" who confined their official duties to the legislative sessions and those whose main political dealings occurred in the "secret meetings" outside the assembly with Ethiopian officials and the Chief Executive, which focused on finding ways to explicitly use the legislature to further erode Eritrean autonomy.<sup>692</sup>

After Ibrahim Sultan's failed attempt to introduce a bill allowing for Muslim residents to purchase government-owned land across the lowlands, the Assembly passed the Eritrean Land Tenure Act in July 1953. While in principal the Act merely required that the government extended "the traditional seven-year cycle" of private land

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<sup>691</sup> Muhammad Umar Kadi, *Tarikh Hagerkha Meflat*, 44.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid., 44.

ownership to twenty-seven years and include the payment of tribute to the government, Ellingson observed that it also served “to encourage young men, especially those from the highlands, to take up permanent residence on government owned lowlands” by expanding their plots and effectively monopolizing much of the property across the predominantly Muslim region. In response, mass opposition among Muslims “who feared that lands which had been considered their own would be taken away” erupted, and in conjunction with resistance even among residents across the highlands, officials in the Assembly eventually decided against putting the Act into effect.<sup>693</sup>

While the Land Tenure Act served to only reinforce perceptions throughout Muslim communities that the Assembly represented nothing more than an abuse of its authority, other legislation conveyed to Muslim activists the idea that the body represented a direct extension of the Chief Executive’s unionist program. This included attempts to remove the Eritrean flag from government offices, monitor political meetings among Muslim League supporters across the western province and the major cities, promote Amharic as the working language of government and ultimately override Eritrea’s constitution as a means to further restrict Muslim political power. During Bairu’s tenure (1952-55) each of these aims became pillars of unionist policy, but they reached unprecedented levels with Asfaha Woldemikael election as the second Chief Executive of the Federal government in August 1955.<sup>694</sup>

Ironically, Bairu’s longtime status as a committed unionist did little to endear him to the larger unionist forces. Although as the Federation’s first Chief Executive he

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<sup>693</sup> Ellingson, “Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism,” 170.

<sup>694</sup> See Bairu Tafla, “Asfəh’a Wäldä Mika’el,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 368.

oversaw the dismantling of Eritrea's independent press, privileged Christian unionists in civil employment and increased police surveillance and imprisonment of pro-independence activists, Bairu's refusal to "expedite the dismantling of Eritrea's autonomy" lead to his downfall by mid-1955. The subsequent election of Asfaha Woldemikael demonstrated the full extent of Ethiopian control over the legislative and executive branches and also illustrated the degree to which unionist leaders capitalized on the League's "inherent weakness" as a fragmented force by late 1955.<sup>695</sup>

While serving simultaneously as Eritrea's Deputy Representative to Haile Selassie, Asfaha Woldemikael appointment as Chief Executive increased the speed by which Ethiopian officials and unionists liquidated Muslim citizenship; he achieved this by first divesting Muslims from Eritrean political society through prohibiting the use of Arabic within the Federation government by decree.<sup>696</sup> This attempt to ostracize Muslims was the most destructive step, as it forced out Muslims from administrative positions and encouraged their replacement with government-trained Amharic-speakers. Officials at the American Consulate observed that by late 1956 that Asfaha Woldemikael's measures on the language issue and his refusal to address religious leaders' concerns were the primary reason behind the "increasing dissatisfaction on the part of the Moslem population" with Federation officials at all levels of government.<sup>697</sup>

Asfaha Woldemikael's actions also severely compromised Muslim youth education. The influence of unionist Christian officials within the Ministry of Education

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<sup>695</sup> Negash, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: The Federal Experience*, 112.

<sup>696</sup> For more information on Asfaha Woldemikael's service in the Ethiopian government prior to the Federation, see FO 742/26.

<sup>697</sup> Report, "Eritrean Political Developments," Asmara Consul to State Department. December 14, 1956. NARA, RG 84, Box 3, Addis Ababa, Classified General Records, 1950-58.



resulted in an uneven allocation of funds to the training and hiring of qualified teachers to schools in Christian-majority areas. With Arabic eliminated from the public school curricula and most government funds channeled into predominately Christian institutions in the major cities, Muslim schools fell into considerable disrepair and also restricted the employment opportunities for Muslim teachers both within the cities and rural areas.<sup>698</sup>

In a May 1956 memorandum directed to the Chief Executive, the Muslim Mosques Committee of Asmara pressed Asfaha Woldemikael's administration on the aforementioned violations, arguing that the administration was required to adhere to article 38 of the constitution, guaranteeing the promotion of Arabic (and Tigrinya) in all Eritrean government departments, offices and schools and that the Chief Executive's office was obligated to punish those who were found in violation of the law.<sup>699</sup>

More significantly, the committee expressed its desire to see the government rectify inequalities in the education system by working to "encourage the Muslim students to have instruction in the Arabic language." Echoing the mufti's wishes, representatives also asked the government to allow for the invitation of Arabic teachers from abroad. In addressing the issue of education reform, the committee also commented on the dire circumstances that government discrimination had produced regarding the lack of employment opportunities for Muslim youth. Committee members requested that federal authorities give consideration to "all applications submitted by the Muslim

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<sup>698</sup> For a deeper analysis of the effects of economic marginalization against urban workers, see Killion, "Eritrean Workers: Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958"; Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 125; Semere Haile, "Historical Background to the Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict," in *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, eds. Basil Davidson and Lionel Cliffe (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1988); "The Root of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict: The Erosion of the Federal Act," *Journal of Eritrean Studies* 1, no. 1 (1986): 9.

<sup>699</sup> Moslem Mosques Committee of Asmara, *Memorandum Submitted by the Moslem Mosques Committee of Asmara to the Office of the Chief Executive* (Asmara: 1956).

educated youth who want to obtain employment. It is understood that such applications were all discarded.”<sup>700</sup> While most of the Committee’s concerns were related to issues that touched the everyday concerns within the wider Muslim community, the later actions of the Muslim League leadership attempted to redress the core issue of political representation and its adverse effect on almost every aspect of public life of their constituents.<sup>701</sup> The growing dissatisfaction with the prohibition against the use of indigenous languages, the destruction of independent media and the worsening economic realities all fostered what Redie Bereketeab termed the “deep national resentment” that in turn became “the midwife of a flourishing national consciousness” during the latter federal period.<sup>702</sup> Yet before the League could capitalize on the widening Muslim discontent, its leadership first addressed many of the long-standing internal conflicts that had plagued much of its political program in the post-1952 period.

### **Political Contention between League Leaders and the Rank and File**

At first glance, the Muslim League’s ability to influence the course of federal politics by 1955 suffered from several major disadvantages. Having gone nearly three years without a viable media outlet to replace *Sawt al-rabita* and with *Sawt al-iritriya/Dehay Ertra*’s cancellation the previous year, the League, by the middle of the decade, failed to even reach its constituents and inform them on several of the organization’s policy decisions. The continuing economic crisis across the country left

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<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> Salim al-Mukhtar, *Shaykh Ibrahim al-Mukhtar during the Time of the Federation*, 1-2. See Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 126-132; FO 371/131245. “Copy. Telegram. Asmara 5.3.1958 (Memorandum Submitted by the Muslim League and Federalist Youth Party of Eritrea).” March 5, 1958.

<sup>702</sup> Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation 1890-1991*, 167.

the League on the verge of bankruptcy, which limited its ability to organize. However, the most significant issue that challenged the organization's internal operations during the mid-1950s developed out of the wide gap between the League leadership and the rank and file.

Ibrahim Sultan became a source of growing frustration, especially among his former base of tigre-supporters who came to resent Sultan's position as a supposed "stooge of the Italians" and for focusing on the League's urban-based constituencies. Sultan's partnership with Italian settlers and his acceptance of CAE-backed funding increased suspicions that the League's agenda had veered far off course from its original populist aims. His long-standing association with the League's more prominent Jabarti members also became a source of tigre discontent. Although the MWLP's leadership had accused Sultan since as early as 1950 of being a tool of Italian interests with autocratic tendencies, his alleged transgressions against the predominantly tigre-grassroots by the mid-1950s revealed the extent to which his loss of stature reflected the League's overall weakened condition.

The rural-urban divide within the League also extended to concerns over the close relationship that Sultan had developed with former conditional unionists since his national tour of Eritrea in February/March 1951. Having begun to mend fences with many of the Massawa and Hirigo-based merchants throughout 1951-52 as Federal rule loomed, the Secretary General's partnership now incurred the hostility of many tigre outside of Sultan's own Rugbat clan. Despite the public rhetoric against rival groups such as the IML within earlier commentaries in *Sawt al-rabita* and *Wahda Iritriya*,

Sultan's later courting of IML officials such as Muhammad Umar Kadi demonstrated how the League leadership's newfound emphasis on building support from the coastal, merchant dominated class in an around Massawa became a major priority as the Federation progressed. Sultan's exploits, in combination with the League's overall stagnation in the rural areas in the aftermath of the Federation's establishment paved the way for wider internal dissatisfaction.

Beyond the mainly rural and tigre-based discontent with Ibrahim Sultan, their grievances spoke to the larger disconnect that plagued the organization by the mid-1950s. Although the League's Executive Council and regional branch leaders held prominent positions as religious, civic and economic leaders across the country, the organization's top-down approach, coupled with the never fully unresolved concerns about Italian-settler influence during the Independence Bloc era nurtured a lull among the wider grassroots that largely abstained from the League's new direction. Even in the likely event that Sultan and other League leaders continued accepting Italian funding during the federal period, it proved to be a nonissue in that it failed to alleviate the organization's overall funding crisis that strained both the Executive Council and the general membership. The economic realities limited the leadership's ability to organize opposition to the Federation government's actions and increased dissatisfaction with the League leadership. The League's troubles magnified in the wake of renewed anti-nationalist crackdowns across the province's districts in the months prior to the Constituent Assembly elections in August 1956. Beyond facing threats from unionist-backed leaders, shifta attacks, and the threat of Ethiopian military intervention, many

League candidates also had to contend with nearly daily harassment from police. Some candidates were jailed after making public announcements that they would seek office as part of the new Federal Assembly. Even Ibrahim Sultan, despite his apparent falling out with many constituents, expressed his concern with officials at the American consul about reports that even civilians “expressing opposition to government chosen candidates” had been arrested by the police.<sup>703</sup>

Yet in spite of the League leadership’s increasing troubles by the middle of the decade, the general membership still maintained a rich informal network of political dialogue across Muslim communities, as groups under the League’s broad authority began to push for internal reform as the organization appeared on the verge of complete fragmentation. The fact that the League’s grassroots were able to effect major changes within the organization came in part as a result of the consensus that the League still had the ability to address Muslim concerns against Federal abuses. The League’s weakened position by 1955 and its leadership’s troubles also obscured the organization’s underlying strength. For example, in spite of its past rivalries with the MLWP and Ibrahim Sultan’s falling out with many tigre constituents, the League itself maintained a strong following across the Western Province, particularly in the rural areas where constituents still looked to local representatives within the organization to help address their displeasure as the federal government’s neglect of the areas outside the major cities worsened. Likewise, the combined weight of rural dissatisfaction and the economic stagnation in the cities also helped diminish much of the previous hostility between the League and conditional

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<sup>703</sup> Earle J. Richey to State Department. August 15, 1956. NARA, RG 84, Box 3, File 350, Addis Ababa, Classified General Records, 1950-58. Henceforth cited as NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

unionist Muslims, whose once bright hopes for economic prosperity under Federal rule diminished in light of the “shortage of liquid capital, the failure of the part of the Ethiopian authorities to provide adequate attractions for foreign investors and the continuing difficulties created for foreign business men by the customs authorities.”<sup>704</sup>

The growing frustration and desire for political change ultimately carried over into the League’s national conference in late 1955. The conference not only allowed the League’s various sub-groups to come together and voice their complaints on a national level, but it represented the beginning of several significant internal reforms that carried the League through the remainder of the federal period.

Equally significant to success of the reform movement was the fact that for all their faults, many members of the Executive Council recognized the need to restructure the League as a viable opposition force. With the support of Suleiman Ahmed Umar, Imam Musa and the other members of the Executive Council, the League convened its national conference in December 1955 with the expressed goal of restructuring the League. The result of the conference and its subsequent memorandum represented the greatest reallocation of authority since the organization’s founding and the last significant internal reform in the League’s history.

### **Reshuffling the League**

On December 1, League leaders convened their national conference in Keren with affiliated branches from every province in an attempt to both address the growing federal authoritarianism and to reconfigure the organization’s precise role as an organ of opposition. The conference adjourned with a nineteen-point memorandum designed to

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<sup>704</sup> FO 371/118738, “Eritrea Annual Review for 1955.”

stem to the tide of unionist influence within the Federation government. Although much of the League's concerns echoed their earlier efforts to safeguard autonomy for Islamic religious practices and community institutions, the memorandum also represented the sum total of the League's anxieties about the economic and social hardship that their constituencies now faced. In particular, representatives requested that federal authorities provide immediate subsidies for "public consumption materials including gas, oil, electricity and water" because so many residents remained in a state on chronic poverty.<sup>705</sup>

Reflecting delegates broader economic distress, the League also requested that the Federal Assembly finally agree to fully implement Article 84 of Eritrea's constitution, thereby establishing an Eritrean advisory council to help develop key issues of "public health, budget and infrastructure" across the country.<sup>706</sup> The memorandum even demanded that the Federal government ease "trading regulations" in the major coastal cities to address the ongoing economic depression facing both merchants and residents in cities such as Massawa and Asseb. If much of the League's complaints related to the tangible economic concerns, the League nevertheless managed to also address how the deteriorating conditions had impacted their lives as Muslim citizens.

The memorandum's authors objected to what they believed were the inequalities in how the federal government had restricted the celebration of various Islamic holidays and Sufi festivals and only recognized Christian holidays. League leaders also reiterated their worry that the federal government was preparing for a transition to Ethiopian

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<sup>705</sup> Eritrean Muslim League Conference Memorandum, RDC/001007, 2.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid.

control. The League leadership even declared that “all laws and regulations” issued by the Ethiopian government since the Federation’s inauguration had the right to be “null and voided” by Eritrean officials because of their refusal to recognize the validity of Proclamation 130.<sup>707</sup> In effect, the League’s opposition to the proclamation demonstrated the development of a broad consensus against the very notion that all legal matters, and particularly religious rulings, would fall under Ethiopian authority.

As the Executive Council had done previously, representatives equated their disapproval of Proclamation 130 with other fears about Eritrea’s institutional viability, particularly the need to promote the use of Arabic and Tigrinya within government offices, raising the Eritrean flag on all government buildings and supporting the creation of an independent educational system. The need to develop a comprehensive and modern education system for the new younger generation came across as one of the League’s primary concerns.

Because the future of the nation is based on education and educating the future generations, it needs special attention to the construction of schools in all areas of the country. This kind of education is not going to produce strong men to lead the nation immediately, so we are calling for further efforts, including a portion of the Federation budget for sending Eritreans outside Eritrea to receive foreign education.”<sup>708</sup>

Taken together, the League’s conference and subsequent memorandum revealed how the organization addressed the concerns of its increasingly distressed constituents. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Executive Council’s proposal two months later to outline the League’s new internal organization and broaden its membership demonstrated the

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<sup>707</sup> Ibid.

<sup>708</sup> Eritrean Muslim League Conference Memorandum, 2.



leadership's written acknowledgement that organization needed to adapt its strategies.<sup>709</sup> Beyond serving merely as a political announcement about the new restructuring, the League's February 1956 internal memo also represented the first major attempt since the closing of *Sawt al-rabita* in 1952 to reaffirm the League's status as the vanguard for federal autonomy and in bringing Eritrea out of the "heavy nightmare of foreign colonization" during the previous years.<sup>710</sup> Sighting their contributions in helping steer the creation of the Federation, League representatives proclaimed that the country's "Islamic elements" were responsible for ensuring this "first stage" of Eritrean autonomy and that now no observer could ever deny their "material, intellectual, and political efforts" to the nationalist struggle.<sup>711</sup>

Composed by a three member commission from the League's Central Planning Committee, including Yasin Ba Tuq, Muhammad Omar Akito and the now League-affiliated Muhammad Umar Kadi, the February memorandum also went beyond an historical overview of the organization's contributions to the nationalist movement; it included a draft of the League's new constitution. Expressing the Executive Council's belief that Federal autonomy needed to work to protect Muslim rights at all costs, the commission echoed their belief all members contribute to the restructuring of "Muslim Solidarity under the banner of the League" to insure their overall objectives.<sup>712</sup> Article I of the constitution set the tone by presenting a more overtly religious rationale in the organization's program. Beyond reiterating calls for self-autonomy and defending "the

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<sup>709</sup> See also FO 371/108197. British Consul, Asmara to British Embassy, Addis Ababa. July 12, 1954.

<sup>710</sup> Eritrean Islamic League Management Council/Planning Committee, RDC/001010, 2.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

Muslim Sect,' it affirmed that the League worked “for the diffusion of high and true Islamic values and principals between Eritrean Muslims and educating them about their national duties and rights.”<sup>713</sup>

The League also claimed its newfound moral position by arguing that it represented a source of authority to instruct and educate Eritrean Muslims about “what is right religiously, morally and socially” in all aspects of their lives.<sup>714</sup> As where the League had first proclaimed after its founding in 1946 that it represented a broad political movement composed of *both* Muslim and concerned Christians, the new constitution made no mention of active interfaith membership or agenda and, for the first time, affirmed that as a matter of official policy, League members would participate in political discussions through religious sermons and within the mosques.<sup>715</sup> This policy largely revealed the organization’s concern that its leadership failed to sustain grassroots enthusiasm for its program even as the political situation for Muslims worsened. With the creation of the new constitution, the League offered to its general membership increased access to the mechanisms of political power by decentralizing much of the authority from the national Executive Council and channeling it through direct, popular consensus.

In particular, Articles 4 and 5 revealed the extent to which the League aimed to incorporate wider participation from its members. Article 4 stipulated that every new and established branch would elect a council of twenty-four members by constituents, including a regional Executive Council consisting of a president, vice president,

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<sup>713</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

secretary, and treasurer. Additionally, Article 4 stipulated that each Executive Council would be elected to two-year terms based on popular vote among members. Further illustrating its new decentralized approach, the League affirmed in Article 5 that each regional branch now assumed the responsibility “of preparing its internal organization documents and their internal affairs” without the direct oversight of the Executive Council.<sup>716</sup>

Despite the new turn toward decentralization and increased grassroots input, League leaders remained concerned that defections would undercut overall support. Weary of past conflicts with rival groups such as the IML and MLWP, the League also made an effort to instill loyalty by requiring that members first take a solemn oath of allegiance before other branch representatives.

I swear by God, the almighty, the great that I will follow the Eritrean Islamic League principals and I will sincerely make every effort to realize it and to follow directions of the League authorities and to be a good, gracious member and to avoid anything or any act that contradicts or harms the League’s principles. May God be my witness.<sup>717</sup>

In the event that members betrayed the organization or harmed fellow members, the constitution stipulated immediate expulsion from the League. In applying “dismissal” from the organization, the constitution prescribed that members engage in a “total boycott” of the person, regardless of whether or not the dismissed was a close relative and that they should not communicate with them at any social or religious occasion. Ultimately the new stipulations illustrated that the League, now completely deprived of any direct political influence within the Federal government, sought to reclaim its

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<sup>716</sup> Ibid.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid., 5.

strength by revitalizing its own ranks. And while the organization failed to fully address the root causes of its fragmentation in previous years, the restructuring laid the groundwork for much of the broader grassroots activism that developed throughout the Federation's latter years.

The December conference helped reposition the League to address members' concerns that Federal institutions were now being summarily cleansed of "Islamic" influence by the new Chief Executive. Concerns about Muslim representation had emerged since 1951 with the BA's previous efforts to incorporate Eritreans into the civil service. Now League members claimed that Ethiopia was increasing its authority inside all branches of the Federation government by promoting the Christian identity of its employees, effectively helping to "Christianize" the administrative ranks.<sup>718</sup> These concerns echoed Ibrahim Sultan's earlier warnings, who claimed as early as October 1952 that Haile Selassie and his representatives had placed their allies in influential positions to guarantee Christian control of administration, even as Federation authorities "beat down and imprisoned" politically-active Muslims.<sup>719</sup> The erosion of Muslim rights thus developed with Ethiopian efforts to appeal to the perceived religious affinity between the monarchy and those sympathetic Christians from the highlands.<sup>720</sup> During

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<sup>718</sup> Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 78. See Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1963*, 28. This "Christianization" was, however, also tied to the larger concern that Eritreans as a whole were being excluded from the legislative mechanisms of the Federation government; Eritrean Liberation Front, *The Federal Case of Eritrea with Ethiopia* (Damascus: Eritrean Liberation Front Office, 1963), 53-57.

<sup>719</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>720</sup> See Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 111-147; Bereket Habte Selassie, "From British Rule to Federation and Annexation," in *Behind the War in Eritrea*, eds. Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe and Bereket Habte Selassie (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1988), 32-47. John Sorenson noted that Christianity was simply "one aspect of the civilizing mission which the Amhara saw as their imperial

the second half of the decade, government discrimination against Muslims “gradually led to their treatment as *quasi* foreigners or second class citizens at best.”<sup>721</sup>

State-sponsored privileging of (unionist) Christians also had the added effect of worsening the already dire economic situation among Muslims. With unemployment having reached “an all-time high” of 15,000 in Asmara and with the newfound momentum in the wake of the internal reforms, the Muslim League began to field candidates in preparation for new constituent assembly elections in 1956. Apart from displaying the League’s newfound self-confidence, the campaigns demonstrated a surprising degree of trust in the legislative branch despite the previous years of political maneuvering by unionist assembly members to undermine their own authority to the Chief Executive. As recently as October 1955, just weeks after Asfaha Woldemikael’s election as Chief Executive, the Assembly tried to modify the Eritrean constitution and secure key changes in the Federal government structure, including the adoption of Amharic as the official language of government, abolishing both the Eritrean flag and official seal and allowing the Emperor to appoint the future Chief Executive.<sup>722</sup>

While the League’s public protests helped prevent the changes from being implemented, British officials noted that the weakened condition of both Muslim and Christian anti-unionists left little hope that they could realistically affect any major changes in the government’s policy in the future.<sup>723</sup>

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duty.” See John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>721</sup> Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” 209.

<sup>722</sup> See FO 371/113520. British Consul, Asmara to British Embassy, Addis Ababa. October 26, 1955.

<sup>723</sup> See Muhammad Umar Kadi, *Tarikh Hagerkha Meflat*, 49.

It seems doubtful however whether the Moslems and their Christian allies in the Federalist cause would in fact do anything more positive to resist a move for Union. Meanwhile, strong Unionists have been placed in positions where they can influence to the utmost the forthcoming election (in August); apart from the Secretaries of the Executive itself, the Vice-President of the Assembly, the Chief of the Police and many of the district officials are now prominent members of the Unionist Party.<sup>724</sup>

By late 1956, officials from the office of the Chief Executive also took more proactive measures to neutralize the League's political leadership. As Secretary General and still one of the loudest voices of opposition in the Federal Assembly, Ibrahim Sultan became the first target of Asfaha Woldemikael's purge of nationalist sympathizers. In the midst of the League's reformation and reenergized campaigns in mid-1956, both Woldemikael's administration and Ethiopian authorities "were determined to keep Ibrahim off the Second Assembly in any way possible."<sup>725</sup> In July, officials found their opportunity when authorities accused Sultan of allegedly "insulting a Sudanese diplomat" during his stay in Asmara "for which Ibrahim was hauled to court and was fined \$600."<sup>726</sup> However, after Sultan appealed the ruling and federal authorities transferred his case to the Ethiopian imperial court in Addis Ababa, authorities "converted" the fine into a one year prison sentence. Sultan ultimately received three years probation under the condition that he abstain from federal politics. Living under virtual house arrest by August 1956, Sultan's troubles represented only the first in a series of targeted attempts to decapitate the League leadership.

Likewise, Muslim League Central Planning Committee official and Assembly member Muhammad Omar Akito became a prime target of Federal officials, who

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<sup>724</sup> FO 371/118738. "Eritrea: Annual Review for 1955."

<sup>725</sup> Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation 1952-1962*, 37

<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

successfully voided the results of Akito's electoral victory in the Asseb division, which led to further unrest among League supporters in both Asmara and Asseb.

There are continued reports of increasing dissatisfaction on the part of the Moslem population with Ethiopian activities in Eritrea including one report that a Moslem meeting held in Eritrea after the general assembly declared the election of Sheik Mohammed Omar Achito invalid had been broken up by the police.<sup>727</sup>

Fortunately for the League, the previous organizational reforms did allow many supporters to redirect their efforts even as Federal authorities intensified their crackdown against the leadership. Throughout late 1955 and 1956 Jabarti merchants from Asmara and Massawa under the leadership of Imam Musa established an auxiliary group, the Muslim Youth League, to offset the growing political limitations faced by many in the League leadership.<sup>728</sup>

The origins of the new group resulted from increased harassment by federal police against the League, who throughout mid-1956 prohibited the League from even holding several local meetings among branch members.<sup>729</sup> Accordingly, Imam Musa and other Jabarti leaders "began organizing party groups in Keren, Massawa, Agordat and Tessenei" throughout the next two years that in turn helped coordinate pro-independence activities with local merchants and youth. As with the League leadership, "the members of the club were concerned not only with the gradual loss of Eritrean autonomy but also about Eritrea's weak economy."<sup>730</sup> Several of the association's affiliates, including

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<sup>727</sup> "Eritrean Political Developments." Earle J. Richey to State Department. December 14, 1956, NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>728</sup> The Muslim Youth League should not be confused with the League's previous youth organization shuban al-rabita.

<sup>729</sup> Earle J. Richey to State Department. June 14, 1956. 775A.00/6-1456. See also Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 250.

<sup>730</sup> Earle J. Richey to State Department. November 7, 1957. 775A.00/11-757.

Massawa-based leaders such as Muhammad Umar Kadi also began to aggressively make personal appeals in Jedda to enlist Saudi political and financial support as nationalist activities spread.<sup>731</sup> Ellingson observed that the organization's rapid expansion across the major cities and even throughout much of the western province demonstrated the group's considerable success in siphoning off support from former conditional unionist elements, including many former MLWP supporters.<sup>732</sup> The combined pressures of widespread disenfranchisement with federal rule and the newfound popularity of Muslim Youth League thus remobilized broad Muslim discontent as members increasingly formulated activities with frustrated segments of Eritrea's Christian community.

By 1957, government repression against the official use of Arabic and Tigrinya, continued violations against the internal operations of the waqf committees, Muslim schools and the deteriorating economic conditions throughout the country had all merged to induce a particularly aggressive atmosphere of nationalist discontent among urban residents in Asmara and Massawa. The prior banning of nationalist media outlets also contributed to the public outrage even as the government-backed media painted a facade of a complacent population. The government's refusal to address any major issue concerning rising political tensions proved so transparent that even officials from the American consul observed the notable disconnect between social realities and the picture painted by the government-sanctioned media. Officials in one June cable went so far as to compare the federation's media programs with the Soviet Union's *Pravda*.

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<sup>731</sup> "SENT DEPT 294 RPTD Info Addis Ababa from Jidda." November 24, 1956. 360.012. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>732</sup> Ellingson, "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism," 216.



The Government controlled press in Eritrea seldom prints any real local news. For example not a word appeared in the local press in regard to the recent school strike and riot by the students at Haile Selassie I Secondary School. In the same manner, nothing is ever published in the press about the numerous and increasing attacks being perpetuated on the highways by Shifta bandits.<sup>733</sup>

The Consul's reference to the student strike at the Haile Selassie I Secondary School illustrated that the growing urban discontent among the youth reflected how the growing ranks of activists enjoyed a high degree of religious solidarity. This unity also demonstrated the long-held aims that nationalists and the League in particular had made during the previous years in regards to preserving institutional autonomy. While the strike that first erupted in mid-March had originated after the school's Indian headmaster allegedly made disparaging remarks about both the Islamic and Christian religions to the students, it occurred at a time in which student activism itself became a major element of nationalist/anti-Federal politics.<sup>734</sup> Moreover, the very composition of the student strikers revealed the extent to which disillusionment with the now hollowed-out Federal system had even angered youths from among Asmara's political elites.

Another significant factor in the student strike is that the students of the Haile Selassie School are the sons of prominent Eritreans, mostly government officials, and represent rather the cream-of-the-crop of Eritrean youth. According to two American teachers who are employed at the school, the great majority of the students are very sophisticated in their political thinking. And the majority of them resent saluting the Ethiopian flag and the efforts of the school to instill Ethiopian patriotism into them.<sup>735</sup>

Although the students eventually ended the strike and returned to their classes, its occurrence amidst the wider public opposition to Asfaha Woldemikael's administration

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<sup>733</sup> "Shades of Pravda." Earle J. Richey to State Department, June 21, 1957. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>734</sup> "Political Developments." Earle J. Richey to State Department, June 13, 1957. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.

and its virtual destruction of any remaining political sovereignty broadened protests to the point where the Muslim-Christian divide, at least among the urban youth, provided to have little if any relevance to the general discontent. The US Consul in Asmara Earle J. Richey reported to the state department in June 1957 that “the Moslems and the Coptics are joining forces in opposition to the Ethiopians” as the urban “young people” from both communities was now “taking over the political opposition movement.”<sup>736</sup> The scale of urban discontent among several key sectors, including students, merchants, unemployed workers and rank and file League members helped set the stage for the mass protests that eventually broke out across several major cities throughout early 1958. By then, localized opposition to government policy gave way to nation-wide discontent over the perceived Federal abuses to Eritrea’s institutional autonomy and economic fortunes. In the process, this new period of intensified public mobilization signaled an important shift in how the League and other activists used their Muslim identity to address their criticisms. As many of the activities and protests throughout 1956 and 1957 suggest, concerns over the Muslim institutional freedom and autonomy from among the League leadership and Islamic clerics transformed into more genuine grassroots dissatisfaction that swelled and created an atmosphere of chronic social unrest by late 1957.

## **Conclusions**

From its inauguration in September 1952 and continuing through 1957, the Eritrean-Ethiopian Federation government served largely as a staging ground for the dismantling of the kind of genuine institutional autonomy that both conditional unionists and even many nationalist groups had begun to support after the UN’s passage of

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<sup>736</sup> Ibid.

Resolution 390-A. For Eritrean Muslims as a whole, the period of Federal rule represented a full-scale assault against the foundations of community and religious life at a time when residents across the country looked to their respective religious and educational institutions to address political failings. Ultimately Muslim leaders' efforts to preserve cultural and institutional strength met with the realization that the Federation's very existence served as the major impediment to Muslims' collective security.

For its part the Muslim League, damaged by fissures between its leadership and the grassroots and also compromised by Ibrahim Sultan's continued associations with Italian and urban-based interests, suffered near fatal fragmentation by the middle of the decade. Beyond simply being an inconvenience for its leadership, dissatisfaction and distrust toward Sultan and his inner circle shook the very foundations from which the League had first emerged. Lack of support among the organization's once solid base of tigre-speaking clans across the western province only added to the League's political difficulties throughout the middle of the decade and lead to a further loss of influence following the second constituent Assembly elections in 1956. Only with a dramatic restructuring of the League and its authority did supporters begin to reengage the nationalist program through grassroots organization. Ultimately the reforms carried out by the League allowed for its revival as an important force in nationalist politics and protest. And even though it was weakened in comparison to previous years, League officials continued to focus on broader issues beyond the immediate political crisis by working to address religious and the growing economic concerns within their respective

communities. Building upon the long-standing links between League members and Muslim clerics, activists made a concerted, albeit unsuccessful, effort to prevent continued institutional interference from Federal authorities.

The Federation government's exclusion and marginalization of its Muslim subjects thus helped the League and its allies shape religious identity as a political vehicle. Abuses against Muslim rights and institutions solidified popular notions about the Federation's inherently "anti-Islamic" character. Ironically, the broad disgruntlement among Eritrea's Muslim communities, regardless of ethnic or regional composition, developed in spite of the League's failure to dominate nationalist activity as it had in the past. Indeed the increasingly authoritarian measures by Chief Executive Asfaha Woldemikael and his administration succeeded in not only helping to rejuvenate the League and its cause, but also in killing hopes among the Tigrinya Christian population that the federation remained a viable option for their own freedom and prosperity. In the next three years, the League's place in the nationalist movement gradually morphed with the broader restlessness that swept across the country, as unrest among both Muslim and Christian communities carried far beyond the League's base of nationalist support.

CHAPTER 8: NEW BEGININGS AT THE FEDERATION'S END:  
MUSLIM MOBILIZATION, POPULAR RESISTANCE AND DIASPORA ACTIVISM,  
JANUARY 1958-SEPTEMBER 1961

By 1958, the steady erosion of Eritrean autonomy within the Federation had created enormous challenges for nationalist supporters in discussing their objections to the growing authoritarianism. For activists and Muslim League members in particular, the previous years since Asfaha Woldemikael assumed authority as Chief Executive in 1955 only confirmed their anxieties that the Federal administration represented the main impediment in addressing Eritrean political, economic and cultural concerns. For the majority of Muslim communities, the previous years also illustrated the unprecedented degree of encroachment by the Ethiopian government in both religious affairs and educational institutions. By the end of the 1957, widespread abuses against Muslim religious and educational institutions had become so commonplace that even former unionist Muslim supporters of the Federal system could not overlook the scale of Ethiopian domination in religious affairs.

Although the Muslim League attempted to stave off Ethiopian encroachment by rallying around nationalist representatives in the Assembly and by reorganizing its own internal structure and outreach efforts among the grass roots, the consolidation of power by the Chief Executive left legislators devoid of any real authority. Consequently, the movement for legitimate autonomy took on more aggressive forms of protest by the end of the decade. This chapter discusses how the activities among the Muslim League and its affiliates contributed to the full scale *remobilization* of independence activism that had

been largely dormant since 1950. In addition, it will demonstrate that the precarious nature of nationalist politics during this stage encouraged a marked increase in Diaspora-based political activity, particularly among communities in Egypt and Sudan.

### **Urban Labor Unrest and Muslim Involvement**

By the end of 1957, Asfaha Woldemikael's policies as Chief Executive had set both the Muslim League and the general public on a collision course with Federation authorities. Specifically, the growing concerns of chronic unemployment and unrest in the major Eritrean cities helped facilitate the growing camaraderie between League authorities and the broader labor movement. Although the League and labor activists had worked together closely since the beginning of the Federation to address economic concerns, the general push for a national labor code that had begun in 1956 succeeded by 1958 in establishing a "broad anti-government coalition of urban Eritreans which included both the already alienated Muslim population and the increasingly disillusioned Tigrinya/Christians who made up the majority of the Asmara working population."<sup>737</sup>

Through the previous efforts of the Syndicate of Free Eritrean Workers under the advisement of Woldeab Woldemariam, Eritrea's fledgling labor movement had already carved out a central position by helping organize opposition to the Chief Executive's refusal to institute the proposed Eritrean Labor Code and address Asmara's unemployment crisis. Dissatisfaction against the government increased and helped strengthen the already considerable solidarity between many urban Muslim and Christian factions.<sup>738</sup> However, the rise in labor protests overshadowed more proactive measures

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<sup>737</sup> Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," 26.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

that Muslim activists embraced in the aftermath of the assault against religious and educational institutions. While much of the turmoil that developed in late 1957 and early 1958 resulted from the growing anxiety among both Christian and Muslim urban youth, several veteran Muslim activists also proved to be a major driving force in harnessing the unrest for political gain.

### **Asmara's "Muslim Trials"**

Although he had been one of the earliest and most ardent champions of conditional union, Muhammad Umar Kadi emerged by late 1957 as an aggressive spokesman against the abuses of the Federation government and targeted the Chief Executive specifically for aiming to destroy Muslim religious and cultural autonomy. Consequently, the League's past efforts to discredit pro-Unionist Muslims like Kadi and other mainly Massawa-based leaders gave way to greater cooperation between the League and many former "conditional" unionists.<sup>739</sup> Although now marginally affiliated with the League, Kadi arrived in New York still professing himself as the IML president as well as the UN delegate for the EDF.<sup>740</sup> Regardless of his particular political affiliation, Kadi proved less than successful in accomplishing his ultimate goal of turning UN delegates against Ethiopia's "black colonialism" toward Eritrea.<sup>741</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> The League's support for Kadi's actions did not imply, at least among the Executive Council, that he had now joined the League leadership. Kadi himself did not acknowledge his official position, although Tekeste Negash has claimed that Kadi effectively became "one of the self-appointed leaders of the Moslem League." See Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 126. See also FO 371/131245.

<sup>740</sup> "Complaint on Present Status of Eritrea." George LaMont to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, November 23, 1957. NARA, RG 84, Box 3, File 350, Addis Ababa, Classified General Records, 1950-58. Henceforth cited as NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>741</sup> See Muhammad Umar Kadi, "The Complaint of the Eritrean People against the Ethiopian Government."

Despite his claims of the widespread support for autonomy in Eritrea, Kadi admitted privately to members of the United States' UN delegation that his recent attempts to build support for Eritrea's cause among most of the leading Muslim states, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, fell short.<sup>742</sup> Although Kadi managed to deliver his pamphlet, entitled "the Complaint of the Eritrean People Against the Ethiopian Government," to several delegations, his trip ultimately failed to bring any substantial international attention to the issue. Nevertheless, the League's Executive Council continued to support Kadi's efforts to speak out against the Federation government's abuses.

When Suleiman Ahmed Umar met with representatives of the American consulate in Asmara in late February 1958, he noted that the League approved of Kadi's actions despite the fact that he was not officially part of their organization. He added that "Kadi had now been accepted by them as their spokesman only because of his increasing prominence and that he was not an initiator of the movement; that if he were to disappear, another spokesman would be found."<sup>743</sup> Further complicating the relationship, several League officials and Muslim religious leaders joined Kadi's public declaration against the Ethiopian government and Federation authorities by signing their names to Kadi's pamphlet. Among others, the cosigners included League Executive Council members Adem Kusmallah and Imam Musa, shaykh Muhammad Serraj Abdu, the administrative

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<sup>742</sup> "Complaint on Present Status of Eritrea." NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>743</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation." George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, February 24, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.



Director of the Asmara Islamic institute and Saleh Naser, former president of the Muslim League's youth association.<sup>744</sup>

After being arrested by Ethiopian authorities in November 1957, Kadi was put on trial at Asmara's Federal Court in March 1958 on multiple charges of treason against the Federation government. Kadi was also joined by colleagues from the Muslim League, each of whom were charged with one count of "dealing with a foreign government" without the consent of the Emperor. Although most of the cosigners were jailed for a short time and later released on \$2,000 bail each, hajj Imam Musa and Suleiman Ahmed Umar both received sentences of four years imprisonment for their actions while Federation authorities sentenced Kadi to ten years in prison for sedition.<sup>745</sup> Although the group collectively tried to bring the UN's attention to the abuses taking place at all levels of the Federation government, the trial against Kadi and his colleagues quickly took on strong religious overtones.<sup>746</sup>

Observing the course of the "Muslim Trials," American consul official George Moore noted that the Islamic leadership in Asmara reacted strongly to the initial charges and attended "in great numbers sessions of the trial, and making dire verbal threats of

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<sup>744</sup> See "Complaint on Present Status of Eritrea." NARA, RG 84, 3/350. Hajj Imam Musa and Suleiman Ahmed Umar also signed the letter.

<sup>745</sup> Although he was also tried for leaving Eritrea without a proper exit visa, Kadi was ultimately convicted on the sole count of sedition.

<sup>746</sup> See Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, 130-131. This is an issue that most scholars have not adequately addressed in the context of nationalist development, although several sources noted the sizable protests and demonstrations that took place within Muslim communities in Keren, Agordat and Massawa in response to Kadi's sentencing. See FO 371/131245. March 12, 1958; Eritrean Liberation Front Office, *The Federal Case of Eritrea with Ethiopia* (Damascus: 1965), 15.

civil disobedience if the accused were found guilty.”<sup>747</sup> He added that the defendants received support from a diverse segment of Eritrea’s Muslim population.

That the trials were viewed by many as a form of religious persecution is evidenced by the open interest of leading representatives of the 6,000 person Yemeni-Hadrami group resident here, who normally do not appear to take any position regarding the political activities of their Eritrean brothers in Islam.<sup>748</sup>

The coalescence of religious and political interests during the trials also illustrates the degree to which Muslim leaders intensified their efforts in calling for effective protection of sovereign religious institutions within the Federation. Accordingly, officials noted that Asmara’s Muslim community was greatly disturbed even weeks after the trials and insensed over what residents considered “travesty justice.”<sup>749</sup>

As a token of complaint, the majority of mosques in Eritrea were closed for the evening prayer of April 3 and many remained closed part of the following day, a Friday. They were reportedly reopened later in the day following an order from the Chief Executive to the Mufti, but many did not hold the formal Friday noon service. The significance of this form of religious protest is heightened when it is realized that it took place in the middle of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.<sup>750</sup>

Beyond the broad support of Muslim leaders during the trial, many League representatives had involved themselves in Kadi’s cause in the previous months. In late January representatives from Keren sent a memorandum to authorities expressing both their support for Kadi and their objection to his arrest and forced return to Asmara. Moreover, the League’s memo alluded to the recent activities of Kadi and his supporters

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<sup>747</sup> “Muslim Trials in Asmara.” George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, June 20, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid.

<sup>749</sup> Untitled. George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, June 2, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>750</sup> “Muslim Trials in Asmara.” George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, June 20, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

as being part of a broader campaign to protect political freedom and expression.<sup>751</sup> The League's apprehension only increased in the following months. On February 14, League members staged a peaceful demonstration in Asmara where they protested after the government announced a ban on public gatherings and cited their right to assemble as defined by Article 7 of Resolution 390-A and Article 32 of the Eritrean constitution. Gathering after Friday prayers, a group of representatives composed a memorandum that again addressed the need to enforce the stipulations of the Constitution and delivered their signatures in person to the Chief Executive's main office.<sup>752</sup> Less than a month later in early March, one Muslim League protest in Keren had grown so large that police opened fire on demonstrators, injuring a dozen people and arresting more than one hundred.<sup>753</sup> In response to the crackdown against the city's protesters, residents responded by refusing to open shops and to go to work. By the first week of March, "the entire Western Province" had gone on strike in protest of the recent government actions.<sup>754</sup>

In the context of the widespread resentment, both the League's protest and the "Muslim trials" occurred simultaneously and with greater unrest from all segments of the urban workforce. The general strike, which included approximately 100,000 participants in Asmara and effectively paralyzed the capital city in March 1958, reflected the high level of coordination and mutual support that the Muslim league and its members shared

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<sup>751</sup> "Summary of Petition from Residents of Keren and Sahel, January 28, 1958." Earle J. Richey to American Embassy, March 10, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>752</sup> "Summary of the Telegram to HIM and Chief Executive, allegedly sent February 14<sup>th</sup> from the Asmara group." Earle J. Richey to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, March 10, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>753</sup> FO 371/1311245. Asmara, March 5, 1958. See "Comments of Moslem League Secretary General Concerning Political Demonstrations in Eritrea." George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, March 24, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350; Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia; The Federal Experience*, 130.

<sup>754</sup> Eritrean Liberation Front Office, *The Federal Case of Eritrea with Ethiopia*, 20.

with urban activists. Leaders from the League's Keren branch had already directly petitioned Emperor Haile Selassie during his visit to Eritrea in the previous January to finally address their "six-year-long unanswered pleas for correct implementation of the UN Federation Decision" as a means to "invigorate the economic life of Eritrea, and alleviation of the brutal situation."<sup>755</sup> Indeed, several of the League members who were tried along with Kadi also had considerable experience in Eritrea's labor movement.<sup>756</sup>

Accordingly, the relationship between Muslim political activism and economic concerns could not be ignored. Even the American Consul George Moore warned that if the Ethiopian government could not succeed in "ameliorating economic conditions in Eritrea," then the trials of Muslim activists could lead to even more violent disturbances. For his part, Suleiman Ahmed Umar also took the time to explain to American officials about the League's concerns that the lack of Eritrean autonomy only compromised the economic interests of all citizens, claiming that Ethiopian encroachment into Federation affairs both discouraged foreign investment in local businesses and placed an unfair burden on Eritrean workers seeking stable employment.<sup>757</sup>

### **The 1958 General Strike and the League's Disintegration**

Although attributed chiefly to the efforts of Asmara's heavily Christian labor base, the Muslim League also claimed to have played a major role in fostering the unrest in March 1958. In a March 25 meeting between Ibrahim Sultan and officials at the

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<sup>755</sup> "Summary of Telegram from Keren Members of Moslem League of Eritrea to HIM, January 31, 1958." Earle J. Richey to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, March 10, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>756</sup> The most prominent of these figures tried was shaykh Muhammad Serraj Abdu, who had served previously as the vice president of the HZSKSE under Woldeab Woldemariam. See Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," 20-21.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid.

American consul, Sultan claimed that the Asmara strikers had been both inspired and advised on their activities after observing “the Muslim partial strike of the previous week in Keren and elsewhere in the western province.”<sup>758</sup> For their part, League leaders had coordinated activities both in the Western Province and in Asmara in late February and early March. As early as January, League and religious leaders from across the Western Province had provided a detailed memorandum of their growing concerns in relation to several of the “violations of our constitutional rights,” including the government’s denial of political parties from attending meetings and the increased suppression by the police force.<sup>759</sup> The League succeeded in convincing merchants to close most Muslim-owned businesses throughout the Western Province for four days during the week prior to the Asmara strike. Beyond giving “moral support” to labor activists in Asmara, the League leadership also encouraged merchants and laborers in the capital to rally behind Christian labor activists.<sup>760</sup> Sultan even predicted that unless both the economic and wider cultural concerns were addressed by the government, the general strike could quite possibly lead to even greater instability among Eritrea’s Muslim population that could even spark intervention on the part of the nationalist supporters across the Arab world.<sup>761</sup>

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<sup>758</sup> “Comments of Moslem League Secretary General Concerning Political Demonstrations in Eritrea.” NARA, RG 84, 3/350. In private testimony, Sultan noted that the unrest in Asmara had followed the mass Muslim disobedience centered in Keren and Agordat that arose in the previous months after more than one hundred League officials had sent a telegram to the UN complaining of rampant abuse by Eritrean police, wholesale arrests of citizens and other “anti-constitutional activities” embraced by the unionists in the Eritrean Assembly. Ibid.

<sup>759</sup> Eritrean Liberation Front Office, *The Federal Case of Eritrea with Ethiopia*, 24.

<sup>760</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation.” Earle J. Hickey to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, March 20, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid. In a conversation between Sultan and American consuls George C. Moore and Earle J. Richey, the League leader compared the unrest in Asmara with the previous uprising that had erupted in Budapest in 1956.

Despite this apparent warning about possible external influence, both British and American officials in Asmara seemed unconcerned about the role of outside agitators in causing the urban unrest. Sultan himself went on record and affirmed that the strike was entirely the result of Eritrean discontent.

There was absolutely no foreign organization or participation in the strike, it being an entirely local effort, with the major organizing elements coming from former Unionist party members, the bulk of whom have become disillusioned with the IEG's failure to insure basic human rights granted to the Eritreans under their Constitution and the Federal Act.<sup>762</sup>

Even prominent unionist leaders in the Federal Assembly such as shaykh Ali Musa Radai confided to the American Consul that the activities were orchestrated without any assistance from supporters outside Eritrea.<sup>763</sup> Nevertheless, the intensity of the unrest even before the general strike in Muslim communities did cause concern for some interests parties, particularly among some within the Italo-Eritrean community. When rioting broke out in Massawa on March 13 and more than 8,000 protesters took to the streets, some settlers blamed the unrest on support for Egyptian nationalists and "Nasser's propaganda" and worried that the rioting in Massawa would spread to other major cities.<sup>764</sup>

Although intervention from "outside" elements proved virtually nonexistent, the general strike witnessed an unprecedented degree of cooperation between the League and many former Unionist Christian elements. Attempts to show the Muslim-Christian

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<sup>762</sup> "Muslim Trials in Asmara." George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, June 20, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>763</sup> Untitled. George C. Moore to Secretary of State, April 8, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350. See also Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," 52.

<sup>764</sup> "Eritrean Riots." W. Astill to American Embassy, Addis Ababa. March 13, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

solidarity of the demonstrators took many forms besides the public declarations from the League and labor leaders. According to Gaim Kibreab, the strike's main architects chose the compound of Asmara's Enda Mariam Orthodox Church as the staging ground for their protests since "the organizers wanted to make a powerful statement to the effect that all Eritreans, including the previously staunch supporters of the unification project, had undergone a change of heart and mind."<sup>765</sup> Additionally, many Christian labor activists tried to illustrate to Federation authorities that discontent did not rest exclusively in "Muslim elements" who were supported by outside backers in the Arab world.<sup>766</sup> Former unionist and labor leader Blaata Kidanemariam even noted that tigre frustration with the Federation government had increased to the point that by the time of the strike most tigre communities "were in great sympathy with their linguistic brethren in Eritrea and could be expected to join in future Eritrean-instigated disorders."<sup>767</sup>

Although the general strike did illustrate, according to Tom Killion that the majority of Asmara's Tigrinya/Christian population had largely turned against the unionist position that many had supported in previous years. It also revealed that the Muslim League continued to exercise considerable influence within the broader

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<sup>765</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 135.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid.

<sup>767</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation." George C. Moore to American Embassy, Addis Ababa, March 21, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350. Despite the growing discontent within the Muslim community, Federation officials continued with previous efforts to win Muslim support by proclaiming the Ethiopian government's religious objectivity. In a speech given by Asfaha Woldemikael on the celebration of the Prophet's birthday in late September 1958, the Chief Executive stressed to the public that "For the population of Ethiopia, religion is nothing also than the means by which each can communicate with his God and through which he has the power to distinguish right from wrong." In his appeal to Asmara's Muslim residents, Woldemikael reassured the public of both the Ethiopian and Federal government's intentions to protect Muslim religious equality despite no formal legal guarantees. He claimed that "Freedom of religion, which others have found necessary to put into their constitutions, is for us no novelty, rather something which has been with us through countless epochs." See "Speech Given on the Prophet's Birthday by Asfaha Woldemikael." Earle J. Richey to State Department, October 3, 1958. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

nationalist coalition. Moreover, it showed that its religiously inclusive leadership continued to push its agenda and mobilize on a wide scale in its urban strongholds to work with the mainly Christian majority composition of the approximately 100,000 protesters that gathered in Asmara. The fact that the government's repression of the General Strike resulted in both the destruction of the Eritrean labor movement "and the suppression of all public anti-Unionist organizations" testifies to the fact that the political and economic crises impacted a broad segment of the public, including much of the League's base in the major cities.<sup>768</sup>

Taken together, both the League's support for the protests and Asfaha Woldemikael later decision to abolish all Eritrean political parties while giving Federation security forces extraordinary powers "by which the commissioner could put in jail anyone for up to ten days without bringing any charges" suggests the large-scale social dimensions of the League's involvement.<sup>769</sup> The general strike of March 1958 represented for the League its final act of broad political action within Eritrea. Under the threat of imprisonment as a result of the new ban on all political parties, its leadership fragmented in the months after the strike, as several Executive Council members sought refuge outside Eritrea or were jailed. Although members continued to meet in secret in urban enclaves in Asmara, Keren, Agordat and elsewhere, the League's remnants looked increasingly to the Diaspora communities in neighboring Sudan and especially Egypt to facilitate future efforts.

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<sup>768</sup> Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," 33.

<sup>769</sup> Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation 1952-1962*, 3; FO 371/131245. December 5, 1958. See Zewde Retta, *Ye Eritrea Guday: 1941-1963* (Addis Ababa: Central Publishing, 1998).



### **Eritrean Nationalism goes Abroad**

In March 1959, the Muslim League's symbolic end in Eritrea came when Secretary General Ibrahim Sultan and his colleague Idris Muhammad Adam fled in secret across the western border to Sudan.<sup>770</sup> Having heard rumors that Federation police had begun rounding up several of the “elderly” nationalists, Sultan and Adam purportedly made their way from Keren in a frantic escape. When their car broke down as they headed west, the pair resorted to more drastic measures.<sup>771</sup>

On the road, we stopped and threatened a habesha driver with a gun and made him drive us. We passed through checkpoints in Barentu and when we reached Haykota, police asked us where we were heading and we told them that we were going to Haliste to attend a wedding. They let us go. When we reached near Tessenei-Haliste, we jumped off the car and warned the driver not to say a word. From there, we met Hadi Musa Hussein (from the Marya Tselam Rugbat) and Abdella Idris Mohamed (a teacher from the Ejud-Kassala school) with camels and they took us to Kassala.

After being kept hidden for several days by Sudanese ex-soldiers in a “Khatmiyya Village” on the outskirts of Kassala, Adam's contacts arranged for a taxi to transport both he and Sultan to Khartoum.<sup>772</sup> Following a brief stopover in the city, the pair eventually made their way to Cairo where Sultan claimed he soon met with Eritrean students at al-Azhar to explain the situation. Afterwards, “the students spread the word to all of the embassies and news of their arrival was soon heard in Addis Ababa. In response, Haile

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<sup>770</sup> “Official-Informal Secret.” George C. Moore to American Embassy, Athens, July 1, 1959. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>771</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>772</sup> Mehamed Umar Abdala “Abu Tiyara,” interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, March 23, 1989. Translated by Gebrai Weldeselassie and Mahmud Mai Betot Amar.

Selassie purportedly passed an order for a search squad in Asmara” to gather information about their activities.<sup>773</sup>

Sultan’s arrival in Cairo as a “political refugee” also signaled that the Muslim who had worked for Eritrean independence since the end of World War II were now giving way to a new generation of activists whose transnational dimensions would fundamentally alter the course of nationalist mobilization.<sup>774</sup> Sultan himself alluded to the changing circumstances of the crisis when he argued in a telegram to Edward Mulcahy that because Eritreans had finally learned “to understand the truth of the subjugation and slavery of Haile Sellasie [sic],” the independence movement had to now find a new way to survive despite the dire circumstances. For his part, Sultan sounded to American officials less like a defeated, exiled politician than a reinvigorated leader boasting of his readiness to engage the next stage of the nationalist movement.

We must struggle until the achievement of our goal, and we Eritreans shall make friends with whoever helps us or at least whoever does not oppose us and help Haile Sellasie, and we shall be the enemy of all those friends of Haile Sellasie who help him or hurt us.<sup>775</sup>

Sultan’s apparent confidence was based in his sincere belief that broader social mobilization, particularly among the youth in the Diaspora, held the key to Eritrean liberation. As Sultan’s testimony illustrates, both his and Idris Muhammad Adam’s escape had been made possible with the help of sympathetic networks of Sudan-based Eritrean Muslim groups mainly in Kassala and Khartoum, particularly former soldiers and teachers. Two years earlier, a group of exiles had formed the “Committee for Eritrean

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<sup>773</sup> Sultan claimed that Federation authorities imprisoned his wife for nearly two years and subjected her to electric shock torture before he was finally released and escaped to Kassala. Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>774</sup> Untitled. Ibrahim Sultan to Edward Mulcahy, July 24, 1959. NARA, RG 84, 3/350.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

Nationalists in Khartoum” or *Jamiat Abna Iritriyi bil-Khartoum*. Apart from developing as a social network for Eritreans in the city, the original group followed political events in Eritrea and often sent correspondence to politicians still in Asmara inquiring about the situation.<sup>776</sup> By mid-1957, a subcommittee under the same name developed a more concentrated program centered on assisting newcomers in Khartoum to find food, housing and employment. When Sultan and Adam travelled to Sudan, members of the Khartoum Committee received them to discuss the political situation and helped collect money to send them to Egypt.<sup>777</sup> Beyond the Khartoum committee, the growing diaspora networks benefitted from the involvement of Eritreans who were formerly soldiers in the Sudanese army. According to organizer Saleh Heduq, the rise in the soldiers’ activity in Eritrean political affairs grew out of the wider political transformations occurring in the region.

In the 1920s many Eritreans reached officer rank in the Sudanese army, but after the revolution began they did not reach these ranks. Then the Sudanese started to know who is a real citizen and started to screen more effectively for enlisting and promotions. Actually already after the British left and Sudan became independent, life became very difficult for us inside the army.<sup>778</sup>

Having joined the Sudanese military in larger numbers during the 1940s and early 1950s, many Eritrean soldiers found themselves unemployed after the British withdrawal in 1955 and many were encouraged to participate in the liberation movement by virtue of

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<sup>776</sup> Ahmed Suri, interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, January 26, 1991. Translated by Wodi Qeshi.

<sup>777</sup> Ibid. According to Ahmed Suri, the committee also ran into problems when some members voiced concern about their political involvement and suggested that members “restrict the committee exclusively to social matters.”

<sup>778</sup> Saleh Heduq, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, March 14, 1989. Translated by Abdurrahman Tahanna.

their location.<sup>779</sup> Former soldier Adem Gendifel described how after he left the Sudanese army he began placing posters across border towns in western Eritrea advocating an armed struggle.<sup>780</sup> As clandestine political activity increased in the wake of the 1958 general strike, many of the former soldiers took on new roles as transport guides to take Eritreans across the border.<sup>781</sup> For the organizers of the networks that sprang up throughout Kassala by the end of the decade, contact with their colleagues in Eritrea usually came without difficulty, as their proximity to the towns along the porous border between the Western Province and Sudan made contact so routine that often there was “no difference between inside and outside.”<sup>782</sup> As a result, an intensified nationalist impetus developed organically as “the public awareness reached into Sudan” and encouraged active interest in addressing the deteriorating situation within the country.<sup>783</sup>

### **Eritrean Liberation Movement**

While the Kassala and Khartoum-based groups facilitated activists’ movements across the border and procured safe passage to other locations, Eritreans in the northeastern city of Port Sudan formed the core group of activists that became the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), the first major opposition group to emerge from the Diaspora. The main thrust of political activism in Port Sudan came from Muhammad Se’id Nawad and a core group of urban professionals. Born in the western Sahel in 1936, Nawad spent much of his adolescence in Port Sudan and eventually found work for the

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<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

<sup>780</sup> Adem Mehamed Hamid “Gendifel,” interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, February 9, 1991. Translated by Mehari Testaledet. Henceforth cited as Adem Gendifel.

<sup>781</sup> Ibid.

<sup>782</sup> Saleh Heduq, interview.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid.

Eastern Telegraph Company. His interest in nationalist politics caused him to briefly join the Sudanese Communist Party before becoming involved in Eritrean affairs. According to colleague Saleh Ahmed Eyay, Nawad first approached a group of colleagues in Port Sudan in November 1958 with the idea of establishing a new organization to liberate Eritreans from Ethiopian control.<sup>784</sup> With a population of approximately five thousand resident Eritrean students and workers, the organization benefitted from an energized youth base. The success in promoting the ELM or *haraka* as it became known- as a force among Diaspora youth enabled the group to organize across the country during the next two years, including in Gerba, Gederef, Medeni, Khartoum, Toker and Kassala.<sup>785</sup> Nawad recounted that initially many concerned Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt did not set out to create their own organization but simply to find ways to support in secret those political organizations “which were prohibited to work inside Eritrea” due to the government crackdown.<sup>786</sup> Nevertheless, members had by late 1958 come to the conclusion that the virtual evaporation of organized political parties inside Eritrea and the jailing of most nationalist and labor leaders required the establishment of a new political entity to impact the situation.<sup>787</sup> The secretive, cell-based organization of the ELM thus developed out of the uniquely “Eritrean experience” of the late 1950s in which clandestine activities became the only recourse for activists.<sup>788</sup> Consequently, the ELM’s policy of recruiting new members through cells of seven people revealed a basic strategy

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<sup>784</sup> Saleh Ahmed Eyay, interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, January 10, 1988.

<sup>785</sup> Muhammad Se’id Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya: al-Haqiqa wa’l-Ta’rikh*, 17-18. Haraka/Harakat translates as “movement” in Arabic.

<sup>786</sup> Mehamed Said Nawd, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, July 11, 1988. Spelling is based on Schröder’s model.

<sup>787</sup> Muhammadberhan Hassan, *Menqesqas Harnet Ertra: ma’arfo kab ma’arfotat gu’azo hagerawi qalsna* (Asmara: 2001): 21.

<sup>788</sup> See Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 9.

in which members infiltrated various institutions within the country including schools, police departments, and others by gradually increasing membership through political education. At its heart, the ELM's operation reflected a grassroots educational program in which activists emphasized three basic aims, the political liberation of Eritrea, the complete unity of Eritrean population and the "creation of democratic political power" within the country.<sup>789</sup>

While the process of building the movement took several months, Nawad claimed that the ELM's success developed once branches in most major cities and towns established their own "local program according to its situation" which in turn led to considerable grassroots support.<sup>790</sup> Known colloquially as Mahber Shewate or "group of seven," the ELM activists inside Eritrea also made important inroads and "achieved great success" by tapping into the discontent within the Eritrean police force and especially the Central Investigation Department in Asmara.<sup>791</sup> In addition, the broad support for the ELM's activities among secondary school teachers also served as an important base to interact and encourage greater student involvement in the movement

Although influenced by the ideology of socialist-inspired movements taking place across Africa, espousing a rigidly secular program and having a leadership that genuinely supported ethnic and religious unity among all Eritreans, the ELM's heavily Muslim composition can not be overlooked in exploring how members achieved their initial success. Even its secular-minded leaders in Port Sudan made a point of beginning their

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<sup>789</sup> Ahmed Suri, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, January/February, 1991.

<sup>790</sup> Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 24.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

first official meeting with a group prayer in which each of the eight original members swore upon a Qur'an to take an oath to support the cause.<sup>792</sup>

Its almost exclusively Muslim composition both in the Sudanese branches and in most of the Eritrean cities beyond Asmara demonstrated the organization's particular appeal to disenfranchised Muslim youth.<sup>793</sup> While the ELM made explicit efforts to reach out to Christian youth and segments of urban labor to emphasize religious cooperation within their cell structures, the organization's prominent Muslim membership only increased as the economic situation worsened by the end of the decade. According to Nawad, the religious imbalance in some ways benefitted the ELM's activities due to the strategic location of many prominent Muslim supporters who used their connections across the Red Sea region to garner support among the Eritrean communities outside Sudan, particularly in places such as Saudi Arabia. Eritrean merchants and workers in Jeddah provided one of the more important bases of support in both raising funds for the organization and in disseminating information about the new nationalist movement through Arabic political tracts and letters.<sup>794</sup> Yet regardless of its heavily Muslim composition, the ELM's leadership in Port Sudan proceeded from the belief that Ethiopia's past efforts to divide Eritreans along religious lines as well as to encourage "the regional and tribal sensitivities" required that one of the organization's central goals be "removing the wall of doubt and suspicion among the Islamic and Christian sects" by uniting them around the independence cause.<sup>795</sup> Ironically, the

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<sup>792</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>793</sup> See Muhammadberhan Hassan, *Menqesqas Harnet Ertra*.

<sup>794</sup> Muhammad Se'id Nawad, telephone interview with author. August 3, 2010.

<sup>795</sup> Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 14.

ELM's new and seemingly radical message of religious unity had been uttered ad nauseam by League leaders for much of the previous twelve years.<sup>796</sup>

### **The Muslim League's Ideological Influence on the ELM**

The ELM's success in developing clandestine communication networks both in Sudan and western Eritrea relied heavily on the participation of former Muslim League elements. Specifically, the ELM's initial growth benefitted from the active support of urban-based Muslim merchants in Asmara, Keren and Massawa, many of whom used their contacts to secure communication and supply lines along the coast cities and across the Eritrean interior.<sup>797</sup> Also key to the ELM's activities was the support from Jabarti leaders in Asmara and other major cities. Despite the economic situation, several Jabarti supporters allegedly helped ELM cells raise the necessary funds for many of cross border travels.<sup>798</sup>

The ELM also found support from several remaining members in the now powerless Eritrean Assembly who were previously affiliated with the League, including Osman Hindi, Muhammad Umar Akito, Muhammad Saleh Musa and others.<sup>799</sup> Some former officials, such as newspaper editor Muhammad Saleh Mahmud also lent their services to the group.<sup>800</sup> Like the League before it, the ELM allegedly received the private backing of Eritrea's Islamic religious elites, particularly Ibrahim al-Mukhtar. According to Nawad, the mufti worked "behind the scenes directing and agitating

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<sup>796</sup> Ahmed Suri, interview.

<sup>797</sup> Muhammad Se'id Nawad, interview.

<sup>798</sup> Ibid.

<sup>799</sup> Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 27.

<sup>800</sup> Mehamed Said Nawd, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, December 19, 1987. Spelling is based on Günter Schröder's model.



through individual communications” despite the fact that he continued to refrain from official membership because of his “sensitive religious position.”<sup>801</sup> Additionally, several khalifas of the Khatmiyya in Keren and Agordat contributed their services by instructing their supporters across the Western Province to provide material assistance and shelter to ELM cell leaders during their travels.<sup>802</sup> According to ELM founding member Saleh Ahmed Eyay, several of the “old politicians” in and around Keren that helped organize the initial cells had been experienced activists within the Muslim League, including several teachers and tradesmen.<sup>803</sup> In Asmara, the ELM also benefitted from the involvement of a large number of former members of the Muslim League Youth Association, some of whom eventually served on the ELM’s Executive Council in Asmara.<sup>804</sup>

Although the ELM helped organize a new generation of activists that had come of age with increasing frustration at the injustices during the Federation, their broad nationalist objectives filled a political void that resulted in many members viewing the new organization as a needed successor to the League. Moreover, the ELM’s program was almost indistinguishable from the League’s earlier proclamations to the point that many of its specific arguments paralleled the League’s nationalist platform during the earlier part of the decade, especially the ELM’s “redefinition of a politically distinct, pluralist, and secular Eritrean State; a reassertion of the Eritrean demand for

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<sup>801</sup> Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 81-82.

<sup>802</sup> Muhammad Said Nawd, interview.

<sup>803</sup> Saleh Ahmed Eyay, interview.

<sup>804</sup> Saleh Ahmad Eyay, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, July 13, 1988.

independence on the basis of Ethiopia's violation of Eritrean constitutional rights" and a "rejection of Pan-Ethiopianism."<sup>805</sup>

While the ELM's leaders may have viewed themselves as overtaking the "elite nationalism" that had, in their eyes, failed to address the demise of Eritrean sovereignty, its basic ideological thrust represented a validation of the previous efforts of both League leaders and other groups of the Independence Bloc.<sup>806</sup> Apparently, even Ibrahim Sultan believed in the continuity between the two organizations. Former ELM official Muhammadberhan Hassan claimed that Sultan sent a secret telegram in 1960 addressed to Haraka supporters stating, "we al-rabita are one with you in our mission and we are going around the countries to tell them to support and stand by the people of Eritrea."<sup>807</sup> Even prior to Sultan's alleged statement of support, ELM leaders had made efforts to gain the support of established nationalist leaders in Cairo through letter writing campaigns and by sending some of their leading representatives, such as Tsegaye Kahsay, abroad.<sup>808</sup> Regardless of its leaders behind-the-scenes efforts, the basic strategies, arguments and aims of the ELM illustrated its connection to the League's ideological legacy.

Although ELM leaders espoused an aggressively secular program, it nevertheless benefitted from the apprehensions of Muslim communities in a similar way to the League. In addition, the ELM's agenda to liberate Eritrea through covert organization and aggressive Diaspora-based activism represented a new avenue for the nationalist

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<sup>805</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for independence*, 100.

<sup>806</sup> Ibid.

<sup>807</sup> Muhammadberhan Hassan, *Menqesqas Harnet Ertra*, 50.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid., 49. See Tsegaye Kahsay, interview with Günter Schröder. Rome, Italy, May 28, 1988.

movement. By tapping into the discontent of merchant communities, clerics and especially Muslim youth, the ELM demonstrated that political activism against Federation abuses could continue even without the presence of formal political parties. While the ELM's urban component was in many ways unprecedented due to its de-emphasis on religious identity and its representation of a true "cross-section of Eritrean society," many members had already gained experience in previous political organizations.<sup>809</sup> Despite claims that the ELM developed its urban base by using a newfound "secularization" as a strategy to "reconcile the Moslem-Christian schism," these religious-based divisions among Eritrean activists had been largely mitigated with the growth of Christian discontent that characterized much of the support behind the labor strike in March 1958.

Nevertheless, the ELM's particular organizational strategy, coupled with the composition of its membership, helped sustain its early outreach efforts despite the logistical limitations. According to Ruth Iyob, the organization's success came largely from its substantial investment in Eritrean civil society.

The use of the cultural arena as a vehicle for national reconciliation and mobilization was one of the most significant developments of this period. Social gatherings, sports and tea houses were transformed into mobilization centers for youth, workers, and small traders.<sup>810</sup>

In addition to the broad social mobilization among the youth and urban workforce, one of the ELM's greatest strengths was its ability to take advantage of the already well-developed national identity among most Eritrean soldiers based in Sudan who now offered their services to the new organization. In explaining the ELM's

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<sup>809</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 150.

<sup>810</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for independence*, 99.

advantage in procuring soldiers' support, Nawad recalled that through their service in the Sudan army in previous years they "were bonded together by belonging to the Eritrean nation and not because of tribal or clannish affiliation. They enjoyed a high degree of consciousness and deep nationalist spirit."<sup>811</sup>

Despite the initial claims of the ELM's success, the organization's insistence on secrecy, its decentralized activities and political agenda of non-violence failed to persuade a large segment of the Diaspora activists that Eritrean "liberation" could in fact be achieved without taking up arms. Whatever its intellectual and political contributions, the ELM's short-lived in prominence in the movement gave way to a more aggressive nationalist faction. The establishment and eventual dominance of the counter organization that became the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) transformed the course of nationalism not simply by advocating armed struggle, but by dramatically shifting the debate about Muslim identity in the context of national liberation.

### **Transnational Activism and the ELF's Origins**

While the ELM continued to build up its membership within Eritrea and its branches in eastern Sudan, a wider and more aggressive movement developed among the political exiles and students principally in Cairo. The growth of the exile community in Cairo during the 1950s offers an important avenue to better understand how Diaspora-based mobilization contributed to the growing urgency in the nationalist movement. From a purely religious perspective, Cairo already held an important place for generations of Eritrean Islamic scholars who sought instruction at al-Azhar University. Many of Eritrea's most prominent Islamic clerics, including Ibrahim al-Mukhtar,

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<sup>811</sup> Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Iritriya*, 19.

attended the University after engaging in preliminary study at schools in Eritrea and Sudan. Other members of the Islamic clergy claimed to have had ancestors who attended the school as far back as the sixteenth century. Consequently, Cairo boasted a sizeable Eritrean community even prior to the influx of political exiles that began arriving in the mid and late 1950s.<sup>812</sup> In addition, Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's earlier efforts to solidify relations between the Eritrean 'ulama' and al-Azhar officials had strengthened the institutional relationship by arranging for delegations of teachers and Arabic instructors to travel from al-Azhar to assist in strengthening curricula within Eritrea's Islamic schools.<sup>813</sup> However, Eritrean student participation also had broader ramifications than just religious training, as many students helped chart a new course of nationalist activity throughout much of the next decade.<sup>814</sup>

Some observers have commented that the nationalist migration occurred mainly because by the mid-1950s, Cairo had become one of the major centers of growing Arab nationalist thought.<sup>815</sup> Indeed, the positioning of Eritrean students in the heart of the Arab world during the 1950s helped produce an increasingly aggressive cross section of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist student activists. Wolde-Yesus Ammar also noted that Eritrean

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<sup>812</sup> Miran argued that this proximity came about largely as a result of Italian colonial policy and its effect on Muslim learning in which "Eritrean Muslims were able to travel more freely for religious education in the Middle East, especially to Egypt and the Hijaz," resulting in the emergence of "a more conscious Muslim urban intelligentsia." Miran, "A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea," 202.

<sup>813</sup> See Ibrahim al-Mukhtar, "Letters," Ismael al-Mukhtar, [http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?category=letters\\_mukhtar&type=viewnew](http://www.mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?category=letters_mukhtar&type=viewnew) (accessed December 1, 2008); Miran, "Grand mufti, érudit et nationaliste érythréen." Prior to the establishment of the Federation, Muslim League members worked with British officials in guaranteeing entry for al-Azhar representatives. See FO 742/23.

<sup>814</sup> Curiously, Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti claimed that the Eritrean Student Club did not espouse any particular religious program or agenda, and that the Mufti was not in direct contact with the organization during the period in question. Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, telephone interview with author. January 5, 2010.

<sup>815</sup> See John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Muslim students were “among the first” to be directly exposed to the broadcasts and writings of Arab nationalist leaders. Consequently, “tuning to Cairo became a long-lasting habit to many Eritrean nationalists with some knowledge of Arabic.”<sup>816</sup> As early as 1950, concerned al-Azhar students became involved in Eritrea’s political debates when a group of students submitted their own pro-independence memorandum to delegates when the UN Commission of Inquiry stayed in Egypt on their way to Eritrea.<sup>817</sup>

However, the most significant aspect of student political activism developed with the formation of the Eritrean Student Club at al-Azhar in January, 1952.<sup>818</sup> Although forming after a series of prolonged discussions between a core group of eighteen students, the Club’s activities picked up in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution and the organization functioned initially as a charity dedicated to assisting newly arrived Eritrean students.<sup>819</sup> Former club member Abdelkarim Ahmad noted that the organization also helped foster national unity by downplaying regional and cultural differences between members and thus “there was no strong ethnic differentiation among the Eritreans in Cairo at that time.”<sup>820</sup> Although concerned primarily with student welfare, club leaders closely followed events in Eritrea and by 1957 the club itself

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<sup>816</sup> Wolde-Yesus Ammar, “The Role of Asmara Students in the Eritrean Nationalist Movement, 1958-68,” 64.

<sup>817</sup> Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Thikryati an Dewr al-Haraka al-Talabiya Labina Iritriya fi Misr* (Cairo: 1994), 35.

<sup>818</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>819</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. According to Abdelkarim Ahmad, “whenever a student came to Cairo and the club he received from the club two suits, one for summer and one for winter and he was fed and given a place to sleep till he got a scholarship.” See Abdelkarim Ahmad, interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, January 7, 1988. Translated by Dr. Mehamed Said Beshir.

<sup>820</sup> Abdelkarim Ahmad, interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, January 7, 1988. Translated by Dr. Mehamed Said Beshir.

functioned as an important body to facilitate nationalist activity.<sup>821</sup> Beyond procuring scholarships for newly-arrived students, the club emerged as a quasi-information desk on developments in Eritrea and organized several anti-Ethiopian demonstrations during the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>822</sup> The club's strategic location also allowed its members to meet with various Eritrean delegates during their international travels. While en route to New York to submit his memorandum, Muhammad Umar Kadi stayed with club members in Cairo who allegedly helped arrange a meeting between him and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld.<sup>823</sup>

Club members also coordinated activities aimed at promoting greater cultural and political unity among students by organizing group discussions about Eritrean history, guest lectures with professors and political activists and participating in dialogues with other student groups.<sup>824</sup> According to co-founder and former Club president Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, club members strongly followed political events in Egypt and consequently took in the basic tenants of "Nasserism." Supposedly, Nasser himself spoke in favor of the club's objectives and on various occasions met with student representatives, whom he encouraged in private to fight for their independence.<sup>825</sup>

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<sup>821</sup> One of the first nationalist leaders to work with the Club was Woldeab Woldemariam, whose resettlement from Eritrea to Cairo was facilitated by club members, who procured him a job as a Tigrinya instructor. Students in turn worked with Woldemariam in letter writing campaigns and organizing other political activities. Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Thikryati an Dewr al-Haraka al-Talabiya Labina Iritriya fi Misr*, 35. Later, Woldemariam began broadcasting his own nationalist radio program, "Radio Free Voice of Eritrea" from Cairo.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>823</sup> Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, interview.

<sup>824</sup> Preparatory Committee for Golden Jubilee of Eritrean Students Club, *Resalah al-'Jial* (Cairo: Eritrean Students Club, 2002), 1-12. I am grateful to Professor Jonathan Miran for bringing the two previously cited texts to my attention and granting me access.

<sup>825</sup> Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, interview.

Throughout the 1950s and particularly by the end of the decade, club leaders involved themselves in the wider political movements taking place across the Islamic world. Other students participated in the growing activism among Diaspora communities by taking part in meetings in Port Sudan and Kassala. In other instances, club members branched out and participated in Islamic youth conferences in Pakistan, Egypt and elsewhere. By the end of decade, club members Hamid Adem and Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirt also participated in the creation of the African Student League founded in Cairo under the supposed encouragement of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir.<sup>826</sup> In addition, club representatives developed more concrete relationships directly with the nationalist leadership in Eritrea, as delegates began making trips to Eritrean cities to gather money in secret for their activities. Consequently, many of the student representatives came into contact with prominent nationalist leaders as well as arranged meetings with Islamic leaders and Muslim League officials in Asmara, Mendefere, Keren, Agordat and other cities.<sup>827</sup> As the repression of political expression increased after the strike, the Club’s rhetoric took on a similar tone with the League’s defense of Muslim institutional autonomy.

At a 1959 conference of African-Asian youth organizations in Cairo, a delegation from the Club argued that the Federation could only continue to exist if Ethiopian authorities were willing to allow local officials to retain control of Eritrea’s internal affairs, including the management over taxation, transportation issues, customs, religious and educational institutions and other areas of governance. According to the

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<sup>826</sup> Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, *Thikryati an Dewr al-Haraka al-Talabiya Labina Iritriya fi Misr*, 32-33.

<sup>827</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



representatives, this was needed to ensure that Ethiopia respected the autonomy of the national Eritrean government.<sup>828</sup> Significantly, the delegation's platform mirrored the consensus of the Muslim League, which had long-proclaimed the necessity for maintaining independent, local institutions in the political decision-making process.<sup>829</sup> Moreover, the tone of the nationalist language among the Eritrean students focused on dispelling the perception that Eritrea shared any cultural or political affinities with Ethiopia. In this respect, the Club's also reflected Eritrean independence as argued by Ibrahim Sultan and other League officials before the Four Power Commission in 1947 and the UN General Assembly two years later.<sup>830</sup>

Activism among Cairo students and exiles only increased after the arrival of Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Muhammad Adam in late March, 1959. According to the latter, most of the leading student representatives supported the idea of launching an armed struggle and by December 1959, they had decided to form a new organization for that explicit purpose. Nevertheless, supporters remained largely inactive in proceeding with any concrete political plans for the first half of 1960, although according to Idris Uthman Glawdiyos the leadership did establish an Executive Council in early February.<sup>831</sup> The founding of the ELF finally took place in July when eleven members came together to refute previous efforts at a peaceful resolution and establish a guerilla-based movement

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<sup>828</sup> See Preparatory Committee for Golden Jubilee of Eritrean Students Club, *Resālah al-jiāl*, 52-61.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid.

<sup>830</sup> See Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies, "Report on Eritrea," C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM Sixth Hearing; G.A.O.R., First Committee, Third Session, Part II, April 5-May 13, 1949.

<sup>831</sup> Idris Usman Glawdiyos, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, January 1, 1988.

for national liberation.<sup>832</sup> Under the primary leadership of its chairmen Idris Muhammad Adam the ELF quickly emerged as the dominant political entity across the diaspora in Northeast Africa and the Middle East. With the outbreak of armed resistance, and specifically the rise of the ELF, Islam and Muslim identity became increasingly tangled with more aggressive nationalist articulations that emerged as the Federal system gave way to formal Ethiopian occupation.

### **The ELF's role in Reshaping Eritrean Nationalism among Muslims**

While the growth of the ELF signaled a dramatic turn in the course of political activism, it also had significant consequences on the role of Muslim identity as a tool for articulating a new kind of Eritrean identity. This identity was fundamentally linked with activists in the Diaspora as the principal agents of change on the eve of Eritrea's war against Ethiopia.<sup>833</sup> In particular, student involvement in Cairo contributed the success of many of the veteran Muslim nationalist politicians in building support. According to Abdelkarim Ahmad, the decision to create the ELF did not take place in July 1960 as widely claim, but actually several months in December 1959 when a group of students and Idris Muhammad Adam went on a retreat to Jebel Muqadam on the outskirts of Cairo. After taking a secret oath and agreeing to launch an armed struggle, participants

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<sup>832</sup> The eleven members included Irdirs Glawdiyos, Idris Muhammad Adem, Muhammad Saleh Humed, Said Ahmed Hashim, Adem Akte, Ibrahim Idris Bileni, Said Hussein, Abdelqader Ibrahim and others. Taha Muhammad Nur, interview with Günter Schröder. Rome, Italy, May 28-29, 1988.

<sup>833</sup> See Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 109; Uthman Salih Sabbe, *Jughrafiyya Iritriya* (Beirut: Dar al-Kunuz al-Abadiyya, 1983); Wolde-Yesus Ammar, *Eritrea: Root Causes of War & Refugees* (Baghdad: Sindbad Publishing, 1992), 139-149. I am grateful to Solomon G. Kefela for providing me with a copy of the latter text. At times, even Eritrean activists living in Cairo suffered the wrath of the Ethiopian government. In November 1961, several members of the Eritrean Student Club were injured during a protest in front of the Ethiopian embassy when Ethiopian soldiers allegedly opened fire on the group of sixty students as they waved the Eritrean flag. Ironically, some of the students were later arrested by Cairo police for causing a public disturbance. Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, interview.

elected Adam as its chairman and began the process of expanding membership. However, other accounts have somewhat downplayed student influence in actually calling for the new nationalist body. Instead, some have argued that the ELF was created only in the aftermath of Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Muhammad Adam's 1960 diplomatic visit to Saudi Arabia, where the pair "made contacts with the Eritrean community" and later expressed their desire to "form an organization and start an armed struggle."<sup>834</sup>

However, Ibrahim Sultan's recollections of this period paint a far more complex picture of the supposed unified "desire" among Eritrea's nationalist leaders. He contended that even much of the leadership was divided along opposing ideological grounds. Sultan claimed that the most decisive issue that confronted Muslim communities in western Eritrea was the divisions within the Beni-Amer (tigre) population, which was divided into two camps, those who identified with the traditions of the Khatmiyya tariqa, and those who began displaying reactionary, Wahhabist leanings, including Idris Muhammad Adam and his group of supporters.<sup>835</sup> Sultan's description of the rapport between Idris Muhammad Adam and Saudi prince Faysal (including the latter's decision to give the former funding to "form a party and destroy *al-rabita*") suggests that by the early 1960s, there were clear ideological divisions within Eritrea's Muslim community, as some hard line activists perceived the Muslim League as a

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<sup>834</sup> Proceedings of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples, *The Eritrean Case*, 151. Sabbe allegedly helped finance and arrange their visit to Saudi Arabia.

<sup>835</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview. Ibrahim Sultan's account contrasts widely with Sabbe's recollections in *Jughrafiyya Iritriya* on the nature and degree of factionalism in the establishment of the ELF. See Eritrean Liberation Front, *The Ethiopian Unilateral Abrogation of the UN Federal Resolution* (Damascus: Eritrean Liberation Front Office, 1967).

political entity too outdated and moderate to lead an armed struggle.<sup>836</sup> For his part, Idris Muhammad Adam claimed that ELF members later found refuge and support among conservative Saudi elements.

When Eritreans came illegally to Saudia and claimed to be ELF they were not touched. This came after we met with King Faysal after he became King and he gave us facilities. Eritreans in Saudia had come as skilled workers as at that time Saudia was open for workers from all sides. There was no real Eritrean association among the workers as they were lacking the leaders for it. When we visited Saudia for the first time we met with all the young Eritreans in Jeddah after speaking with King Saud.<sup>837</sup>

Sultan's mentioning of his alliance during this period with other former the Muslim League members against Idris Muhammad Adam's faction suggests that a faction within the early fluid structure of the ELF continued to embrace a more inclusive perspective even when armed rebellion was seen as the next course of action.<sup>838</sup> Even Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's formal "non-political" role aligned with that of Ibrahim Sultan's ideological wing by his continued defense of Islamic religious institutional autonomy even after Eritrea was officially annexed by the Ethiopian government. Ibrahim al-Mukhtar's previous alleged support for the ELM is also indicative of the mufti's predilection toward supporting nationalist efforts that were led by activists who were not

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<sup>836</sup> Ibid. Ibrahim Sultan's comments about Faysal's role and the Khatmiyya-Wahhabi rivalry are particularly revealing. Faysal, according to Haggai Erlich, was the "embodiment of the Saudi-Wahhabi historical alliance" who throughout the period attempted to "further legitimize the regime at home and to stem revolutionary and socialist nationalism in the region." This included his sponsoring of the Islamic International Conference in Mecca in May 1962, which led to the creation of the conservative World Muslim League. See Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity, and Politics Entwined* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 104-106.

<sup>837</sup> Idris Muhammad Adam, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, March 17, 1989.

<sup>838</sup> By the late 1950s, with most of the organization's former leadership in exile or imprisoned, the Muslim League ceased to exist as a formal political party. Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti recalled that throughout the late 1950s and 60s, several former Muslim League members living in Cairo worked with the Eritrean Student Club; many came as guest speakers on political issues and others worked with members to sponsor events and address the situation in Eritrea. Abd al-Qadir Haqus al-Jibirti, interview.

intent on using strict, exclusionary interpretation of Islam as a primary mobilizing factor in struggling for independence.

By discussing his exclusion from the official founding of the ELF due to alleged “pressure” from the Saudi government, Sultan’s testimony suggests that Adam’s rise to power within the new organization marked a change in how many within the nationalist leadership perceived the significance of Islam to the struggle.<sup>839</sup> In discussing the drastic political divergence between the two organizations, Kibreab rightly noted that “dynamic internal debate and relative tolerance” within the ELM gave way to a more aggressive view of the nationalist struggle inside the ELF, which had “a narrower membership base and lacked the experience and conceptual frameworks to create an inclusive front that could reflect the social and political diversity of Eritrean society.”<sup>840</sup>

While the early ELF may have lacked a “clear ideological line” in comparison to the ELM, its leaders did emphasize the historical oppression of Eritrean Muslims by the Ethiopian government. Consequently, the organization became the ideal incubator for the rise of genuine “Moslem militants.”<sup>841</sup> The ELF’s call for an armed struggle also encouraged many of the ELM’s members to lose patience with the limitations of their own efforts. Former ELM organizer Ali Said Mehamed Berhatu summed up the frustration when he observed that “following Harakat was like a kind of plebiscite. People did not what is the name, what is the politics, they were interested in some kind of activity against Ethiopia.”<sup>842</sup>

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<sup>839</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, interview.

<sup>840</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, 152.

<sup>841</sup> Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 108.

<sup>842</sup> Ali Said Mehamed Berhatu, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, January 25, 1988.

Less than a year after its founding, the ELF succeeded in winning over many former ELM supporters and built on the existing Diaspora networks across Sudan. By mid-1960, even many disaffected ELM members had established direct communication with ELF leaders in Cairo and began laying the groundwork to arrange for arms transports. ELF leaders also overtook the ELM's influence elsewhere in the Diaspora by winning support of Eritrean workers based in Saudi Arabia.<sup>843</sup> Largely due to their leadership's continued refusal to engage in armed combat, the ELM's rank and file gradually began to abandon the party, as the ELF increased its outreach efforts to build their cause as a genuine "Muslim" movement against Ethiopian oppression.

When the ELF was declared and many confrontations with the Ethiopian army took place, many of our friends went to Jebha and were not longer with us. All of those, my friends in the committee, with the exception of myself, they went to jebha, all of them. They became the leadership of Jebha. And that also was because the leadership of Jebha at that time tried to make a new propaganda against us. They said that Harakat are communist and we (Jebha) Muslims. To be called a communist at that time was a very, very bad thing.<sup>844</sup>

By early 1961 the ELF solidified its operations in both Khartoum and Kassala and succeeded in gaining the support of a large portion of several ELM leaders in eastern Sudan. Even ELF chairmen Idris Muhammad Adam traveled to Sudan on several occasions and spoke out against Haraka's leadership while seeking the allegiance of most ELM members in the crucial areas in and around Kassala.<sup>845</sup> In some instances, the ELF leader allegedly received correspondence directly from disaffected ELM members who

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<sup>843</sup> Idris Usman Glawdiyos, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, January 1, 1988..

<sup>844</sup> Saleh Ahmed Eyay, interview.

<sup>845</sup> Several of Adam's visits also involved overseeing and transporting arms to western Eritrea. See Mehamed 'Umar 'Abdala "Abu Tiyyara," interview.

expressed their desire to leave the organization.<sup>846</sup> Former Haraka members noted that the ELF's campaign to discredit the ELM as an alien, "Marxist" organization succeeded in winning majority support of ELM members within some Eritrean cities in a matter of only a few weeks.<sup>847</sup>

### **Armed Struggle and Shifting Strands of Muslim Political and Cultural Identity**

Although gaining the support of most former Haraka members provided the organization with a new avenue to broaden its operations in eastern Sudan, the most important aspect of the ELF's initial success involved its members gaining the allegiance of religious and community leaders on both sides of the border who could facilitate the actual logistics of building an armed struggle.

The people who were moving to form the ELF were doing so very secretly because they were afraid of the Sudanese as well as the Ethiopia[n] government. Because of this there were no official letters sent inside from Kassala. But people who were coming from inside to Kassala were telling to the people there that there is some movement inside concerning the Eritrean freedom or independence. The same thing went the other way. People who move[d] from Kassala to inside were telling them that there is some movement in Kassala. This was the linkage between Kassala and inside in the beginning. Later regular messages were sent. Sometimes we wrote them on the inside of the clothes of messengers.<sup>848</sup>

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<sup>846</sup> Ibid. In response to the ELF's apparent success in winning over large segments of the ELM's membership, the leadership in Port Sudan eventually came out against the ELF and the veteran politicians behind its activities. According to Mahmud Mehamed Saleh, a former member of the ELM's Central Regional Committee in western Eritrea, ELM leaders dispatched a pamphlet to its cells across the region stating that because Idris Muhammad Adem, Ibrahim Sultan and other "old politicians" had refused to work with their organization's objectives, all Haraka members should "stop any relation with them from inside the country." Mahmud Mehamed Saleh, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, April 1, 1989.

<sup>847</sup> Adem Gendifel, interview with Günter Schröder. Kassala, Sudan, January 7, 1988. Gendifel noted that the exception was in Keren, where the ELM had strong ties to the organization's leaders in Port Sudan despite the growing pressures. Some accounts have been downplayed the supposed influence of the ELM in the Diaspora. Sabbe claimed that he did not know of Haraka's existence until he arrived in Jeddah in early 1960. See Uthman Saleh Sabbe, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, December 12, 1980.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid.

By 1961, many ELF affiliates across the region used broad ideas of a “Muslim struggle” to gain the support of prominent Muslim raiders and former shifta to help take up the struggle. The ELF was particularly concerned about garnering the support of Hamid Idris Awate, one of the Western Province’s most well-known former shifta leaders. By all accounts, the most ardent ELF proponent to encourage Awate was Muhammad Sheikh Dawd. The grandson of a Beni-Amer Sufi leader, Dawd “was motivated by religious feelings” in his political activities with the ELF, particularly by his deep resentment of the abolition of Arabic as a language of education” by the Federation government. Allegedly, he called Awate to a meeting in Agordat in early 1961, where he told the shifta leader that “he should declare a Jihad” against Ethiopia because of the banning of Arabic and since the situation in Eritrea now required that “the Muslims should fight for the divine right of the Muslims and Islam” against Ethiopia aggression.<sup>849</sup>

Months prior to the start of hostilities in September 1961, another ELF organizer, shaykh Sayedna Mehamed, Ali held a meeting with Awate and supporters in the village of Mogolo. A well-known religious leader, Ali was considered a “living saint” among the Beni-Amer community in the area according to Uthman Saleh Sabbe. Under the guise of a Sufi festival, the meeting attracted more than 2,000 people and helped raise money and arms for Awate’s cause to lead the revolt.<sup>850</sup> While it remains doubtful that Awate and his core group of fighters actually joined the ELF in any official capacity, later accounts by ELF officials often emphasized their organization’s efforts to reach out to Awate in mid/late 1961. In the wake of Awate’s death, many ELF leaders also went to

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<sup>849</sup> Umer Damer, interview with Günter Schroder. Kassala, Sudan, March 24, 1989. Translated by Gebrai Weldeselasia. Also present were Abu Tiyara and Mahmud Mai betot.

<sup>850</sup> Uthman Saleh Sabbe, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, April 4, 1983.



great efforts to connect Awate's activities actions as being part and parcel of the ELF operations by claiming that Awate remained in direct contact with representatives in Kassala throughout most of the year. Other accounts claim that when Awate first met with ELF representatives in Agordat in May 1961; the shifta leader informed the representatives that he wished to speak directly with ELF leaders about the logistical challenges of beginning a guerilla war.<sup>851</sup> Despite these overt efforts to paint Awate as working exclusively within the ELF camp and forging a "Muslim" struggle, the perception that the ELF planned to protect Muslim interests carried more weight in the wider Diaspora than among the organization's rural base in western Eritrea and eastern Sudan.

One of the best illustrations of this de-emphasis of purely religious motivations across the immediate region included the relative absence of traditional Sufi authorities in even contributing to the ELF's mobilization. While the ELF received broad support from many rural clerics in the villages and towns, their participation developed without the involvement of the influential al-Mirghani family. Having been relegated to the outside of Eritrean politics since sayyid Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani switched to the UP in 1948, the apparent unwillingness of the al-Mirghani family in Kassala and Osman and sayyid Abu Bakr in Eritrea to assist in "the national struggle" only served to further delegitimize Khatmiyya leaders' political legitimacy.<sup>852</sup> Consequently, even many

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<sup>851</sup> Despite calls by some ELF representatives in contact with Awate to support a vague "Muslim" struggle against Ethiopia, Awate's principal focus in dealing with ELF remained largely the same as his concerns when he was first approached by the ELM; the need to receive additional arms and supplies from Sudan, building up a larger fighting force and finding experienced fighters to coordinate guerilla actions across other regions of Eritrea. See Mahmud Mehamed Saleh, interview.

<sup>852</sup> Adem Gendifel, interview.

devout ELF supporters with connections to the tariqa looked elsewhere for religious guidance as the armed struggle progressed.<sup>853</sup> The al-Mirghani family's general indifference to the political situation by 1960, in combination with the ELF leadership's rapport with more "reactionary" Muslim authorities across the Middle East suggests that unlike the early movement for independence during the late 1940s, this new, aggressive movement for national liberation largely dismissed the Khatmiyya leaders as a non-entity in the impending struggle.

In addition to the apparent indifference of the Khatmiyya leadership, the transnational nature of the early ELF's operations demonstrated that the organization's concern for building support across the region resulted in a majority of its efforts being concentrated in areas in the Muslim world where they could expect more meaningful logistical and political support. Once again, the ELF's Cairo-based leadership and its relationship with students proved to be a major advantage in building support.

In Cairo there was an active movement to discuss with the Arab embassies the Eritrean case. We asked for permission for Idris Mehemed Adem to visit different Arab countries. Somalia was among the first to respond very enthusiastic about the Eritrean case. Also the Saudi government gave permission. Sabbe was first in Jeddah and went with him to Somalia. The Somali government agreed to allow an Eritrean office to be opened: the Eritrea-Somali Friendship Association. It was opened in November 1960 and Usman Saleh Sabbe was the first representative.<sup>854</sup>

The ELF's connection with the Somali cause in particular became one of its most proactive international efforts. According to Shumet Sishagne, the organization not only sought support from Somali activists but received considerable aid directly from the Somali government, which provided "the earliest source of financial military support for

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<sup>853</sup> Muhammad Se'id Nawad, interview.

<sup>854</sup> Idris Usman Glawdiyos, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, January 1, 1988.

the Eritrean insurgency. It also provided Somali passports to ELF members and its sympathizers living abroad.”<sup>855</sup> Idris Muhammad Adam later admitted to traveling to Somalia at the beginning of the decade after receiving an invitation from Somali supporters. After establishing the Eritrean-Somali Friendship Association as an umbrella group to facilitate the creation of multiple ELF branches, Idris Muhammad Adam returned to Cairo while Uthman Saleh Sabbe remained in country for nearly a year continuing to develop a support base.<sup>856</sup> Meanwhile, ELF branches also sprang up across the Red Sea in Jeddah and Riyadh as ELF representatives organized workers in the cities’ exile communities.<sup>857</sup>

With Somali backing and the growing interest of supporters based in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan and elsewhere in the Eritrean Diaspora, the ELF moved ever closer to fully embracing the spirit of “Muslim solidarity” that many Muslim League officials and writers themselves had promoted years earlier, albeit through a much more rigid interpretation. While this shift in Islamic identity resulted in part from the organization’s outreach efforts across the Muslim World to the younger generation in the Diaspora, a major thrust in this transformation came through the efforts of one of the ELF’s major international organizers, Uthman Saleh Sabbe.

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<sup>855</sup> Sishagne, *Unionists and Separatists*, 131. Sishagne even argued that the Somali government was the primary force behind the establishment of the Somali-Eritrean Friendship Association, which coordinated “support for the Eritrean cause.”

<sup>856</sup> Idris Mehamed Adem, interview with Günter Schröder. Khartoum, Sudan, March 17, 1989. Translated by Abdurrahman Tahanna. The spelling of Idris Mehamed Adem is based on Günter Schröder’s model.

<sup>857</sup> Ibid.

### **Uthman Saleh Sabbe and widening “Muslim” Nationalist Mobilization**

Born in the town of Hirgigo in 1932, Sabbe came from a respected Saho family with connections to the local ‘ulama.’<sup>858</sup> Sabbe had received particular support from his mentor and family associate Saleh Kekiya Pasha. After finishing his initial Qur’anic studies, he attended the Hirgigo Charity School and was later sent to Addis Ababa where he enrolled in teacher training courses from 1950-52. After returning to Eritrea in 1953, Sabbe took a position as an instructor at the Hirgigo Charity School (renamed Emperor Haile Selassie I School in 1950) and became the institution’s director in September 1955. During his time in the Massawa/Hirgigo area, Sabbe immersed himself in nationalist politics and became leader of a local group of activists, helping publish a pro-Independence, hand-written newsletter entitled *al-Nahdha*. Sabbe also came into frequent conflict with Eritrea’s Federation-government regarding the lack of funds for the promotion of Arabic language study. During the late 1950s, Sabbe also worked clandestinely with Sudan-based activists to send Eritrean student groups to Cairo. Having been arrested for subversion by Federation authorities in 1958, Sabbe was later released and finally left Massawa in August 1959 and worked for a short time for a shipping company in Assab before committing full time to nationalist activity.<sup>859</sup>

Almost immediately after being brought into the ELF fold through Adam’s encouragement, Sabbe proved to be the organization’s most astute international spokesmen and fundraiser. Besides early success in Somalia and his efforts in North Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Sabbe attempted to carry to the ELF’s message beyond the Red

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<sup>858</sup> See Günter Schröder, “Utmān Sālih Sabī,” in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 1049-1050.

<sup>859</sup> E. Correnti, “Osman Saleh Sabbe (OSS) The Unknown,” May 27, 2002, <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/606/13/> (accessed June 20, 2009).

Sea region, going so far as to plan a diplomatic mission to Pakistan.<sup>860</sup> Eventually, Sabbe, alongside Adam and ELF colleague Idris Osman Galadewos appointed themselves as members of the organization's Supreme Council.<sup>861</sup> As one of ELF's main leaders and its Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Sabbe worked against other Eritrean activists deemed too secular or radical by the ELF hierarchy.<sup>862</sup>

This shift also helps explain why many later non-Muslim activists in the Diaspora felt increasingly uneasy about the religious divide that developed in the early armed struggle. The predominantly Christian leaders within what eventually became the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) alluded to the legacy of this abovementioned ELF faction that they claimed was backed by "reactionary Arab states" and consisted of Idris Muhammed Adam and other "peasant chieftains and reactionary petty bourgeois intellectuals" that used the armed struggle to promote personal agendas of "political opportunism and religious fanaticism."<sup>863</sup> Significantly, the ELF's rise also paralleled a decline among many former Muslim League leaders in working within the new organization. Adam's background history as a leader with the MLWP had already been a cause of rivalry with Ibrahim Sultan and only created greater division among others within the League's hierarchy. The establishment of the ELF thus began a change in which the previous legacy of religious cooperation as argued by the Muslim League and

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<sup>860</sup> Although his trip to Pakistan never materialized, Adam claimed that Sabbe did manage to speak with the Pakistani ambassador in Saudi Arabia to discuss the movement. Idris Mehamed Adem, interview.

<sup>861</sup> John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 110.

<sup>862</sup> Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean struggle for independence: Domination, resistance, nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 105. Sabbe was particularly instrumental in thwarting the activities Muhammad Said Nawad's Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) in 1964/65.

<sup>863</sup> Eritreans for Liberation in North America, "Our Struggle and Its Goals," *Harnet* 2, no. 3 (March 1973): 3.

later the ELM was overtaken by more sectarian views that sought to divest Eritrean Muslims from the previous legacy of inter-religious cooperation that had defined the earlier, largely unsuccessful period of nationalist activity.<sup>864</sup>

While the ELF emerged by the early 1960s as the organization most capable of leading the armed struggle, the reluctance of some ELF members to adopt this more rigid outlook of Islamic identity was largely due to the continued influence of Ibrahim Sultan, who, in addition to serving as an informal advisor for some ELF members in Cairo, continued to maintain strong relations with exiled Christian nationalists, particularly Woldeab Woldemariam. Ultimately, this “first major rift in the ELF” between Sultan and Adam foreshadowed the later issues that arose as a greater number of ELF members resented the direction that Adam and the other members of the Supreme Council had taken the organization by embracing a notable “anti-Christian” sentiment in its nationalist language.<sup>865</sup>

### **Reclaiming the Moral Conscience of Eritrean Muslim Nationalism**

Although largely an outside observer to the ELF’s rise and its later dominance in the mid-1960s, Ibrahim Sultan remained the most active Muslim nationalist leader to emphasize religious cooperation, even as sectarianism within the ELF leadership seemed to increase simultaneously with the intensity of the armed conflict. Decades after the early ELF’s exclusionary view of non-Muslim Eritreans had already contributed to the political fracturing in the nationalist movement, Sultan continued to attempt to mend internal divisions among various Muslim-majority factions as well as remind activists

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<sup>864</sup> See Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynfelale*.

<sup>865</sup> Sishagne, *Unionists and Separatists*, 138.

about the “grace of brotherhood” that *all* Eritreans had shared in the nationalist movement.<sup>866</sup> As he had done throughout his tenure with the League, he reminded his fellow activists of the need to embrace all faiths as part of the struggle. Sultan’s arguments expressed the spirit of the previous years of the League’s nationalist message, a discourse that emphasized Islam as a vital identity marker but that also held a practical and pragmatic view that the Eritrean nation was indeed multi-confessional and thus required broad acceptance and interfaith accommodation within the independence movement.<sup>867</sup>

Espousing his own ideal of Islam’s capacity for tolerance and cooperation, Sultan argued in one memorandum he authored in the early 1980s that Islam could unite the fractured national movement through promoting activists’ common objectives and national identity.<sup>868</sup> In his tract Sultan harkened back to the Federation’s earliest days and noted that “the only rays of light” to come out of the “dark period” were due to the efforts of League members and their associates within the Independence. Having witnessed the ELF’s attempts to commandeer the armed struggle as the true representative organ for Muslim interests, Sultan provided both a defense of the League’s historic importance and even argued for its resurrection in the current political climate.

The Muslim League, as any organization in life, has had many weaknesses...this is life, but coming back to strength is possible. And possibilities of life are still there and Muslims all over the beloved land still have their hopes on the Muslim League. They did not shake their

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<sup>866</sup> Ibrahim Sultan, "Subject: call for unification of all nine factions of the Eritrean Revolution and request to form a national council of each faction that consists of nine members instead of a national council for each faction." No Date. RDC, 01661

<sup>867</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>868</sup> Ibid., 2.

hands of it and they are still calling it for a place of authority to defend the faith, protect the language and bring victory to the Eritrean People.<sup>869</sup>

Although Sultan's memorandum appeared long after the ELF itself had lost its place in leading the war of independence, its wide circulation among several Muslim majority political factions across the Diaspora illustrated that the "major rift" in the ELF that first began in the early 1960s had important ramifications on how nationalist leaders continued to frame Islam as a component of national liberation for decades after the start of the war of independence.<sup>870</sup>

## Conclusions

Between the start of pervasive civil unrest in Eritrea's major cities in early 1958 and continuing through the much of 1961, the virtual collapse of Eritrean autonomy within the Federation government had tremendous significance on the course of Muslim political activism and specifically on the Muslim League's legacy as the vanguard of the independence movement. The formal banning of political activity within Eritrea in April 1958 signaled the end of the League's existence as a formal power entity, it necessitated that activists look abroad to engage in the growing resistance movement through the growing Diaspora. Initially, many former Muslim League members took solace in the early success of the ELM.

In many ways, the ELM's rise defied convention given the context of political repression within Eritrea. Yet, the inability of the ELM leadership to ultimately put forth

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<sup>869</sup> Ibid.

<sup>870</sup> Sishagne, *Unionists and Separatists*, 135. According to Sishagne, Sultan's exclusion from the ELF did not end the hostility as, "Both men revived their old rivalries of the 1940s and mobilized their personal and clan followers in the struggle to gain the upper hand in the ELF and to control the exile community in the Middle East." Ibid.



a program of armed rebellion against Ethiopian encroachment ultimately allowed a new, more reactionary leadership within the ELF to siphon off a substantial portion of its membership and build upon its considerable Diaspora networks throughout the early 1960s. The ELF's rise represented a fundamental break in the overall political ideology among Muslims as defined by the League. Abandoning the League's previous legacy of interreligious cooperation and general inclusion in the independence movement, the ELF's Cairo-based leadership dramatically shifted the debate concerning both Eritrean identity and Islam's place in the nationalist struggle.

Part of the shift in ideology came as a result of the fact that much of the ELF's leadership had not been affiliated with the inner workings of the Muslim League, but actually with rival organizations including the IML and the MLWP. Moreover, the relatively youthful composition of its members in the Diaspora represented a marked change for the generation of nationalist leaders that had come of age during the political debates of the 1940s and early 50s. Consequently, the ELF's dismissal of the Muslim League leadership and pro-independence Christian leaders illustrated the drastic shift in their nationalist program. Seen as an outdated organization far too moderate to take the reins of an armed struggle, the Muslim League and its former leaders watched largely from the sidelines as the ELF developed its own, much narrower ideological construct to engage in its own nationalist struggle.

While part of this came about as a result of the sincere belief of some within the ELF hierarchy, the push toward more exclusive, pro-Muslim rhetoric also reflected the practical realities of building an armed struggle across the Red Sea region in the early

1960s. In need of funding, arms and political legitimacy, the ELF reinvented itself as a Muslim nationalist movement pitted against Ethiopian Christian domination. Throughout the Eritrean Diaspora, whether in Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Red Sea region, the nationalist impetus became increasingly tied to more aggressive articulations of Muslim identity. This newfound Muslim identity largely centered on a common feeling of representing an oppressed people, one that was both excluded from political power by Ethiopian authorities and increasingly seen as a virtual alien people in their own country. The attacks on Muslim institutions and the Arabic language, coupled with the worsening economic situation, also instilled further resentment at the fact that Ethiopian authorities had favored many Tigrinya-speaking unionists at the expense of the general Muslim population. Ironically, these reactionary attitudes developed even as ELF leaders began embracing more secular strands of Arab nationalism and especially Nasserism throughout the 1960s. Consequently, the early ELF's embrace of this new Muslim Eritrean identity contained a paradoxical and sometimes uneasy mix of self-proclaimed "Muslim" nationalist fighters and those who latched onto the wider secular nationalist trends from across the Arab world.

Ultimately, these newfound transformations of Muslim identity and the backlash against the League leadership illustrated how the changing circumstances of Ethiopian domination fundamentally altered the dialogue that had emerged in previous years through Eritrea's vibrant but fragile nationalist contact zone. Without the input of the Muslim League's intellectual and political leaders to emphasize the nuance of national identity and Muslim-Christian cooperation as integral elements of national

liberation, an important break in Eritrean Muslim political and cultural identity took place. As the ELF solidified its power during the early and mid-1960s, it weakened the previous legacy of interfaith camaraderie in the nationalist movement by falsely recasting Eritrean nationalism as an inherently sectarian struggle. The contradictions of this newfound view of Muslim identity helped sow the seeds for the later conflict that fractured the ELF during the late 1960s and led to the eventual establishment of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE LEAGUE’S LEGACY AND POSSIBLE PATHS TOWARD FUTURE INQUIRY

In the two decades between the end of formal Italian colonialism and the beginning of Eritrea’s armed war of independence against Ethiopia (1941-61), a discernable “Muslim” identity emerged that had far reaching ramifications on the country’s broader nationalist movement. As this study has illustrated, the independence movement developed with a significant contribution from the Eritrean Muslim League and its main leadership. Although the League represented only one of several nationalist organizations that developed throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, it served as the primary incubator for the first substantial intellectual discussions that challenged prevailing views that Eritrea lacked legitimacy as a sovereign entity.

Yet as the main representative organ for addressing broad cultural concerns among Eritrea’s Muslim communities, the League embodied far more than merely a political body. The organization thus came to represent different things to its different constituencies. For the Tigre-speaking groups across the Western Province that originally supported its creation due to its anti-feudal policies, the organization represented a vehicle to reform long-standing issues over land rights, shumagulle domination of the economy, and the social marginalization of the tigre. Later, as League representatives broadened their program well beyond the Western Province, many of Eritrea’s other Muslim groups including many urban-based Saho, Afar and especially

Jabarti activists were drawn to the organization and helped facilitate its expansion across the country.

Regardless of the particular rationale of each respective faction in initially supporting the organization, the League served as the main medium to address social, political and economic concerns among Muslims who began to view any form of union with Ethiopia with increasing apprehension. By looking at the organization's origins, ideological foundations, and internal mechanisms, this study has sought to provide greater nuance in explaining how the League helped inform one of the major strands of early nationalist thought, one that helped set the stage for the eventual armed liberation movement. By looking at this particular chapter of Eritrean history with an emphasis on the League and its influence, we are able to better assess how and why Muslim identity served as one of the major ideological components of the early nationalist movement. Given the current political climate both within Eritrea and across the Horn of the Africa, understanding the significance of the relationship between nationalism and Islam remains an ongoing issue with tremendous political and social ramifications.

## **Overview**

During the first five years of BMA rule between 1941 and 1946, Eritrea's Islamic communities gradually came together through a series of political and social causes. The use of Islam as a social and political marker developed rapidly with the growth of the tigre emancipation movement across Eritrea's Western Province. In addition to tigre dissatisfaction, the expansion of more uniform religious, judicial and educational institutions also had the effect of cementing a broad if still somewhat vague Muslim

identity. Consequently, Muslims as a whole began to articulate concerns about how the country's political future would impact their respective communities, especially in the wake of Ethiopian attempts to promote the cultural links between Eritrea's Tigrinya-speaking Christian communities and Ethiopia. Although Eritrea's small class of urban-based political activists did not, initially, view the independence issue as having any particular religious connotation, the gradual politicization of religion convinced most Muslim observers that their interests would be better served through an independent Eritrean state rather than through union with Ethiopia or by partition to Sudan. By the time of the infamous bet giyorgis conference in November 1946, the anti-Muslim rhetoric of both Eritrean unionists and Ethiopian officials had caused enough anxiety to justify the creation of a new political organization to address Muslim concerns.

The establishment of the Eritrean Muslim League in December 1946 thus reflected the increasingly political nature of religious identity in regard to the independence question. The League's founding touched off a brief but intense period of intellectual debate throughout 1947 in which the organization's leading writers and affiliates internalized Eritrea's future status and its significance to Muslim security, religious institutions, educational progress and political freedom. The main thrust of this intellectual discussion occurred in the pages of the League's official newsletter, *Sawt al-rabita al-islamiyya*. Through the paper's commentaries, news reports and declarations, the League's leading intellectuals involved themselves directly in the nationalist contact zone, a public space of rich intellectual and critical discussion that allowed activists to engage both each other and unionists about issues concerning their "Eritrean" identity.

For the League and its supporters, 1947 represented the most successful and energetic period of nationalist activity, as political mobilization across the country allowed the organization to dominate much of the early nationalist discourse.

If the period from late 1946 through 1947 was marked by an unprecedented degree of mobilization, political action, and productive intellectual debate from within the League, the months between January 1948 and September 1949 represented a time of internal fragmentation and the first of many logistical crises for its members. Faced also with a revitalized Unionist Party, the League struggled throughout this era to remain united amid financial difficulties, the defection of its former President Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Mirghani and the assassination of one of its most influential intellectual spokesmen, shaykh Abdelkadir Kebire. And yet in spite of these challenges, the League managed to hold together and eventually mobilize broad opposition to unification efforts by the Ethiopian government. The League also proved strong enough to prevent attempts by Britain and Italy to partition the country between Sudan and Ethiopia. Nevertheless the League's greatest success during this turbulent period came when its leadership worked to solidify its nationalist program with several other likeminded organizations to create the Independence-Bloc by mid-1949.

Although between September 1949 and December 1950 the League struggled to maintain its momentum as rival organizations, including the MLWP and the IML challenged its overall aims and the integrity of its leadership, the organization nevertheless succeeded by helping prevent complete union between Eritrea and Ethiopia. League leaders built up support for their agenda by emphasizing the historical oppression

of Muslims already living in Ethiopia. By arguing that Ethiopian rule represented an anathema to Muslim community interests, League leaders and the general membership supported the idea that religious and cultural freedom needed protection as integral components in a legitimate, independent Eritrean state. The organization's leaders also staved off the external challenges from the MLWP and the IML by convincing the wider public that the League, despite the newfound political setbacks, remained the true advocate of all Eritrean Muslims and the only organization capable of allowing for a diversity of opinion in the political climate.

Even after the United Nations Assembly rejected the idea of unconditional Eritrean independence and voted in favor of creating the Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation in December 1950, the League, through its supporters within the Independence Bloc managed to create enthusiasm for the impending Federation system. In their efforts, League leaders promised constituents that the organization would seek assurances from Federation authorities to protect key religious and political institutions. Thus the period between from 1951 through September 1952 saw the League lead the public discussions about the need to preserve and strengthen Muslim institutions as a means of guaranteeing equal rights and representation within the Federal system. Consequently, the major cultural markers of Muslim culture, including the preservation of Arabic as an official language, the autonomy of religious institutions and the strengthening of Muslim education were all embraced as core issues of concern by the League. Calls for the protection of these cultural pillars only increased throughout the middle of the decade amid the Federation government's failure to address Muslim concerns.



Indeed, the years between the Federation's inauguration in late 1952 through 1957 demonstrated to both the League and the general public that Eritrea's Muslims had little if any relevance to the overall aims of Federal authorities, particularly unionist administrators in the Constituent Assembly and within the office of the Federal Chief Executive. Although the Muslim League also faced its greatest internal conflict during the period, as dissatisfaction with Ibrahim Sultan and his inner circle prompted a virtual revolt against the organization's leadership, the League nevertheless managed to reform itself and regain its footing in the nationalist movement as prospects for Eritrean autonomy looked increasingly dim by the latter part of the decade.

Beginning in 1958 and continuing through the start of the armed struggle for independence in September 1961, the authoritarian measures of the Federation government only encouraged the League and other nationalist groups to redouble their efforts. While the League experienced a brief resurgence in the months preceding the outbreak of Asmara's general strike in March 1958, the subsequent banning of all political organizations forced the League and most of its leadership into exile. Consequently, Eritrean diaspora communities in Sudan and Egypt became the major centers of nationalist activity for former League members as well as the new emerging generation of activists that eventually formed the core of the ELM and the ELF. The ELF's eventual dominance over the ELM during the early 1960s also represented a major break from the previous ways in which Muslim identity and nationalism had been articulated by the League. Thus the ELF not only represented a new political organization, but also signaled a major shift in the ideology of Muslim nationalist leaders

who expressed a far more aggressive and rigid interpretation of their collective “Muslim” identity. In this sense, the ELF’s rise to prominence represented a final break from the previous fifteen years of the League’s influence on the prevailing nationalist discourse, one that had used Islam as a means of building an inclusive movement to showcase Eritrea’s inherent diversity and independence rather than promote the nationalist cause as an inherently Islamic struggle.

While throughout its relatively short history the Eritrean Muslim League faced numerous internal divisions and external pressures, it nevertheless provided the major organizational apparatus needed to encourage the development of a collective Muslim identity in the context of an emerging Eritrean state. In contrast to many of the other rival organizations with broad Muslim-based memberships that developed in the wake of the League, including the IML, MLWP, and even the Pro-Italy Party, the Muslim League not only retained the support of the majority of the country’s Muslim residents, but also received the backing from the country’s leading Islamic clerics and scholars, giving the organization added credibility through the support of its affiliated intellectuals and community leaders. As the only “Muslim” organization to consistently express support for Eritrean independence and (later) the preservation of local autonomy within the Federal system, the League served as the primary ideological bridge between early nationalists of the 1940s and the armed liberation movement.

By illustrating how Muslim identity was put in the service of Eritrea’s independence movement, this study has explored the often-overlooked relationship religious identity and nationalism in one particular area in the Horn of Africa. It has also

demonstrated that in the Eritrean context, the League used Islamic identity as a way to actually encourage religious cooperation and broad-based respective cultural autonomy among a heterogeneous population. If the Muslim League's experience in Eritrea speaks to a unique example of how one region responded to Ethiopian attempts at domination, it also echoes broader trends across the region in which other activist groups have relied on their own interpretations of Islamic identity to assert their territorial and cultural integrity from Ethiopian authority, be they in Oromia, Ogaden, the Afar region, or elsewhere.

### **Paths toward Further Research**

While this study has examined how Muslim community leaders, religious authorities and political activists contributed to formation of an Eritrean national consciousness through the Muslim League, future scholarship is needed to provide a broader picture of how Muslim communities were influenced in later years by the wider intersection of religion and politics. Viewed from this perspective, three areas of particular concern stand out. First, the precise relationship between the al-Mirghani family and Eritrean political authorities during the Federal period remains an area that needs to be explored in further detail. Although this study has addressed the al-Mirghani family's early role in the formation and initial split within the Muslim League, lingering questions about the family's role and ultimate influence in western Eritrea throughout the 1950s remain. Given the long history of Khatmiyya involvement in accommodating and serving as a conduit for larger regional powers, exploring the interactions between Federation authorities and Sufi leaders during the period has the potential to provide

greater insight on the broader issues of how and why some Muslim elites outside the League continued to embrace the Unionist cause throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

The need to better understand social attitudes and reactions toward the later political development speaks to the second and perhaps most challenging area for scholars to engage in future research; the participation of Muslim women in the early nationalist movement. Indeed, the relative silence of women in the historical record throughout the period before and during the Federation offers scholars one of the most difficult challenges. In comparison to other broad-based African nationalist movements throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Muslim League's activities generally lacked any substantive involvement from women, beyond peripheral contributions at the grassroots. Nevertheless, as some of the oral testimonies and written commentaries mentioned in this study have suggested, the issue of female involvement in contributing to Eritrea's future statehood did arise and was seriously entertained by at least some League members. Thus the current lack of both written and oral sources documenting women's involvement cannot be simply dismissed by scholars without applying a serious investigation that truly examines the social context of Muslim female life between 1941 and 1961.

Beyond exploring the involvement of the al-Mirghani family and the true extent of female participation in the nationalist activity, scholars also need to begin approaching the complex topic of how "outside" Muslim groups within Eritrea contributed to the transformation of Islamic life during the Federal period. Although this study has discussed briefly some underlying social and economic issues related to Eritrea's resident

Hadrami class, further research on Muslim merchant communities across the country is needed to illuminate our understanding of how these social groups also influenced the institutional development of Islam during the period in question. In a broader sense, analyzing how Yemani, Hadrami, Omani and other non-indigenous groups contributed to the fabric of Islamic life may also allow scholars to make progress in exploring the theological and cultural connections between “Islamic” Eritrea and the wider Red Sea world during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Doing so will hopefully provide an important corrective to the current discourse and broaden our knowledge of how Eritrea’s early independence movement relates to other permutations of nationalism across the region.

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