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“Transborder” Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885–1889*

By Iris Seri-Hersch

IREMAM-Université de Provence, France (iris_hersch@yahoo.ca)

The intertwined history of Sudan and Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century has received relatively little attention in the literature, and the few studies that focus on Sudanese-Ethiopian relations in the Mahdist period (1885–1898) consist of political histories fed by military and diplomatic events.¹ Most of these otherwise valuable works lack transboundary perspectives that examine interaction and exchange patterns in specific border zones of Sudan and Ethiopia. Border studies dealing with this part of Africa certainly do exist; the historical and anthropological essays edited by Donald Donham and Wendy James more than twenty years ago analyze processes through which southern peripheries were incorporated into imperial Ethiopia from the 1890s up to 1935.² These examples do not, however, address earlier border dynamics affecting political, economic, and social relations between Mahdist Sudan and Ethiopia in the 1880s. A pioneering study in this field is Alessandro Triulzi’s work on the Bela Shangul border region south of the

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¹ See George N. Sanderson, “Conflict and Co-operation between Ethiopia and the Mahdist State, 1884–1898,” *Sudan Notes and Records* 50 (1969), 15–40; Richard A. Caulk, “Yohannes IV, the Mahdists, and the Partition of North-East Africa,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 1, 2 (1971), 23–42; Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1976), 378; Muhammad Sa‘id al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha, Dirasa fi-l-Siyasa al-Dahiliyya wa-l-Harijiyya li-Dawlat al-Mahdiyya, 1881–1898* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992); Richard A. Caulk, “*Between the Jaws of Hyenas*”: *A Diplomatic History of Ethiopia (1876–1896)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002).

² Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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Blue Nile.³ Subjected to Mahdist influences in the early 1880s, this area was later incorporated into the Ethiopian empire.⁴ To the north, the border zone spreading from the Atbara River to the Rahad tributary of the Blue Nile was not affected by such a drastic political redefinition. It was nevertheless a main battleground for ideological and military ambitions opposing the Mahdist state against Christian Ethiopia, which culminated in 1885–1889. The armed confrontation ended with the death of Emperor Yohannes IV at the battle of Gallabat (9–11 March 1889). That same year, the accession of Menilek to the Ethiopian throne coincided with the end of the Mahdiyya’s “militant phase.”⁵

Notwithstanding heated religious discourses used by both sides as rhetorical instruments of legitimization⁶, the conflict did not hinder intense exchanges across an invisible “border.” In this article, I analyze the ways in which people, things, and representations circulated between two African states that remained independent at a time of growing European hegemony in the world. Although Sudanese-Ethiopian relations were to some extent influenced by European imperialist processes, their territories were not separated by a European-drawn line.⁷ Using as primary sources Mahdist archives and

³ Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy: Prelude to the History of a No-Man’s Land, Belā Shangul, Wallaggā, Ethiopia (ca. 1800–1898)* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1981). See also his article “Trade, Islam, and the Mahdia in Northwestern Wallaggā, Ethiopia,” *Journal of African History* 16, 1 (1975), 55–71.

⁴ For a contemporary account of borderlands south of the Blue Nile, see Juan Maria Schuver, *Juan Maria Schuver’s Travels in North East Africa, 1880–1883*, ed. Wendy James, Gerd Baumann and Douglas H. Johnson (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1996).

⁵ Gabriel R. Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan since the Mahdiyya* (London: C. Hurst, 2002), 48. The term “Mahdiyya” refers to the political and religious revolutionary movement initiated by Muhammad Ahmad b. ‘Abdallah in Sudan in 1881. This self-proclaimed *Mahdi* (“guided one” in Arabic) managed to overthrow the Turco-Egyptian government (January 1885) and establish an Islamic state in most of present-day Sudan. After his death (June 1885), he was succeeded by ‘Abdullahi al-Ta‘aishi, widely known as Khalifa ‘Abdullahi, who ruled the Mahdist state until its collapse at the hands of Anglo-Egyptian troops (September 1898). In the 1890s, Sudanese-Ethiopian relations improved until a peace agreement was reached in early 1897. See Balanbras Bozna Venis Balezla Governor of Jelga to En Nur Salaa, early Jumada al-Ula 1312/November 1894, MAHDIA 1/34/10B, NRO; Betwadded Mangasha to the Khalifa of the Mahdi, 6 Safar 1314/17 July 1896, MAHDIA 1/34/10B, NRO; Statement of Mohammed Osman El Haj Khaled, n.d., MAHDIA 1/34/16, NRO; Sanderson, “Conflict and Co-operation,” 26, 28–37.

⁶ See Iris Seri-Hersch, “Confronting a Christian Neighbor: Sudanese Representations of Ethiopia in the Early Mahdist Period, 1885–89,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, 2 (2009), 247–67.

⁷ The present-day border between Sudan and Ethiopia was delimited on 15 May 1902 by a British-Ethiopian treaty. See al-Bukhari ‘Abdallah al-Ja‘ali, *Hudud al-Sudan al-Sharqiyya ma‘a Ithiubia wa Eritrea: al-Niza‘ al-Hududi wa-l-Markaz al-Qanuni* (Doha: Matabi‘ al-Bakir, 2000), 81–83. Recent historical studies dealing with Africa from a transboundary perspective often situate their analysis in a colonial or postcolonial context. Boundaries “arbitrarily” traced by European powers in the late nineteenth century determine the spatial configuration in which cross-border activities are examined. See for example, Donna K. Flynn, “‘We Are the Border’: Identity, Exchange, and the State along the Bénin-Nigeria Border,” *American Ethnologist* 24, 2 (May 1997), 311–30; Tilman Dederig, “War and Mobility in the Borderlands of South Western Africa in the Early Twentieth Century,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, 2 (2006), 275–94. A

accounts of foreigners that traveled or lived in Sudan or Ethiopia in the late 1880s, I explore Sudanese-Ethiopian relations through multiple interactions involving both state agents and local populations.⁸



Map 1. Adapted from Peter P. Garretson, “Frontier Feudalism in Northwest Ethiopia: Shaykh al-Imam ‘Abd Allah of Nuqara, 1901-1923,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, 2 (1982), 262.

network of scholars interested in African border studies has been established in 2007. See <http://www.aborne.org>.

⁸ Primary sources I have consulted for this research inevitably led me to adopt a perspective that is more Sudanese/Mahdist than Ethiopian. Further investigations into Ethiopian sources dating from the 1880s would greatly contribute to the topic I am dealing with here.

Conceptualizing the Border

The *border* concept does not bear one single and universal meaning. Although it is basically associated with the notion of limit (and thus with otherness), it has acquired different meanings in the political jargon according to specific historical and cultural contexts. Two major meanings have prevailed in the modern Western world, conveyed by the English words *border* or *boundary* (line separating two territories or political entities), and *border* or *frontier* (area considered peripheral in relation to a defined center).⁹ The rather vague French term *frontière* includes both meanings. Are these concepts relevant or applicable to the case of Sudanese-Ethiopian relations in the years 1885–1889? Did Mahdist and Ethiopian elites design their political, religious, and economic activities according to specific conceptions of *border*?

Notions of *border* that developed in Mahdist Sudan and Ethiopia should be considered against the background of the conflict opposing the two countries in the mid-nineteenth century. In the period of Turco-Egyptian rule over Sudan (1821–1885), no separating line delimited the territories of Sudan from those of neighboring Ethiopia. A vast no man’s land constituted a buffer zone between the farthest Turco-Egyptian posts and regions claimed by local Ethiopian lords.¹⁰ In the 1830s, this borderland became a major target for slave hunting. Indeed, the Pasha of Egypt asked for an increasing number of slaves from Sudan. Functioning as a human reservoir, areas bordering Ethiopia were believed to contain legendary mineral resources.¹¹ Such material wealth encouraged the Turco-Egyptians to organize several large expeditions in 1837–1838, which resulted in the occupation of the town of Gallabat.¹² Both the Ethiopians and the European consuls in Egypt suspected that Mehmet Ali intended to conquer the whole of Ethiopia. Under British pressure, the Turco-Egyptian ruler assured that he only wanted “to establish his authority in those peripheral areas inhabited by Muslim tribes (...) the ‘enemies of the Christian

⁹ See Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), quoted by Dederling, “War and Mobility,” 275.

¹⁰ Harold G. Marcus, “Ethio-British Negotiations Concerning the Western Border with Sudan, 1896–1902,” *Journal of African History* 4, 1 (1963), 90; Mordechai Abir, “The Origins of the Ethiopian-Egyptian Border Problem in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 8, 3 (1967), 447.

¹¹ Abir, “The Origins,” 451.

¹² Gallabat is referred to as “Metemma” in certain Ethiopian and European sources. In the 1860s, the French traveler Guillaume Lejean used “Gallabat” to designate both the local district and its capital. He explained that “metamma” was a generic term referring to the ruler’s place of residence. Thus, he also related to the town as “Metamma.” The area was also traditionally called *Ras al-Fil* (“head of the elephant” in Arabic), a name used by James Bruce, who traveled in the region in 1772. See Guillaume Marie Lejean, *Voyage aux deux Nils: Nubie Kordofan, Soudan oriental: exécuté de 1860 à 1864* (Paris: Hachette, 1865), 127–133. Online at Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Gallica, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k852382.image.f4.langFR> (6 May 2009). Although “Gallabat” and “Metemma” are often interchangeably used to designate the border town, al-Gaddal points out that they were two distinct but adjacent towns. See al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 14. However, al-Gaddal does not specify the period to which he relates. There may have been a single town in the borderlands until the Mahdist period or the early Condominium era.

tribes of the interior.”¹³ The historian Mordechai Abir explains these tensions by the difference between Egyptian and Ethiopian conceptions of the *border*. Influenced by European ideas, the Turco-Egyptians defined a territory as theirs according to two important criteria: the religion of its inhabitants (Islam) and the effective administration of this territory. Mehmet Ali followed the principle of *effective occupation*, which later became the main legitimizing tool for Africa’s territorial division among European powers.¹⁴ For their part, the Ethiopians conceived the border as an undefined zone extending into their neighbors’ lands. Effective control of a territory was not a necessary condition for its appropriation. Rather, a governor’s ability to organize raids and collect taxes in an area made it part of the Ethiopian territory.¹⁵ The legacy of this first Egyptian-Ethiopian (military and conceptual) confrontation was the absence of a clearly defined linear and uncontested border. The borderlands remained a kind of no man’s land inhabited by ethnically and religiously heterogeneous populations. It alternatively served as a refuge and a hideaway for rebels and bandits from both sides.¹⁶

Egyptian and Ethiopian interests clashed again during the reign of Khedive Ismail (1863–1879), who sought to build a large empire in northeastern Africa. Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889) attempted to neutralize Egyptian expansionism by borrowing the European concept of *border*. Some time before the battles of Gundat (1875) and Gura (1876), Yohannes told his host De Sarzec, the French consul at Massawa:

Egypt covets my country; she surrounds me from all sides. Until this day, I have not wanted to forcefully oppose these invasions. I call on the Western nations. [I call] the *Christian* sovereigns of Europe, whom I ask their support, to agree on sending wise and upright men, *disinterested arbitrators*, who will settle between Ismail-Pasha and me. They will delimit *our respective borders*. What they do will be well done, and I commit myself not to transgress *the limits* that they draw for me.¹⁷

The emperor’s words are interesting on several grounds. First, they show his willingness to solve the conflict through an external, European and *disinterested* intervention. Could rulers that he himself qualifies as “Christians” play the role of impartial judges in a struggle between Ottoman/Muslim Egypt and Christian Ethiopia?

¹³ Abir, “The Origins,” 453.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 460.

¹⁵ Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 47. According to Donham, the idea of delimited borders and fixed territories slowly integrated the political culture of imperial Ethiopia in the early twentieth century. See Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History,” in Donham and James, *The Southern Marches*, 42.

¹⁶ Lejean, *Voyage aux deux Nils*, 129, 133; Abir, “The Origins,” 460; Peter P. Garretson, “Vicious Cycles: Ivory, Slaves, and Arms on the New Maji Frontier,” in Donham and James, *The Southern Marches*, 196.

¹⁷ Achille Raffray, *Abyssinie* (Paris: Plon, 1876), quoted by Jean-Baptiste Coulbeaux, *Histoire politique et religieuse de l’Abyssinie : Depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à l’avènement de Ménélick II* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1929), II, 472. My translation and emphasis.

Second, the emperor invoked the European concept of *border* as the solution to the conflict. In this sense, the border was a line meant to limit and contain each state within a defined space. However, Yohannes' wish for European intervention was not fulfilled, and the border as a precise and linear concept remained a theoretical notion.

In the mid-1880s, tensions grew between Ethiopia and Italy while relations with Mahdist Sudan deteriorated. Gerald Portal, a British emissary commissioned to mediate between Ethiopia and Italy, presented Yohannes with the conditions he should accept in order to establish friendly relations with the King of Italy. Among them was the obligation to mark out the Ethiopian border with pillars erected at regular intervals, "in order to prevent any further dispute in the future."¹⁸ With British support, Italy apparently tried to impose upon Yohannes the European concept of *border* in the sense of a physically visible line, something that did not suit the emperor's immediate interests.¹⁹

How was the border conceptualized in the framework of Sudanese-Ethiopian relations, which were particularly tense from 1885 till 1889? The sources I have used include only one document that specifically refers to the Ethiopian emperor's position on this matter. It consists of a peace proposal that he sent to the Mahdist emir in charge of the Gallabat region, Hamdan Abu 'Anja. Stressing the uselessness of wars, the emperor addressed the Sudanese rulers in the following way: "Let us then both remain—each in his country within his own limits and let us not kill the poor and harmless without cause, but let us both unite against our common enemies—the Europeans."²⁰ Even if the border did not correspond to a line known and accepted by all, it referred to a sufficiently precise concept requiring the armies of each state to stay in their respective territory. The manner in which Yohannes conceived inter-state peace implied the notion of *respecting borders*, a fundamental element in modern international relations.²¹

On the Sudanese side, the Mahdist chronicler Ismail b. 'Abd al-Qadir presented the border as a theological rather than geographical concept. His book about the Sudanese-Ethiopian conflict contains no mention of the physical position of what he considered to be the border of either the Mahdiyya or Ethiopia. 'Abd al-Qadir justified the militant attitude of the Mahdists toward their Christian neighbors by accusing the latter of having

¹⁸ Gerald H. Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London: E. Arnold, 1892), 168.

¹⁹ The definition of Ethiopian territories and Italian zones of occupation was itself at the center of the Ethio-Italian dispute. For more details, see *Ibid.*, 158; Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844–1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 98.

²⁰ John King of Zion to Hamdan Abu 'Anja, 17 Kihak 1881 / 25 December 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/1/192, NRO.

²¹ Yohannes' successor, Emperor Menilek II (1889–1913), would play the "game of effective occupation" a decade later, in the face of British advance towards Sudan and French progression into the Upper Nile Basin. See Triulzi, *Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy*, 178, and Douglas H. Johnson, "On the Nilotic Frontier: Imperial Ethiopia in the Southern Sudan, 1898–1936," in Donham and James, *The Southern Marches*, 220. For a political and judicial analysis of border problems between Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea since the late nineteenth century, see al-Ja'ali, *Hudud al-Sudan*.

“transgressed the borders [*hudud*] and not let the people of Islam in peace.”²² The Ethiopian entity is thus delimited by borders that have religious and “behavioral” meaning. Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane have suggested an interesting interpretation for Mahdist conceptualizations of the border, although it is not necessarily convincing. They claim that in opposition to their Turco-Egyptian predecessors, the Mahdists “felt the need to establish their monopoly of power within defined borders.”²³ This hypothesis is bolstered by the example of the repression of the *jihadiyya* revolt that erupted in 1885 in the Nuba Mountains. The Mahdi could not tolerate the existence of dissident fiefs within the new Islamic community he strove to build. The idea of a political and religious monopoly does not seem unfounded, but did the consolidation of such an incontestable power automatically entail the existence of precise geographical borders? Nothing is less certain. In practice, the Mahdist elite could draw a clear distinction between the Mahdiyya and the rest of the world while accommodating with moving “physical” borders. Alan B. Theobald’s assertion that “the boundary [between the Mahdist state and Ethiopia] was clearly marked geographically and racially,”²⁴ is not supported by any evidence.

In the early Mahdist period, the *border* concept took different shapes in the discourses of Ethiopian and Sudanese political figures. While Emperor Yohannes sometimes resorted to the European notion of a defined and defining line, Sudanese leaders tended to espouse a religious distinction. In practice, the borderlands retained some long-lasting features: they were territories inhabited by various cultural and religious groups, crossed by several important commercial routes, attracting individuals who distanced themselves from the central state for a variety of political, religious, and economic motives.

Commercial Trends Between Official Ideology and Pragmatic Needs

During the second half of the 1880s, the circulation of goods and people between Sudan and Ethiopia followed two different patterns: negotiation and consensus on the one hand, constraint and the use of force on the other. Commercial exchanges and war booty represented two distinct modes, although complementary in certain cases, for acquiring vital products (cattle, foodstuffs) and more luxurious items (slaves, gold, ivory). I shall examine each of these two modes separately, and then elaborate on a phenomenon that is closely connected to both of them: slavery and the slave trade.

Borderlands located between the towns of Gedaref, Gallabat (Sudan) and Gondar (Ethiopia) constituted a zone of intense commercial exchanges well before the Mahdist

²² Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim and Muhammad Sa‘id al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya: 1885–1888* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1991), critical edition of Ismail ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Kurdufani, *Al-Tiraz al-Manqush bi-Bushra Qatl Yuhanna Malik al-Hubush* (Omdurman: handwritten manuscript by the *katib* Muhammad Ahmad Hashim, 1890, conserved at the Sudan Archive, Durham, SAD 99/7), 59. My translation.

²³ Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane, *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 25.

²⁴ Alan B. Theobald, *The Mahdiya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881–1899* (1951; reprint, London: Longmans, 1962), 150.

period. Under Turco-Egyptian rule, these towns were meeting points not only for local merchants, but also for traders coming from Egypt, the Hijaz, India, Greece and Armenia.²⁵ Located near productive agricultural land, Gedaref became an important regional market. Its natural protection (the town was surrounded by hills) and its central position in the middle of a triangle formed by the towns of Kassala, Abu Haraz, and Gallabat contributed to the dynamism of its commercial activities. In addition to crops such as maize, sorghum, sesame, and grapes, Gedaref became famous for its cattle and ostrich feathers trade, as well as for its soap and tobacco production.²⁶ In April 1881, Schuver recorded that cotton from Gedaref and Doka (a village located between Gedaref and Gallabat) was exported to Ethiopia through Metemma and Gondar.²⁷ Turco-Egyptian governors were not blind to this prosperity, which benefited them through taxes levied on local products.

Unlike Gedaref, the town of Gallabat was the focus of long quarrels between the Turco-Egyptian and Ethiopian governments. Its geographical position made it into a disputed border zone. A military outpost under the Sultanate of Funj (1504–1821), it came under Ethiopian control in 1821 and was then occupied by Turco-Egyptian forces (1838). It remained subordinate to Khartoum until its evacuation in early 1885, when the Mahdists took possession of the town.²⁸ The market of Gallabat was among the largest ones in Sudan; people came there to negotiate various products such as cattle, cotton, wax, musk, coffee, oil, slaves, gold, and ivory.²⁹ This may explain the demographic significance of the Gallabat district, which numbered 25,000 persons in 1864, whereas Khartoum numbered no more than 30,000 people at the same time.³⁰ The town's commercial activities brought great profits to the polity that controlled it, a fact that accounts for several episodes of conflict between the Turco-Egyptian and Ethiopian regimes (in 1838 and 1863). The role of Gallabat's Takarir³¹ community as commercial intermediaries between Sudan and Ethiopia should be emphasized. The Takarir levied taxes on goods for the benefit of one

²⁵ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 14, 16; Sadiq Basha al-Mu'ayyad al-'Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha: min al-Asitana ila Adis Ababa, 1896* (1904; reprint, Abu Dhabi: Dar al-Suwaydi, 2001), 168.

²⁶ Joseph Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi im Sudan und meine zehnjährige Gefangenschaft dortselbst* (Innsbruck: H. Schwick, 1892), 156; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 14.

²⁷ Schuver, *Juan Maria Schuver's Travels*, 278.

²⁸ Implementing the Hewett Treaty signed with Britain on 3 June 1884, Ethiopian soldiers helped to evacuate Turco-Egyptian troops assailed by Mahdist forces in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderlands.

²⁹ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid*; Lejean, *Voyage aux deux Nils*, 128.

³¹ The term *Takrur* refers to the capital of a state that emerged in the Senegal Valley in the eleventh century. It is believed to be the first West African principality that adopted Islam. The attributive form (*nisba*)—*Takruri*, pl. *Takarir*—came to be used in the Middle East to name Muslims from West Africa that had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). The Takarir mentioned here settled in the Gallabat region in the eighteenth century, after returning from Mecca. For more details, see 'Umar al-Naqar, "Takrur, the History of a Name," *Journal of African History* 10, 3 (1969), 365–74, and also Schuver, *Juan Maria Schuver's Travels*, 13 n. 2.

government or the other. Their political allegiance indeed oscillated between Sudan and Ethiopia, according to changing power relations between the two states.³²

Gondar, the imperial capital of Ethiopia from 1636 to 1855, was located at the crossroads of several important commercial routes. One axis linked it to Egypt through Sennar and Nubia. A second started in Darfur in the west and reached the port of Massawa in the east, passing through Sennar, Gondar, and Adwa. A third route led traders from Gondar to Gallabat.³³ The imperial city was among the largest markets of Ethiopia during the first half of the nineteenth century. Commercial activities persisted even when Gondar lost its imperial status under the rule of Tewodros II (1855–1868). The city was especially reputed for its gold, coffee, and ivory markets, but the selling of cattle and poultry was equally widespread. In the mind of many inhabitants of Sudan, Gondar represented an incredibly prosperous city beyond the borderlands.

Were such commercial dynamics maintained in the Mahdist period? One would tend to answer negatively when considering the fact that both the Mahdi and the Khalifa “refused to establish diplomatic and commercial contacts with neighboring Muslim states that did not accept [the Mahdist] mission.”³⁴ If even Muslim states such as Egypt could not hope to soften the Mahdist elite’s intransigency, where did Christian Ethiopia stand? In respect to Egyptian traders, the Khalifa forbade them access to the Mahdist territories in a letter he wrote in 1886 or 1887:

The region from which you now come is under the government of the unbelievers and it is not right that there should be a connection between its people and the people of a country under the government of the Mahdia. Your coming is only for the sake of trade so in the best interests of the Faith, We have thought it most expedient that there should be no sale in the Sudan of the goods you have brought.³⁵

Beyond his religious ideology, the Khalifa may have feared the impact of Egyptian influences capable of undermining the legitimacy of the Mahdist state. His attitude is confirmed by a letter addressed to the inhabitants of Italian-occupied Massawa on December 6, 1887. The author, a Mahdist commander named Muhammad ‘Ali Farja b. ‘Uthman, complained about the fact that the area stretching between his post and Massawa (present-day Western Eritrea) was merely a place for commercial transactions and “other worldly business.” Although part of the population of Massawa had embraced the Mahdiyya, religious zeal did not seem to preoccupy them. Therefore, Muhammad ‘Ali justified the Khalifa’s decision to prevent all traders from accessing the roads leading to Massawa, Suakin, and Egypt. Those violating the rule would have their goods

³² Lejean, *Voyage aux deux Nils*, 129–30; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 13.

³³ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 17–18.

³⁴ Ahmad Ibrahim AbuShouk, “Ideology versus Pragmatism—the Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan (1881–1898),” *Die Welt des Islams* 46, 2 (2006), 159.

³⁵ MAHDIA 2/31/4/112, NRO, quoted by Peter M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881–1898: A Study of Its Origins Development and Overthrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 236–37.

confiscated.³⁶ By minimizing contacts between Mahdist Sudan and its immediate neighbors, the Khalifa plausibly attempted to reduce both the possibilities of escape from Sudan and the penetration of “harmful” influences from neighboring areas.³⁷ The commercial policy of the Mahdist ruler was nevertheless flexible. After the total destruction of Mahdist forces by Anglo-Egyptian troops at the battle of Tushki (August 3, 1889) and a drought that ravaged the country in 1889–1890, he opened Sudan to foreign merchants coming from the north and the east. Recommended by the treasurer of the Mahdist state (Ibrahim ‘Adlan), this change included a state monopoly on trade in ivory, Arabic gum, and ostrich feathers.³⁸

This trend in Mahdist commercial policy seemingly did not apply to trade with Ethiopia. Various sources indeed mention the existence of intensive commercial activities in the border zone of Gallabat, even at a time of growing tensions between the two neighboring states. Al-‘Azm states that Mahdist Emir Yunis al-Dikaym, after he settled in Gallabat in March–April 1887, proclaimed the freedom of trade for all merchants.³⁹ Abu Salim and al-Gaddal go further when they argue that commercial exchanges did not suffer at all from military operations affecting the borderlands. Al-Dikaym considered the Ethiopian traders—*niqadiyya*—as people who practiced a lawful occupation that should not be curtailed.⁴⁰ The Khalifa himself had supposedly authorized them to pursue their activities.

However, one incident tarnishes this somewhat idealized picture. About one month after his appointment as governor of the Gallabat district, al-Dikaym arrested a caravan including 402 Ethiopian and Jabarti merchants.⁴¹ Goods were confiscated and men were

³⁶ Muhammad ‘Ali Farja b. ‘Uthman to the People of Massawa, 20 Rabi‘ al-Awwal 1305 / 6 December 1887, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/47, NRO.

³⁷ According to Carl Neufeld, a German prisoner of the Mahdists from 1887 till 1899, “The Caliph indeed wanted to keep Sudan as much a *terra incognita* as possible; he feared that the opening of new trade routes would open the way into the country” [my translation]. Carl Neufeld, *In Ketten des Kalifen: Zwölf Jahre Gefangenschaft in Omdurman* (Berlin, Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1899), 164. For numbers showing a significant diminution of Sudanese imports and exports between 1882 and 1888, see Henry Russell, *The Ruin of the Soudan: Cause, Effect and Remedy. A Résumé of Events, 1883–1891* (London: Sampson, Low and Marston, 1892), 288–99. Like other European publications at that time, Russell’s book nourished anti-Mahdist feelings concomitant with British strategic interests in the Nile Valley; therefore these numbers should be considered with particular caution.

³⁸ AbuShouk, “Ideology versus Pragmatism,” 160.

³⁹ Al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 170.

⁴⁰ Abu Salim and al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya*, 60 n. 1. By contrast the historian Peter Garretson links military raids to declining trade in the area during the Mahdist period. See Peter Garretson, “The Naggadras, Trade, and Selected Towns in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12, 3 (1979), 435.

⁴¹ Abu Salim and al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya*, 60 n. 2; Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 151. *Jabara* or *Jabart* originally refers to a region near Zeila, to the east of Shoa, where early Muslim migrants established a community. It later came to apply to all Muslims inhabiting the Ethiopian highlands. For various etymologies of the term, see Abdulkader Saleh, “Ġābārti” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*

put in chains and sent to the Mahdist capital of Omdurman. The emir justified his act by accusing the Muslim merchants of paying taxes to Ethiopia and failing to fulfill prayer duties. The motives underlying this action could plausibly be connected to al-Dikaym’s political and military ambitions. He purposefully sought to impress his patron through a spectacular move.⁴² This episode generated two reactions that deserve our attention: first, the Khalifa “jihadized” the event by spreading the news of al-Dikaym’s victory against the unbelievers, presenting the merchants as authentic war prisoners; second, the chronicler ‘Abd al-Qadir transformed the event into a matter of espionage, claiming that the Ethiopians were actually spies disguised as traders.⁴³ Ideological and political meanings were thus used to justify the caravan’s capture.

When Hamdan Abu ‘Anja came to govern the Gallabat district (December 1887), he proclaimed the freedom of trade on one condition: merchants should grant him one fifth of their goods.⁴⁴ This arrangement seems to have satisfied all parties, for many Ethiopian traders poured into the town and sold crops, milk products, honey, and oil. The one-fifth tax levied on these commodities served to maintain Abu ‘Anja’s army.⁴⁵

War Booty: the Material and Symbolic Functions of a Shared Practice

Negotiation was not the only mechanism allowing goods and people to flow across the borderlands. Another pattern of movement involved physical violence and constraint. War booty constituted a central tool of acquisition for Sudanese and Ethiopian state officials. With regards to Sudanese gains, Hamdan Abu ‘Anja’s victorious campaign in Dembea and Gondar (January 1888) resulted in the taking of peculiarly large amounts of booty.⁴⁶ A few

(Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 2: 597–98; Edward Ullendorff, “Djabart” in *Encyclopédie de l’Islam* (Leiden: Brill, and Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 1965), 2: 364–65. See also John S. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 58; Mordechai Abir, “The Ethiopian Slave Trade and Its Relation to the Islamic World,” in John R. Willis, ed., *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa. Vol. 2: The Servile Estate* (London: F. Cass, 1985), 135 n. 7; Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform, and Reaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 205.

⁴² Abu Salim and al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya*, 60 n. 2; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 72; al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 171.

⁴³ Abu Salim and al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya*, 59.

⁴⁴ Al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 172. It is interesting to notice that the Islamic canonical rule regulating the distribution of war booty (*ghanima*) was transposed to trade. See AbuShouk, “Ideology versus Pragmatism,” 156.

⁴⁵ Al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 172.

⁴⁶ This expedition constituted the furthest Mahdist territorial expansion into Ethiopia (Abu Salim and al-Gaddal, eds., *Al-Harb al-Habashiyya al-Sudaniyya*, 15–16); it may have involved the biggest army invading Ethiopia in the nineteenth century (Richard A. Caulk, “Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History* 13, 4 (1972), 622). An Egyptian Military intelligence report mentions “70,000 [Mahdist] men with 7,000 rifles” (“War between Dervishes and Abyssinians,” undated, CAIRINT 1/29/148, NRO), whereas Tsegaye Tegenu gives the number of 19,000 Mahdist troops: Tsegaye Tegenu, *The Evolution of Ethiopian Absolutism: The Genesis and the Making of the Fiscal Military State, 1696–1913* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1996), 262.

days after the destruction of the ancient Ethiopian capital and its numerous churches, the Mahdist emir wrote a letter mentioning the amount of booty, its nature and distribution, as well as the number of killed and injured Mahdists. The booty was divided into four categories: horses, mules, donkeys, and slaves. For each category, Abu ‘Anja detailed the total number of captured elements, one fifth of this number (*tanzil ‘an al-khums*), and the remaining amount, which had to be granted to the army (*haqq al-jaysh*). For instance, 3,445 slaves were taken in total, of whom 684 were due to the Khalifa and 2,761 to the fighters.⁴⁷ A total of 3,647 donkeys, 447 horses, and 326 mules were captured, of which one fifth was set aside for the Khalifa. The booty also included clothes of Ethiopian leaders, some of which were adorned with silver and red gems.⁴⁸

Abu ‘Anja’s report shows that Islamic canonical law regarding the distribution of *ghanima*⁴⁹—four fifths to the fighters and one fifth to the state ruler—was respected in this major campaign. Did Mahdist policies generally stick to this rule?

Muhammad Ahmad applied these regulations during the early years of his struggle against Turco-Egyptian power. However, he later adopted a new approach that allowed him to grant the entire booty to the treasury (*bayt al-mal*).⁵⁰ His successor, Khalifa ‘Abdullahi, introduced significant changes in the organization of state finances. He transformed *bayt al-mal* into *bayt al-mal al-‘umumi* (public treasury) and reduced its importance by creating several parallel treasuries: *bayt mal al-mulazimiyya* (treasury of his personal guard), *bayt mal warshat al-harbiyya wa-l-tirsana* (arsenal and dockyard treasury), *bayt mal dabitiyyat al-suq* (market police treasury) and *bayt mal khums al-khalifa* (treasury of the Khalifa’s fifth).⁵¹ In the account of Rudolf Carl Slatin, a famous Austrian prisoner of the Mahdists, war booty appears only in the Khalifa’s personal treasury. It seems, therefore, that one fifth of all war booty was usually put to the ruler’s

⁴⁷ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Khalifa, 15 Jumada al-Ula 1305 / 29 January 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16B/67, NRO.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ The Arabic word for booty and an Islamic notion defined as “weapons, horses, prisoners of war, and all other movable possessions taken in battle from unbelievers.” See AbuShouk, “Ideology versus Pragmatism,” 156.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Yitzhak Nakash, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, 3 (1988), 379; Ahmad Ibrahim AbuShouk and Anders Björkelo, *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897* (New York: Brill, 1996), 27; Muhammad Ibrahim Naqd, *‘Alaqa al-Riqq fi-l-Mujtama‘ al-Sudani: Tawthiq wa-Ta’liq* (Khartoum: Dar ‘Azza li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi‘, 2003), 93. One reason underlying the Mahdi’s decision is the inflation process resulting from the great quantity of booty taken by the Mahdists from Turco-Egyptian troops (gold, jewelry, coins).

⁵¹ AbuShouk, “Ideology versus Pragmatism,” 155; Rudolf Slatin Pascha, *Feuer und Schwert im Sudan: Meine Kämpfe mit den Derwischen, meine Gefangenschaft und Flucht, 1879–1895* (German original edition, Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1922 [1896¹]), 2: 231–34; Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 238–41; Nakash, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems,” 371; Muhammad Sa‘id al-Gaddal, *Al-Siyasa al-Iqtisadiyya li-l-Dawla al-Mahdiyya: Masadiruha, Mazahiruha, Tatbiqaha 1881–1898* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992) quoted in Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan*, 55.

personal use. Neufeld even extended the Khalifa’s revenues to one fifth of total assets in Sudan, because “all property was considered to be under his supreme management.”⁵²

Even if the rule was well defined in theory (one fifth of the booty for the head of the Mahdist state, four fifths for the soldiers), the distribution of booty did cause tensions in practice. Combatants sometimes seized parts of the booty outside the “official” division. The Khalifa strove to impose a strict discipline among his troops, calling on them to disregard worldly things.⁵³ His position on this issue can be inferred from a letter written to him by an officer enrolled in Emir al-Dikaym’s army:

I shall do all my duties with the greatest firmness, and fight the enemy without cowardice (...) I will never take anything of the booty, not even a needle (...) Our men and I, after knowing what has happened [among soldiers of other armed units], have sworn to God, His Prophet, His Mahdi, and to you, that we attend always the five prayers, the rateb of the Mahdi (...), the reading of the Koran, morning and evening in parties, and not to run away before the enemy, but either to gain the victory for religion, or die in its cause, also that we will never hide any booty, not even a needle; we have definitely discarded this world and are ready to fight in the cause of religion until we meet God (...).⁵⁴

This letter alludes to troubles that occurred within several units of the Mahdist army, whose soldiers allegedly took illegal parts of the booty.

Ethiopian officers and soldiers also benefited from large quantities of booty taken in expeditions and raids in the border zone. In January 1887, Takla Haimanot, the Ethiopian governor of Gojjam, conducted an attack on the town of Gallabat. The Ethiopian force, which may have been as much as ten times larger than the local Mahdist garrison, “occupied Gallabat, set it on fire, and plundered all the money and material goods [that could be found] in the town.”⁵⁵ South of the Blue Nile, Ras Gobana, a general who greatly contributed to Shoan expansion into southwestern Ethiopia in the 1880s, led successful campaigns against Mahdists in western Wallagga. During one of those expeditions, which

⁵² Neufeld, *In Ketten des Kalifen*, 232. My translation. Regarding booty from the Sudanese province of Kordofan, of which one fifth was sent to Omdurman, see David F. Decker, “Females and the State in Mahdist Kordofan,” in Stiansen and Kevane, *Kordofan Invaded*, 91. Holt stresses that the one fifth fraction need not be taken literally; Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 239.

⁵³ Naqd, ‘*Alaqat al-Riqq*, 93.

⁵⁴ Uthman Maati to the Khalifa, 22 Shawwal 1304 / 14 July 1887, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/71, NRO. The *ratib* was a prayer book compiled by the Mahdi, which his followers had to recite on a daily basis.

⁵⁵ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 59. My translation. Al-Gaddal mentions the “exaggerated” numbers of Slatin regarding the size of the two armies: 60,000 Ethiopian warriors against 6,000 Mahdist soldiers. Tegenu refers to even larger numbers: 100,000 Ethiopians against 16,000 Mahdists (*The Evolution of Ethiopian Absolutism*, 262). Thousands of Mahdists perished, including their leader Muhammad walad Arbab. Egyptian Military Intelligence reported as many as 20,000 Mahdist men killed in the assault. See “War between Dervishes and Abyssinians,” undated, CAIRINT 1/29/148, NRO.

occurred in 1886 or 1888, the Ethiopian force killed 5,000 Mahdists and captured 1,325 firearms.⁵⁶

The profits of war booty were certainly not the privilege of state officials. Outlaws and bandits inhabiting the border zone naturally engaged in plunder and brigandage activities, which contributed to the movement of objects, animals, and people across the borderlands. I shall return to this topic in a later section of this paper.⁵⁷

Beyond the satisfaction of material needs, booty also fulfilled a highly symbolic function. Particularly striking is the case of Ethiopian heads that were cut off and sent to Omdurman. The Khalifa exhibited the heads of his “internal” and “external” enemies throughout the Mahdist capital. Among “internal” opponents who underwent this cruel treatment, we find Shaykh Salih of the Kababish tribe (May 1887),⁵⁸ Adam Muhammad and his disciples,⁵⁹ as well as the Sultan of Darfur Yusuf Ibrahim (January or March 1888).⁶⁰ Joseph Ohrwalder⁶¹ has depicted this practice in greater detail than any other witness of the Mahdist period. According to his account, Abu ‘Anja’s campaign to Dembea and Gondar resulted in the dispatch of twelve Ethiopian heads to Omdurman. At the battle of Gallabat (9 March, 1889), whose outcome was brutally reversed by Yohannes

⁵⁶ Triulzi, *Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy*, 160, 166.

⁵⁷ The *sheftenat* (Amharic word for banditry/rebellion) phenomenon in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopia has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention in the 1980s. See Richard Caulk, “Bad Men of the Borders: Shum and Shefta in Northern Ethiopia in the 19th century,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 17, 2 (1984), 201–27; Donald Crummey, “Banditry and Resistance: Noble and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia,” in Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa* (London: J. Currey, 1986), 133–49; in the same volume, Timothy Fernyhough, “Social Mobility and Dissident Elites in Northern Ethiopia: The Role of Bandits, 1900–1969,” 151–72; Peter P. Garretson, “Frontier Feudalism in Northwest Ethiopia: Shaykh al-Imam ‘Abd Allah of Nuqara, 1901–1923,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, 2 (1982), 261–82.

⁵⁸ Francis R. Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahdiism, and of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time* (1891; reprint, London: F. Cass, 1968), 339.

⁵⁹ In late 1887, a man called Adam Muhammad claimed to be the prophet Jesus and managed to gather many followers among resentful Mahdist soldiers posted at Gallabat. Emir Abu ‘Anja reported the event to the Khalifa, who had the conspirators executed (December 1887). See Wingate, *Mahdiism*, 334–35; Na‘um Shuqayr, *Ta’rikh al-Sudan al-Qadim wa-l-Hadith wa-Jughrafiyatuhu* (Cairo: n.p., 1903) edited by Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim, *Ta’rikh al-Sudan* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1981), 733–35; Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 152–53.

⁶⁰ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 170; Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 138.

⁶¹ Joseph Ohrwalder (?–1912) was an Austrian priest of the Roman Catholic mission in Central Africa. He went to Cairo in 1880 and traveled to Sudan with Bishop Daniel Comboni. He was stationed at the Dilling mission (Nuba Mountains) until his capture by the Mahdists, who took him to El Obeid (1882). He was then transferred to Omdurman, where he lived for ten years as the Khalifa’s captive. He succeeded in escaping to Egypt in 1892. He came back to Omdurman after the 1898 Anglo-Egyptian “reconquest” and died there in 1912. See Richard L. Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan* (1951; reprint, London: F. Cass, 1967), 298.

being fatally injured, Mahdist fighters sent several severed Ethiopian heads to the Khalifa to convince him of a great Mahdist victory.⁶² Two days later, the head of Emperor Yohannes was brought to Omdurman. Ohrwalder described how the Khalifa sought to consolidate his political and religious legitimacy through a ceremonial use of the decapitated heads. These were paraded publicly while being attributed to great enemies of the Mahdist state, such as Ras Alula, Ras Hayla Maryam, and Salih Shanga.⁶³ Yohannes’ head was shown all around the market in order to announce the defeat of the powerful emperor.

Mahdist use of their severed enemies’ heads did not only address the Sudanese population; it also aimed at pressuring Egyptian and British enemies. According to Ohrwalder, the Khalifa forwarded the Ethiopian emperor’s head to Dongola and Wadi Halfa (at the Sudanese-Egyptian border) as a warning signal to the Khedive and the British: a similar fate would await them if they failed to submit to the Mahdiyya.⁶⁴

Enslaving and Slave Trading Across the Borderlands

The two modes of circulation that I have examined up to this point—trade and war booty—are closely connected to a “total” phenomenon, whose social, political, economic and cultural implications are extremely varied, and which has left deep imprints on Sudanese and Ethiopian societies: slavery and the slave trade. The Gallabat border zone witnessed large-scale flows of objectified men and women during the Mahdist period. Due to space limits, I shall briefly point out at a few aspects relevant for our discussion, meant to stress the phenomenon’s “qualitative” and “quantitative” significance within the appropriate historical context.

The canonical legal texts of both societies, the Qur’an for Mahdist Sudan and the Fetha Nägäst for Christian Ethiopia, recognize the institution of slavery and regulate it in specific ways.⁶⁵ According to the *Shari’a*, a person can be legally enslaved if he/she is not a Muslim and if he/she has been captured in a jihad.⁶⁶ The legal code of the Ethiopian

⁶² Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 179.

⁶³ In a letter written after the end of the battle, the Mahdist commander al-Zaki Tamal informed the Khalifa that the head of Ras Alula would be sent to Omdurman with Yohannes’ head. See Al-Zaki Tamal to the Khalifa, undated, CAIRINT 1/29/148/98, NRO. However, Ras Alula did not perish at the battle of Gallabat: “Ras Alula’s head was never received; he remained its possessor although he lost almost everything else.” Haggai Erlich, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography: Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1875–1897* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996), 136. Ras Alula died in early 1897, after a fight against a rival in which his leg was wounded. See Haggai Erlich, “Alula ጄጎጎጎጎ” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 1: 213. Ras Hayla Maryam actually died at the battle of Gallabat.

⁶⁴ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 180.

⁶⁵ Alice Moore-Harell, “Economic and Political Aspects of the Slave Trade in Ethiopia and the Sudan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 32, 2–3 (1999), 409.

⁶⁶ Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 5. This statement is vague because of the plurality of meanings and

church allows Christians to own slaves but theoretically forbids them to be involved in slave-trading activities.⁶⁷ While taking into account the normative authority of these texts, I agree with Ahmad Alawad Sikainga's argument that "the status of slaves in many parts of the Muslim world and their day-to-day existence were determined by social reality more than religious norms."⁶⁸ As an institution, slavery is historically entrenched in the social, economic and cultural structures of Sudan and Ethiopia. It is in both cases a particularly ancient institution.⁶⁹

During the Mahdist period, the rulers of the Sudanese and Ethiopian states were the biggest owners of slaves within their respective societies. In Sudan, the Khalifa, his family and the great emirs owned vast agricultural estates in the provinces, where they employed servile labor.⁷⁰ Although the slave trade within Mahdist territories was legalized, reaching significant dimensions, exports beyond Sudan were strictly forbidden. This policy was shaped by purely pragmatic motives: the Khalifa sought to eliminate the possibility of exported slaves being enrolled into enemy forces, such as the Anglo-Egyptian army. The restriction of the slave trade to Sudan thus ensued from a military strategy, not from abolitionist efforts.⁷¹ The allegation of the historian Jok Madut, according to which the revenues of the Mahdist state came mainly from slavery and the slave trade, seems therefore groundless.⁷² On the Ethiopian side, the emperor was the greatest owner of slaves. Yohannes made tremendous benefits from the slave trade, as he controlled the flow of caravans heading for Sudan.⁷³ Despite declarations condemning slavery, the emperor did not implement any meaningful measure to prevent his subjects from organizing slave

interpretations ascribed to the concept of jihad, which could serve as a religious legitimizing device for any raid. See Seri-Hersch, "Confronting a Christian Neighbor," 256.

⁶⁷ Abir, "The Ethiopian Slave Trade," 127.

⁶⁸ Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, 5. Sikainga bolsters his thesis with the assertion that the great majority of slaves in northern Sudan were obtained through raids and purchases, and that the captives included many Muslims.

⁶⁹ Abir, "The Ethiopian Slave Trade," 126; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974* (London: J. Currey, 1991), 34; Heather J. Sharkey, "Luxury, Status, and the Importance of Slavery in the Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Northern Sudan," *Northeast African Studies* 1, 2–3 (1994), 187–88.

⁷⁰ Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, 31.

⁷¹ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 275; Naqd, 'Alaqa al-Riqq, 91; AbuShouk, "Ideology versus Pragmatism," 158.

⁷² Madut Jok Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 89. For more details on the revenues of the Mahdist state, see Slatin Pascha, *Feuer und Schwert*, 2: 231–34; Nakash, "Fiscal and Monetary Systems," 371–74; AbuShouk and Bjørkelo, *The Public Treasury*, 13–15; AbuShouk, "Ideology versus Pragmatism," 151, 155–61.

⁷³ Moore-Harell, "Economic and Political Aspects," 412. Moore-Harell gives the number of 20,000 Egyptian pounds a year and evaluates the Egyptian pound at one pound sterling 2.5 pence in the 1870s.

raids. The fact that he accepted to abolish the slave trade in a treaty signed with the British in 1884 had little impact on slave-trading activities in Ethiopia.⁷⁴

The Sudanese-Ethiopian borderlands were a major arena of enslaving and trading activities. This was related to the geographical and cultural background of slaves, which was not arbitrary. People considered as “peripheral” by state elites were often targeted. Culturally or religiously different from the dominant society, these groups could be—on moral grounds—more easily enslaved than people closely associated with the culture of the ruling elites.⁷⁵ Populations inhabiting border zones between Sudan and Ethiopia, such as the Bertha, Burun, Gunza, Ingessana, Jum Jum, Mao, Khoma, Meban and Uduk people⁷⁶ were “peripherized” by both states and became the target of many raids. In Ethiopia, the label *Shangalla* had for centuries been pejoratively used by highlanders to refer to pagan people living in the lowlands. The term came to be associated with slavery, for people designated by it were “reservoir populations of potential slaves.”⁷⁷

Finally, the ways in which slaves were acquired were common to Sudanese and Ethiopian societies. Trade, war booty and raids *per se* constituted the most widespread means to acquire slaves. In Sudan, the Khalifa forcefully recruited into his army slaves who had deserted their master and fled to Omdurman.⁷⁸ In Ethiopia, parents struck by ecological or financial catastrophes used to sell their children as slaves.⁷⁹ Thus, the combined phenomenon of slavery and the slave trade contributed to the exchange of human beings between Mahdist Sudan and Ethiopia. The sources I have consulted incline me to argue that the trade route leading slaves from Ethiopia to Sudan was more frequented than the opposite direction.⁸⁰ The largest Sudanese slave market could be found

⁷⁴ Ibid., 417; Richard Pankhurst, “History of the Bareya, Sanqella, and Other Ethiopian Slaves from the Borderlands of the Sudan,” *Sudan Notes and Records* 58 (1977), 31.

⁷⁵ Pankhurst, “History of the Bareya,” 1; Douglas H. Johnson, “Sudanese Military Slavery from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century,” in Léonie Archer, ed., *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour* (London: Routledge, 1988), 149.

⁷⁶ Abdussamad H. Ahmad, “Trading in Slaves in Bela-Shangul and Gumuz, Ethiopia: Border Enclaves in History, 1897–1938,” *Journal of African History* 40, 3 (1999), 434.

⁷⁷ Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire,” 12. See also Crummey, “Banditry and Resistance,” 139. An interesting adoption of *Shangalla* as a self-name among the Gumuz of Wallagga has been reported by Wendy James, “Lifelines: Exchange Marriage among the Gumuz,” in Donham and James, *The Southern Marches*, 121. For a Gumuz conception opposing a *Shangalla* slave identity to a Funj identity associated with freedom, see Wendy James, “Perceptions from an African Slaving Frontier,” in Archer, ed., *Slavery*, 135.

⁷⁸ Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, 30.

⁷⁹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 22.

⁸⁰ It was already a major trade route before the Mahdist period. In the mid-nineteenth century, between 13,000 and 17,000 slaves passed each year on this route. During the 1860s, British geographer Clements Markham described the slave market of Metemma (Gallabat) as “flourishing.” In the summer of 1862, over forty caravans of non-Christian Ethiopian slaves reached Gallabat to be sold there. Many Sudanese merchants traveled to Gondar in order to purchase slaves originating from southern Ethiopia. They had a significant religious, cultural, and political impact on the city. See “The History of Gallabat,” *Sudan Notes*

in Omdurman. Men and women coming from Bahr al-Ghazal, Darfur and the Nuba Mountains were purchased there, besides Ethiopians who had been captured by the armies of al-Dikaym and Abu ‘Anja. Ohrwalder stresses that Ethiopian slaves were not suitable for hard labor such as water carrying and corn grinding. Most of them worked in the harem.⁸¹ Ethiopian women were traditionally in high demand in Sudan, as they were very appreciated as domestic workers and concubines. Their cost was thus more elevated than that of their male counterparts.⁸²

Trade and war booty were fundamental modes of circulation of goods, animals and human beings through eastern Sudan and western Ethiopia. However, movements of people from one region to the other were not necessarily temporary (as in the case of traders) or constrained (as in the case of slaves). There were categories of individuals who chose—willingly or not—to cross the invisible Sudanese-Ethiopian border in order to join the opposite camp in a long-term perspective.

Political and Religious Asylum: Individual Trajectories of Migration and Dissent

The border zone between Sudan and Ethiopia was an arena of individual and collective “voluntary” migrations,⁸³ stirred by political, religious, economic, and ideological dynamics. Population movements involved migrants from both countries, several of whom were fierce opponents to the established political regimes. According to Richard A. Caulk, relations between the rulers of Sudan and those of Ethiopia were characterized by “their habit of supporting malcontents for whom the unsettled borderlands offered easy asylum and a predatory career.”⁸⁴ The border zone was a place of refuge for individuals escaping from the control of the Sudanese and Ethiopian states. The deteriorating economic and

and Records 7 (1924), 97–98; Moore-Harell, “Economic and Political Aspects,” 413–14; Pankhurst, “History of the Bareya,” 24; Abir, “The Ethiopian Slave Trade,” 130–31. Despite official prohibitions of the slave trade on both sides of the 1902 border, reduced flows of slaves going from Ethiopia to Sudan continued well into the twentieth century: in 1927, 800 slaves from southwestern Ethiopia were dispatched to Gojjam and Sudan. See Fernyhough, “Social Mobility and Dissident Elites,” 160. Conversely, evidence shows that Sudanese people were enslaved and brought to Ethiopia in the early years of the twentieth century, see Garretson, “Frontier Feudalism,” 265, 272.

⁸¹ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 274.

⁸² Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, 22, 225 n. 113. In the Mahdist period, a female slave often cost twice the price of a male slave.

⁸³ Although the distinction between *forced* migrations and *voluntary* migrations is not a clear-cut one, I use the second term to emphasize the notion of choice and the fact that many migrants actively fought the political and religious order they had deliberately left.

⁸⁴ Caulk, “Yohannes IV, the Mahdists,” 30. In the first part of the nineteenth century, a famous refugee from Sudan was Makk Nimr, who fled from Shendi on the Nile to the Ethiopian borderlands in 1822, avoiding Turco-Egyptian heavy taxation and political control. See Henri Dehérain, *Le Soudan Egyptien sous Mehemet Ali* (Paris: G. Carré and C. Naud, 1898), 96–98.

security conditions of the late 1880s⁸⁵ made the borderlands a zone where political rebellion and banditry flourished. Two *shefta* of humble origin that had started their careers in the borderlands during the Mahdist period managed to gain high office in early twentieth-century Ethiopia: Kidana Maryam and Hayla Maryam.⁸⁶ Let us examine individual itineraries of “transborder” migrations stemming from political and religious dissent, which sometimes involved banditry activities.

Regarding migrations from Sudan to Ethiopia, the case of Salih Shanga appears most often in Mahdist correspondences and later historical sources. Educated as an imam at al-Azhar, he was the sheikh of the Takarir of Gallabat and had been governor of the town under Turco-Egyptian rule.⁸⁷ He was responsible for levying taxes and maintaining trade connections with Ethiopia. Shanga relied on a private army of 4,000 warriors equipped with firearms, who were employed on his agricultural estates in peaceful times. When the Mahdist revolution broke out, he remained loyal to the Turco-Egyptian government and did not subsequently modify his political stance. His staunch opposition to the Mahdiyya ensued from the fact that he had benefited from an excellent situation under the Turkiyya⁸⁸: trade routes going through Gallabat provided him with great profits and he had managed to keep good relations with neighboring Ethiopia.⁸⁹ Shanga indeed succeeded in gathering support from Ethiopian tribes to fight against the Mahdists, and he inflicted a serious defeat on them on November 7, 1884. He accompanied the evacuation of Egyptian troops towards Ethiopia (February 28, 1885) and settled in western Gojjam. The Takruri sheikh became an important commander of the Ethiopian state. He initiated several campaigns against Mahdist Sudan and encouraged Takla Haimanot to attack Gallabat in January 1887.⁹⁰

Salih Shanga was not the only refugee of Mahdism to settle down in that Ethiopian region. ‘Ijayl ‘Awd al-Hamrani, the leader of an anti-Mahdist faction from the Hamran Arabs, took his partisans to Ghabta (an Ethiopian village in the border zone), from where they started attacking Sudanese villages. Several sources stress the opportunist nature of

⁸⁵ Between 1887 and 1889, the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderlands suffered from cattle plague, harvest failure, and military operations, which greatly increased the number of hungry bandits in the region. See Fernyhough, “Social Mobility and Dissident Elites,” 157.

⁸⁶ Balanbras Bozna Venis Balezla Governor of Jelga to En Nur Salaa, early Jumada al-Ula 1312/November 1894, MAHDIA 1/34/10B, NRO; Timothy Fernyhough, “Interpreting Ethiopian Banditry: A Revisionist View,” in *Papers of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. Kyoto, 12–17 December 1997* (Kyoto: Shokado Book Sellers), 65, 73. Such political mobility was exceptional for bandits of lowly background, though it was an essential part of Ethiopian noble banditry.

⁸⁷ Holt, *The Mahdist State*, 48; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 17.

⁸⁸ The term *Turk* was used by nineteenth-century Sudanese to refer to their Turco-Egyptian rulers, whose regime came to be known as the *Turkiyya*.

⁸⁹ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 27. According to Schuver, ivory from southwestern Ethiopia was “sent by the prince of Gojjam (Ras Adal) via Dongur, to the Sheikh of the Tukruri [sic] negroes (Sheikh Salih) of Galabat [...] and sold there”: Schuver, *Juan Maria Schuver’s Travels*, 276.

⁹⁰ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 156; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 29.

these activities: ‘Ijayl and his companions had on their mind nothing else than plundering, devastating villages along the Atbara river, which had unwillingly been submitted to the Mahdiyya.⁹¹ When Takla Haimanot assaulted the town of Gallabat, ‘Ijayl supported him by occupying Doka and massacring its inhabitants.⁹²

A third character named al-Muddawi ‘Abd al-Rahman found refuge in western Ethiopia. He had initially been a fervent supporter of the Mahdiyya, taking part in the siege of Khartoum (March 1884–January 1885). After the Mahdi’s death (22 June 1885), this man “recognized his folly and fled from Omdurman.”⁹³ Joining Salih Shanga, he stayed some time in Ethiopia and then went to Cairo (1890). He came back to Sudan after the collapse of Mahdism and died there in 1899. The Khalifa considered him as one of the greatest traitors to the Mahdist cause—after Shanga—because he had supported Takla Haimanot’s attack of Gallabat.⁹⁴

I have less information on Ethiopians who took flight to Mahdist Sudan. Let us nonetheless mention three distinct cases.

First, a Jabarti (Ethiopian Muslim) called al-Nur wad Fagran migrated to Kordofan at the beginning of the Mahdist revolution. The Mahdi appointed him as emir and sent him back to Ethiopia to propagate Mahdism among his people. Fagran returned to the Sudanese-Ethiopian border zone, gathered men at Gedaref and vainly attempted to invade the village of Gadabi.⁹⁵ He then settled in the camp of Tabarak Allah,⁹⁶ where he organized incursions into Ethiopian territory.

Second, another Jabarti named Muhammad Jibril, went to Sudan and gave his allegiance to the Mahdi shortly before the latter’s death. He was then sent back to Ethiopia in order to spread the Mahdist predication among Christians and Muslims alike.⁹⁷ His

⁹¹ Al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 170; al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 25. Garretson emphasizes that these raids stirred Mahdist counter raids which devastated the Ethiopian highlands; these remained uncultivated for more than one decade, see Garretson, “Frontier Feudalism,” 267.

⁹² Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 158.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 157. My translation. Al-Gaddal suggests that al-Muddawi’s faith in the Mahdiyya was shallow: al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 57 n. 2. Viviane Yagi argues that he had opportunistically embraced the Mahdist cause: Viviane A. Yagi, *Le Tiraz: Chronique sur la Guerre Soudano-Abyssine de 1885–1889* (Omdurman, 1984), unpublished French translation of al-Kurdufani, *Al-Tiraz al-Manqush* [see note 22 above], 194 n. 59.

⁹⁴ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 157.

⁹⁵ Al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 33–34. The confrontation took place on November 26, 1884. Fagran’s forces lost circa 700 men against Ethiopian warriors supported by Salih Shanga.

⁹⁶ Tabarak Allah was a military camp founded by Jabarti who had fled Yohannes’ persecutions. See al-‘Azm, *Rihlat al-Habasha*, 170.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

activities provoked the wrath of Yohannes, who intensified persecutions against Muslim Ethiopians.⁹⁸

The third instance is probably the most interesting and controversial one. It involves the son of Tewodros II (Ethiopian emperor from 1855 to 1868). Called Tewodros Kassa, he went to Gallabat after Abu ‘Anja’s victorious campaign to Dembea and Gondar (January 1888). He converted to Islam, offered the Mahdists an alliance against Ethiopia and was sent to Omdurman, where the Khalifa received him “with many marks of respect.”⁹⁹ The two men reached an agreement, according to which the Khalifa promised Tewodros Kassa the Ethiopian throne in exchange for the Ethiopians’ conversion to Mahdist Islam and the payment of an annual tribute.¹⁰⁰ It is useful to remember that after his father’s surrender to the British army at Maqdala (1868), Tewodros Kassa had been hidden by relatives in order to prevent Yohannes from killing him. In the late 1880s, he thought that an alliance with the Mahdists could help him to regain the throne of *Negusä nägäst* (“King of kings,” the traditional title for Ethiopian emperors).¹⁰¹

In the Mahdist period, individuals and groups coming from Sudan and Ethiopia decided to flee their country and take an active part in military or missionary operations of the opposite side. At times, their migratory act had significant repercussions on Sudanese-Ethiopian relations. Those who were considered as “traitors” by the Khalifa were transformed into negotiating cards in his diplomatic exchanges with the Ethiopian emperor. The letter he addressed to Yohannes in early 1887, after the Ethiopian attack of Gallabat, clearly shows that Salih Shanga, ‘Ijayl ‘Awd al-Hamrani and Muddawi ‘Abd al-Rahman represented a major political stake:

If you wish to avoid war and Muslim raids in your country, you must firstly return all Muslim captives you have taken, males and females, free persons and slaves, young and old [...] Secondly, if the men that have withdrawn and joined you such

⁹⁸ The persecution of Muslim Ethiopians was part of a wider Christianization policy implemented by the emperor in the 1880s. Al-‘Azam claims that during his trip to Ethiopia, he met Muslims whose hands and feet had been cut off on Yohannes’ order. See *Ibid.*, 170. On these campaigns of forced conversions, which incited many Ethiopian Muslims inhabiting Gondar and Darita to flee towards Gallabat, see Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo*, 175; Abdussamad H. Ahmad, “Darita, Bagemdir: An Historic Town and Its Muslim Population, 1830–1889,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22, 3 (1989), 450–51. On Yohannes’ religious policy as part of a political scheme of imperial unification, see Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 122–23; Richard A. Caulk, “Religion and State in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, 1 (1972), 23–41; Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 251; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 48–49; Sven Rubenson, *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats, 1869–1879* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000), 317, 333.

⁹⁹ Ohrwalder, *Aufstand und Reich des Mahdi*, 174. My translation.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* Ohrwalder claims that he knew him personally and that he had often talked with him. The historian Zewde Gabre-Sellassie names him “Abd al-Rahman ibn Tewodros” (seemingly his Mahdist name) and argues that he was the son of a cousin of Emperor Tewodros rather than the son of the emperor himself. See Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, 243.

as Salih Shanga, Idris Abu Jinn, ‘Ijayl and Muddawi, are willing to return to their religion and surrender, liberate them from your country and send them to us. If they persist in their desertion and choose apostasy, take their statements down on paper, sealed with their seals, and send them to us so that we may count them among your nation [*qawm*], your party, your religious community [*milla*], and your army. Thirdly, stop transgressing the land of Islam from now on, and stay within your boundaries [*hudud*].¹⁰²

Shaping and Enforcing Socio-Diplomatic Norms in Epistolary Exchanges

Up to this point, our discussion has dealt with circulation patterns pertaining to goods and people. Ideas, norms, and representations also flowed between Sudan and Ethiopia. At the state level, the diplomatic game—in the shape of epistolary exchanges—constituted a central mode of transmission of such immaterial items. I should highlight the fact that textual exchanges were not the prerogative of the two supreme rulers, Khalifa ‘Abdullahi and Emperor Yohannes. Governors and lower-rank officers took an active part in diplomatic interactions between the two states. The rich correspondence between Emir Hamdan Abu ‘Anja and Negus Takla Haimanot (named “Ras ‘Adal” or “Ras ‘Adar” in Mahdist sources) provides an outstanding example.

The Mahdist emir sent a letter to the Ethiopian governor after he defeated him at Dembea (January 1888). Although it is not precisely dated (the month is omitted from the date: 21 ? 1305), its contents indicate that Abu ‘Anja was still in Ethiopia when he wrote it. His intransigent tone conveys a militant jihadist outlook. He reproached Takla Haimanot for not having adhered to Mahdist Islam, making him responsible for Ethiopian losses at Dembea.¹⁰³ Abu ‘Anja threatened to plunder the area and massacre its inhabitants as long as the Ethiopian leader would not recite the *shahada*. The most interesting aspect of this letter, however, relates to social and material conventions regulating diplomatic communication. The Mahdist commander finished his dispatch with a note about his messenger:

My messenger who carries this for you is Nakitad Ras Hassan Kradia. He has been always a preacher of good to men. Be gentle to him, and send an answer with him immediately. Do not harm him for this is the law that no messenger should be killed or imprisoned, or even insulted. He is only one man, no more no less.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Shuqayr, *Ta’rikh*, 729–731. My translation. The Khalifa did not specify the location of the border. For an English version wrongly dated July 1887, see Wingate, *Mahdism*, 332–33. “Traitors” of the Mahdist cause were also discussed in correspondences between lower-rank officials, as will be shown in the next section.

¹⁰³ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Aziz Gojjam Ras ‘Adar Takla Haimanot, 21 ? 1305 / October 1887–September 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/54, NRO. My supposition regarding the letter’s date (21 Jumada al-Ula 1305 / 4 February 1888) is sustained by al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 113 n. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Aziz Gojjam Ras ‘Adar Takla Haimanot, 21 ? 1305 / October 1887–September 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/54, NRO.

Correspondences thus seem to be governed by behavioral norms that are quite independent from the proper contents of the letters. Indeed, Abu ‘Anja’s aggressive attitude did not prevent him from kindly reminding his enemy of the rules of good conduct appropriate for this type of epistolary interaction.

Three weeks later, the Mahdist emir dispatched two other letters to Takla Haimanot. In the first one, he confirmed the reception of a message from him through his Jabarti envoys Muhammad Salih and Hajj ‘Abdallah.¹⁰⁵ The Ethiopian official had offered to release the prisoners he had captured a year before, during the attack of Gallabat (January 1887), and to pay him a tribute in exchange for peace. Abu ‘Anja reacted in an ambivalent manner: on the one hand, he mentioned the governor’s conversion to Islam as a necessary condition for any discussion; on the other hand, he suggested that the arrest of “*corrupters*”¹⁰⁶ such as Salih Shanga, ‘Ijayl ‘Awd al-Hamrani and Muddawi ‘Abd al-Rahman could form the basis of a possible dialogue. The second letter of Abu ‘Anja, dated the same day as the first one, also included this ambivalent message. In addition, it dealt with a particularly sensitive and intimate topic: the fate of Takla Haimanot’s relatives who were captured by Mahdist forces during the Dembea campaign. The emir informed him of his daughter’s death, attempting to minimize the dramatic impact of such news:

death is right, and there is no doubt that every living creature, but God, must die; no one but God will remain. There is no date for each creature to die on, but God will never delay, when the time comes. Your daughter Mentwab has perished and met her death naturally, that was her day, which God wished her to die on, and if she was with you she would not have lived one day longer, or one day less, this is God’s will to his servants.¹⁰⁷

Abu ‘Anja considerably softened his tone when dealing with personal matters. He reassured Takla Haimanot on the situation of his daughters Danki and Shashti.¹⁰⁸ His son Maknon had recovered from a bullet wound and was well taken care of. The Mahdist emir nevertheless exploited the detention of Takla Haimanot’s relatives to convince him to convert to Mahdist Islam.¹⁰⁹ In this letter, the messengers again played a crucial role, not only as efficient transmitters, but also as direct witnesses of the situation in each camp. Abu ‘Anja insisted on the fact that Takla Haimanot’s messengers had *seen* and *talked* to his daughters.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Negus Takla Haimanot, 15 Jumada al-Akhira 1305 / 27 February 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16/2, NRO.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Negus Takla Haimanot, 15 Jumada al-Akhira 1305 / 27 February 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/38, NRO.

¹⁰⁸ The names of Takla Haimanot’s daughters vary from one letter to another. One can find “Ranki and Shasta,” “Danki and Shashti,” “Danki and Shashta.” The fact that these letters are English translations of Arabic original texts explains their frequent distortions of words.

¹⁰⁹ Hamdan Abu ‘Anja to Negus Takla Haimanot, 15 Jumada al-Akhira 1305 / 27 February 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/16A/38, NRO.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Negus Takla Haimanot replied to Abu ‘Anja’s letters through two messages he successively sent on April 5 and May 12, 1888.¹¹¹ Their tone is extremely courteous and respectful towards Abu ‘Anja and the Mahdists in general. For instance, the Ethiopian governor used the following formulas:

“To my beloved in God, the honourable Emir Hamdan Abu Anja, the Emirs of all Kallabat’s Emirs”

“After presenting to you and to all friendly Emirs and all the Ansar¹¹² our warm greetings, we inform you that your dear letter (...) has arrived.”

“My beloved if it pleases you (...).”¹¹³

Takla Haimanot thanked the Mahdist emir for the respect and good treatment granted to his daughter during her illness and her funerals. He wrote very politely that he wished to see his son and two daughters still detained by the Mahdists. He bolstered his request in two distinct ways: on the one hand, by emphasizing the “friendship and brotherhood” linking the two commanders; on the other by expressing his gratefulness to Abu ‘Anja through the grant of a maid or any other commodity he should like.

The Ethiopian governor’s rhetoric can be elucidated by two possible explanations. First, the few quiet months following the Dembea campaign and the devastation of Gondar allowed courteous exchanges between the Mahdist and Ethiopian leaders.¹¹⁴ The second hypothesis seems more probable: Takla Haimanot’s weak position pushed him to attempt to coax his Mahdist enemies. His vulnerability resulted not only from the ruin that the Mahdists had spread in his province, but also from his buffer role between Emperor Yohannes and his powerful rival Menilek.¹¹⁵ Therefore he expressed his wish that he and Abu ‘Anja become great friends, “giving a deaf ear to all those who like to interrupt [their] peaceful relations by their evil whispers.”¹¹⁶ It does not seem that the Mahdist emir reacted to the overtures of the governor of Gojjam. The Sudanese-Ethiopian entente concluded in early 1897 had no impact on the fate of the Ethiopian prisoners, who remained the

¹¹¹ The Negus’ messenger fell ill on the way and delayed the arrival of the first letter. That is why Takla Haimanot sent another one with his son Dasta. See Negus Takla Haimanot to Hamdan Abu ‘Anja, 30 Sha‘ban 1305 / 12 May 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/10B/163, NRO.

¹¹² The Mahdi called his supporters *Ansar* in reference to the Prophet Muhammad’s first disciples in Medina.

¹¹³ Negus Takla Haimanot to Hamdan Abu ‘Anja, 30 Sha‘ban 1305 / 12 May 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/10B/163, NRO; Negus Takla Haimanot to Hamdan Abu ‘Anja, 22 Rajab 1305 / 5 April 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/1/160, NRO.

¹¹⁴ Sanderson, “Conflict and Co-operation,” 21. Sanderson mentions the role of a “personal factor” without elaborating further. See *Ibid.*, n. 4.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22. Al-Gaddal also favors this explanation. He adds that Takla Haimanot had been impressed by Abu ‘Anja’s military aptitudes and strove to gain time while Yohannes was busy with fighting the Italians in the east. See al-Gaddal, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha*, 114.

¹¹⁶ Negus Takla Haimanot to Hamdan Abu ‘Anja, 30 Sha‘ban 1305 / 12 May 1888, MAHDIA 1/34/10B/163, NRO.

Khalifa’s hostages until the fall of the Mahdist state two years later. The survivors were eventually repatriated by Kitchener.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Studying the *border* concept and various modes of circulation of goods, human beings, and social-diplomatic norms between Sudan and Ethiopia sheds light on the complex role of the borderlands in the evolution of Sudanese-Ethiopian relations. In the second half of the 1880s, this area cannot be identified as a clearly delimited and delimiting line, nor as a territory completely disconnected from the Mahdist and Ethiopian political and religious orbits. Commercial, military, and political dynamics made it a zone that both separated and linked Sudan with Ethiopia. Different political and religious conceptions and strategies underlie the divergent conceptualizations of the *border* by Sudanese and Ethiopian ruling groups. Conversely, commercial and diplomatic activities brought border populations as well as political elites closer, be it through personal connections or the elaboration of a shared political culture. As for military operations, they are of quite a paradoxical nature, for they strengthened antagonisms between the Mahdist and Ethiopian camps while creating similarities of *practice* (war booty) that established warfare standards shared by both societies.

One of the striking aspects of the border zone is the longevity of the dynamics it is subject to.¹¹⁸ Most of the processes I have discussed have indeed persisted up to this day. For instance, the *border* concept is still at the focus of intergovernmental tensions, although a line was demarcated in the early days of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Commercial exchanges are crucial for the economic survival of each country, because of their climatic and geographical differences.¹¹⁹ Falling within Sudanese territory, the town of Gallabat distinguishes itself by the mingling of Sudanese and Ethiopian cultures, which is salient in such varied fields as gastronomy, family ties (mixed marriages are common), and linguistic practices (Arabic and Amharic bilingualism).¹²⁰ In addition, the last decades have witnessed intensive bidirectional migrations between Sudan and Ethiopia / Eritrea. Ethiopian and Eritrean nationals constitute the largest group of recent migrants in

¹¹⁷ Sanderson, “Conflict and Co-operation,” 22 n. 1.

¹¹⁸ The anthropologist Wendy James has already noticed the persistence, between the 1880s and the 1980s, of certain social, political and cultural patterns characterizing borderlands located to the south of the Blue Nile. She even suggests the existence of a “frontier character” shared by several different local communities. See Wendy James, “The Upper Blue Nile: Re-reading a Nineteenth-Century Text,” in Hervé Bleuchot et al., *Sūdān: History, Identity, Ideology; Histoire, Identités, Idéologies* (Aix-en-Provence: Iremam, 1991), 45–70.

¹¹⁹ Mustafa Babiker (anthropologist), personal interview with author at the Development Studies and Research Institute (DSRI), University of Khartoum, 29 February 2007. Whereas Sudan benefits from an access to the Red Sea, Ethiopia lost its coastal territory with the independence of Eritrea in 1993. However, Ethiopia enjoys a productive agriculture all year long, which is not the case of Sudan.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Sudan.¹²¹ Their movement is mainly due to political and economic causes, which have varied according to changes of regimes and droughts that have successively plagued the region since the 1960s.¹²² Even though I have less information about migrations in the opposite direction, my personal experience in Khartoum taught me that many opponents to Omar al-Bashir's regime, especially sympathizers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), have found refuge in Ethiopia from the 1980s up to this day.¹²³ Though the borderlands came to be delimited by a legal boundary after the Mahdist period, patterns of military competition, shifting political allegiances, and population displacement have endured in the post-imperial context of Sudanese and Ethiopian civil wars.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Fabienne Le Houérou, *Migrants Forcés Ethiopiens et Erythréens en Egypte et au Soudan, Passagers d'un Monde à l'Autre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 14.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 37, 41–43, 50–51. A first wave of migrants is linked to the Eritrean war of independence waged in the 1960s. The 1974 wave followed the revolution that overthrew Negus Haile Sellassie. In the 1980s, people marginalized by the Mengistu regime shared the experience of migration with Eritreans seeking independence. Finally, the fall of Mengistu in 1991 provoked the flight of his supporters towards Sudan. In 2002, the number of Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants dwelling in Sudanese urban areas was estimated at more than half a million people.

¹²³ See also Alain Gascon, "La Guerre 'Discrète' du Soudan," *LiMes: Revue Française de Géopolitique* 3 (1997), 151, 158; James, "The Upper Blue Nile," 48–50.

¹²⁴ See Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) for a historical and anthropological analysis of the southern border zone in the light of recent Sudanese and Ethiopian political, economic, social, and military dynamics.