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Guest Editor: Bairu Tafla

Foreword

Editorial

Defining Frontiers: Violence and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Eritrea

Richard Reid

Power Without Pashas: The Anatomy of Na'ib Autonomy in Ottoman Eritrea (17th-19th C.)

Jonathan Miran

The Strategic Position of Keren in the Massawa-Khassala Trade Route

Adhana Mengstaab

Italian Approaches to Economic Resources in the Red Sea Region

Massimo Zaccaria

Massawa under Khedive Ismail 1865-79

Ghada H. Talhami

Troops, Missionaries and an Anonymous Observer: A Presentation of an Evidentiary Document

Bairu Tafla

Some Aspects of Environmental History of Nineteenth-Century Eritrea: An Appraisal of the Historiographical Sources

Mussie Tesfagiorgis

The Beginnings of Western Education in Eritrea

Christine Smith-Simonsen



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POWER WITHOUT PASHAS:
THE ANATOMY OF NA'IB AUTONOMY
IN OTTOMAN ERITREA (17TH-19TH C.)*

Jonathan Miran

I am the gate of Abyssinia.
(na'ib Idris to Lord Valentia, 1805).¹

The Sultan rules in Istanbul, the Pasha in Egypt, and Na'ib
Hasan in Massawa!
(na'ib Hasan to the Ottoman Governor of Massawa,
1840s).²

About a century following Özdemir Pasha's conquest of the ports of Massawa and Hirgigo in 1557, the Ottoman authorities devolved power to a locally potent family of the Bejja-descended Balaws and appointed its chief as their *na'ib*, or 'deputy.' By the middle of the eighteenth century, the na'ibs were able to develop their political power, impose their authority and practically become the most powerful rulers in a vast area extending between the Red Sea coast and the highland plateau. Past historical accounts have often tended to portray the lowland-based and Muslim na'ibs in a negative light, describing them as naturally inclined "warmongers," "greedy," "uncooperative" and "unruly" elements, who were the primary cause

of the incessant state of disorder and chaos between the northern borderlands of the historic Christian Ethiopian state and the Red Sea coast. Essentialist attitudes were partly rooted in European travelers' and missionaries' accounts since the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century – views that perceived the Ethiopian polity as an isolated and threatened bastion of 'civilization' in a hostile Muslim environment.³ This tendency persisted and was prevalent among nineteenth-century European observers. Numerous travelers and official envoys wrote with prejudice against the *na'ibs*, some having been directly inspired by James Bruce's late eighteenth-century negative account, that, to some extent, replicated the biased missionary reports of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴

Some modern writers too denigrated the *na'ibs*, attributing to them an innate hostile nature and portraying them as the main factor for withholding the seemingly natural and inevitable progression of an equally seemingly monolithic Ethiopian state. In these writings the *na'ibs* "attack travelers," they use "extortion," and they "encroach" upon territories. Similar exploits applied by large imperial forces – be they Ethiopian, Ottoman, Egyptian or European – seem all too normal and legitimate. State- and empire-centric perspectives promote a static and historically deterministic conception of the evolution of the region whereby struggles are only normal between large historic polities, each having its natural place and "reasonable" aspirations within these conflicts. Interestingly, today too the independence of an Eritrean state is seen by some who are sympathetic to (or locked within) the idea of a historically and inescapably predominant 'Greater' Ethiopia in the region, as something of an anomaly, an unnatural and therefore unviable development in the recent history of the Horn of Africa.⁵

This article joins a revisionist effort in the historiography of northeast Africa – one that seeks to inscribe local historical agents in the shaping and making of regional histories. Implicit in this approach is an effort to transcend, or emphatically ma-

neuver away from the limiting boundaries to the historical imagination characteristic of politically and ideologically-oriented historiographical projects. Historian Frederick Cooper has called for a writing of history forwards (as opposed to backwards, from present to past) in order to avoid the traps of the manipulation of history that project present collectivities – such as states, nations and ethnic groups – into the past.⁶ Accordingly, various claims to the "Eritrean-ness" of this region from times immemorial, or to the area's eternal belonging to a historic Ethiopian state, or even claims such as those advanced by the British in the 1940s, that the broader Muslim-majority lowland regions are somehow organically associated with the Sudan, teach us more about the political objectives and ideological agendas of those advancing them than about any dispassionate aspiration to imagine and evaluate those historical trajectories that have seemingly less tangible use for the present.

In espousing this approach the article examines a region – a frontier, or borderland territory – situated both on the margins of the Ottoman Empire on the one hand, and on the periphery of the different configurations of Christian highland political formations (or the historic Ethiopian state) on the other, from the 1600s to the 1850s. It reconstructs aspects of the history of the regions that extend from Massawa and the Red Sea coasts to the northern parts of the highland plateau, which are situated today in the eastern parts of the modern Eritrean state. My underlying outlook propounds that as a local-regional dynasty of power holders in control of a strategically important region in between larger rivaling political entities, the *na'ib* family struggled to promote its own interests, maneuvering between diplomacy and force, constantly testing the limits of their authority. Consequently it succeeded in extending its influence – perhaps hegemony – over societies in the region.

Departing from past vantage points that have focused on the 'external' military and diplomatic struggles of large political entities and imperial powers – Ethiopian, Ottoman or Euro-

pean - for either access to the sea or a safe passage to the highland plateau, the article writes the *na'ibs* and the region which they dominated into the historical narrative. It places the *na'ibs* at the center of the account, examines their political, economic, social and religious bases of power in the region, and explores the methods, meanings and limitations of their autonomy, authority and dominance until a renewed wave of imperialism in northeast Africa and the Red Sea region in the middle of the nineteenth century transformed and diminished their political power. It argues that, among several outcomes, the ways by which the *na'ibs* established and developed their control have laid down the infrastructure of networks, alliances and spheres of influence that gravitated towards Massawa as the chief urban center in that region. The legacy of a decentralized and indirect mode of Ottoman imperial control and the role of the *na'ibs* in the region, molded political, commercial, social and religious networks and fields of action which contributed directly to the shaping of an interconnected and interrelated region in the predominantly Muslim areas of eastern and northern Eritrea. Processes of a similar character occurred in other provinces of the increasingly decentralized Ottoman Empire where local regional power holders and magnate families contributed to the formation of regions through tax collection and through the establishment and cementing of political and economic networks.⁷ The article makes extensive use of oral traditions collected from the *na'ibs* and their associates by Werner Munzinger (1832-75) in the mid-nineteenth century and by Dante Odorizzi (1867-1917) in the early twentieth century, and published in their narratives about the peoples of the area and their history.

Before the 'Turks': the Balaw in Semhar

The origin of the Balaws points to the north of our area - specifically the region of Sawakin in eastern Sudan, where a gradual fusion between Bejja-speaking nomads and Arabs gave birth to

a ruling stratum called "Balaw" (also 'Belew' and 'Bäläw'). Evidence suggests that following a long period of famine in the eastern Sudan at the end of the fourteenth century, the Balaw began migrating southwards through the Tigre-speaking regions of present-day western and northern Eritrea. Some groups continued to the Semhar region in eastern Eritrea and further south along the 'Afar coast down to Zayla.' The Balaw fused into local groups in all these regions, adopted local languages, and influenced, to varying degrees, social and political configurations. In some societies they attained positions of political preeminence and leadership.⁸

Balaw historical traditions, collected by Werner Munzinger in the middle of the nineteenth century, locate the gradual arrival of Balaw families in the coastal strip of Semhar in the fifteenth century. According to these traditions, the Balaw Bayt Yussuf was among the first notable families to move from the Barka to the Semhar region following its expulsion by the Ja'liin. The family established its political ascendancy in the village of Zaga as vassals of the *bahr negash*, the highland-based ruler of the maritime province.⁹ Traditions further record that Hummad, the son of Sayyid 'Amir Qunnu, who was Yussuf's servant in Zaga, overthrew Yussuf with the assistance of Shaykh Mahmud and became the leader of the Balaw in Semhar. Hummad then moved to Hirgigo (also 'Arkiko' and 'Dokono'), situated several kilometers south of Massawa on the coast.¹⁰ There, he established the supremacy of his family and founded the dynasty which would carry the title of *na'ib* up to the twentieth century.¹¹

The town of Hirgigo predated the arrival of the Balaw to the region and was the most important port on that part of the coast. Historically, it had replaced the ancient Axumite port of Adulis, and later Zula, situated some fifty kilometers to the south. As the Red Sea port closest to the highland plateau, Hirgigo offered convenient access to coast-bound caravans coming from the highlands and served as its gate of entrance. Hirgigo's other

advantages were both its position facing the island-port of Massawa, whose deep-water harbor suited larger seafaring vessels (hence access to long-distance water-borne shipping networks), and its relatively good provision of water in an utterly arid area. An early seventeenth-century Portuguese observer reported that Hirgigo was a rather flourishing port consisting of 400 houses constructed in clay and coarse grass and essential to whoever was in possession of Massawa Island. The island-port indeed depended on Hirgigo for supplying it with water and foodstuffs on a daily basis. Unlike Massawa, which remained independent of highland political influence, at times Hirgigo came under the attack of the *bahr negash*.¹²

Oral traditions attribute the foundation of Hirgigo to the Saho-speaking nomad group of 'Idda who, in some type of association with elements of the holy Muslim clan Bayt Shaykh Mahmud whose primary seat was Zula, settled in Hirgigo, which offered a better port site than Zula. The association of the Balaw with the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud, the two most prominent family-clans in Hirgigo at the period, is meaningful since the latter cooperated closely with the na'ibs in their control of the region. It exemplified the na'ibs' collaboration with various holy Muslim families of the Semhar and Sahel in extending their authority over societies of the region.¹³ These historical traditions may also shed some light on the early history of Massawa's inhabitants. Some of the Massawa families that claim to have been among the first inhabitants of the town belong to the Balaw Yussuf Hasab Allah and the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud.¹⁴ The 'Adulay family, who is also thought of by many contemporary Massawans to be among the early settlers, came from Zula. This data coincides with traditions of the foundation of Hirgigo by originally Saho-speaking elements moving north from the Zula region as well as with Balaw Yussuf Hasab Allah regional supremacy in the sixteenth century. While Massawa's history has unquestionably involved periods of flourishing and decline in its earlier days, these shreds of evidence may point to a late

fifteenth - early sixteenth century commercial and demographic revival of the island-port.¹⁵

Ottoman 'Indirect Rule' and the Autonomy of the "Black Na'ib"

In 1557 Özdemiş Pasha conquered Massawa Island and the port of Hirgigo and made them one of the sandjaks (administrative district) of the Ottoman province of Habesh (Habe° eyaleti), which had been established two years earlier with its center in Sawakin.¹⁶ The broader background to this event should be viewed through the prism of Ottoman-Portuguese struggles of power in the Red Sea basin, which followed the Ottoman occupation of Egypt and western Arabia in 1516-17. After having established their control over the two southern Red Sea ports and a stretch of the coast, in 1559 the Ottomans turned inland and took Dabarwa, the capital of *bahr negash* Yeshaq, who ruled the maritime province for the King of Ethiopia. In Dabarwa, they constructed a large congregational Friday mosque and several other smaller ones. Encountering resistance and pushed back by the *bahr negash* and highland forces, the Ottomans remained briefly in the highlands. They did not however, give up their ambition to establish their foothold on the plateau, and in 1578, under the governorship of Ahmet Pasha, they allied their forces with those of *bahr negash* Yeshaq - who had switched alliances due to power struggles with his master, negus Sarsa Dengel (1563-97) - and launched an attack against the Ethiopian king.¹⁷ The Ottomans were only partly successful and in 1589 they were apparently compelled to withdraw their forces to the coast. Having lost either the political interest or military ability to pursue these efforts, the Ottomans seem to have abandoned their ambitions to establish themselves durably on the highland plateau.

Ottoman authority in the region dwindled well into the first decades of the seventeenth century. Within the broader framework of Ottoman imperialism in that period it was not

uncommon that after initial conquests, different systems of administration and governance developed, with varying balances between central and regional-local authority. The high degree of centralization characterizing the empire in the sixteenth century was short-lived. In many localities, especially beyond the commercially important urban centers, the Ottoman government gave recognition to local families or power magnates who collected revenues for the Ottoman government and secured commercially or strategically pivotal routes.¹⁸ Accordingly, the Ottomans left but a small garrison in Massawa and handed Hirgigo to the local Balaw chieftain whom they appointed their *na'ib*. At this point, known sources do not enable us to establish the exact date of the devolution of power and the appointment of the first *na'ib*. It is also not known how formal or informal the actual transfer of power may have been. The lack of clarity may be, at least in part, rooted in a gradual process of power transferal, both in time and in space. According to the evidence, it seems that the *qa'im maqam* (sub-Governor) of the Pasha of Sawakin still ruled Massawa in 1633. Yet when Evliya Çelebi visited the port in 1673 he reported that it was ruled by a *na'ib* of the Balaw, who was assisted by an Agha and a Turkish garrison. Çelebi portrayed the ruler of Hirgigo as the "black *na'ib*" (Tur. *kara na'ib*) who spoke Turkish correctly even though with a marked Levantine accent!¹⁹ Until new evidence comes to light (for example, in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul), it would be reasonable to assume that the Ottomans had transferred power to the *na'ibs*, de jure or de facto, some time in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. The chronicle of Iyasu I (1682-1706) confirms the *na'ib*'s position of power in the late-seventeenth century, when reporting that in 1693 *na'ib* Mussa b. 'Umar Qunnu attempted to use extortion against the Armenian merchant Khodja Murad who was on his way to Emperor Iyasu I with gifts. Following Iyasu's threats to attack the *na'ib*, the chronicle reports, the latter finally submitted to the emperor's pressures.²⁰ It would also be useful to examine the effects of

the 1701 Ottoman administrative reform, which resulted in the merging of the sandjaks of Massawa and Sawakin with the Ottoman Hijazi province with its base in Jiddah, on the question of authority in Massawa and its region and the role of the *na'ibs* within that new provincial structural framework.²¹

According to *na'ib* historical traditions, by the time of the Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century, the family had already acquired wealth and attained a position of considerable influence in Hirgigo and the Semhar at large. Again, in accordance with a tradition of Ottoman provincial practice, officials manipulated internal *na'ib* family struggles for authority, generating and exploiting divisions within the family. Intra-family struggles may explain the divergence of traditions in respect of the appointment of the first *na'ib* and reflect the viewpoints of different sectarian family factions. According to one version, Hummad 'Amir Qunnu, who is designated as the most prominent Balaw chief at the time, fled with his family, wives, slaves and servants, from Hirgigo to the nearby Buri Peninsula following an Ottoman advance from Massawa to the mainland, possibly in the mid-seventeenth century.²² Hummad was chief in Hirgigo and opposed the Ottomans who had curbed his authority on the coast. While fleeing to Buri, Hummad killed his younger brother's son, 'Ali b. Musa, whom he suspected of siding with the Ottomans. Years later, the story continues, 'Amir, 'Ali's son, sought the assistance of the Ottomans, came to Massawa and was appointed as the first *na'ib*. In return for submitting to the Sultan's authority, supplying Massawa with water, and maintaining order and stability on the mainland, the Ottoman authorities presented him with the paraphernalia epitomizing their power and authority (a silk robe and a golden-handled sword) and a monthly payment from the customs of Massawa for maintaining a garrison of troops.²³ Struggles and divisions within the family were commonplace during the first decades of the *na'ibs*' tenure in office. Most quarrels revolved around the contestation for the office of *na'ib*, with its privi-

leges, and involved maneuvers aimed at gaining Ottoman recognition of one faction over the other. The most significant division within the family confronted the two sons of 'Amir, the first na'ib in office. The rivalry between the two brothers, Hasan 'Amir (r. 1720-1737) and 'Uthman 'Amir (r. 1741-1781) gave birth to a family division that split it into two distinct lineages and extended into the twentieth century in the Italian colonial period.²⁴

Relations between the Ottoman authorities and their representatives on the one hand, and the centralized highland Ethiopian polity on the other, remained strained throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since Massawa handled the bulk of highland foreign trade, the crucial points at issue were access to the sea and the tax duties imposed on merchandise-laden caravans heading from the coast to the highlands or vice versa. However, in between intermittent incidents, a state of co-existence prevailed between the ports and highland rulers who did not shy away from continuously threatening to take over the ports but never showed any real intention or capability of incorporating them into their dominions.²⁵ The na'ibs found themselves at the center of these trials of strength. Na'ib authority and autonomy grew significantly beginning in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, mirroring further the loosening of Ottoman central control over the empire. Ottomanist historian Suraiya Faroqhi observed that in this period the Ottoman dominions at large appeared as a "congeries of domains controlled by different local power holders."²⁶

Following the death of the abuna (Metropolitan of the 'Orthodox' Ethiopian church) in 1738, Emperor Iyasu II sent an embassy to Cairo in 1745 to have a new abuna ordained. The na'ib detained the emperor's envoys in Hirgigo for six months and took most of their gold. Eventually, when the new abuna arrived the following year, the na'ib detained him again on the coast until he had paid the required fee.²⁷ This incident coincided with the beginning of the process of the weakening

of the centralized Christian highland polity in the middle of the eighteenth century, a period known as the *zāmāna mäsāfint* (the "Era of the Princes"). The collapse of central authority in favor of the growingly autonomous regional rulers created a power vacuum which benefited the na'ib whose control of Massawa, Hirgigo and the lowland areas between the sea and the mountains was seldom seriously challenged. When James Bruce arrived in Massawa in 1768 he reported that the na'ib did not pay tribute either to the pasha of Jiddah, to which the Ottomans affixed the port's authorities, or to the Ethiopian king.²⁸ In the absence of modern, rigid notions of borders and unitary sovereignty, the question of tribute payment, as will be argued below, was a central issue in claiming and legitimizing authority in the region and a source of ardent contestation.

Now more than ever, the na'ibs needed to maneuver their way and carefully preserve a viable balance in their relations with the rulers of the province of Tigray, who, while promoting their own autonomy and hegemony, engaged in power politics vis-à-vis the na'ib, usually vacillating between various degrees of forceful intimidation and interested collaboration. All in all, the conjunction of the state of political instability in the central and northern highlands and the decline of Ottoman direct control over their province of Habesh provided a fertile ground for the expansion and consolidation of na'ib dominance in the wider region.²⁹

Power without Pashas: the Anatomy of Na'ib Authority and Dominance

In the second half of the eighteenth century the *na'ibs* were the most powerful rulers of the region between the sea and the highlands. The success of the na'ibs in extending their influence and authority over the diverse societies inhabiting this area depended first and foremost on their ability to exercise effective control by coercion and a measured application of force. It also depended on their ability to provide security to the

pastoralist societies that found themselves on the fringes of the northerly highland provinces and the Sudanese region, vulnerable to attempts of conquest, and subject to raids and attacks by more powerful forces. In the later years of the *zāmāna mäsāfint*, Walter Plowden illustrated this point by referring to the lowland nomad populations as those “flying-fish” who “are preyed on by all.”³⁰ Werner Munzinger also recognized the innate exposedness of these societies when observing that “the inhabitants of Semhar depend on Abyssinia for its pastures, on Massawa for its market, on both for security.”³¹ In a borderland region that lay outside any coherent and effective state control, the *na’ibs* performed certain functions which are normally considered the role of a centralized state. Securing a viable regional economic system through the control of the main trading routes and of grazing and agricultural lands, and providing security for herds, flocks and camels, were central aspects of this process. Tribute payment, the recognition of *na’ib* authority and, not less importantly, the weaving of convoluted social, family and economic alliances and networks of patron-client relations provided security to the relatively small-scale communities of the region.

The geographic limits of *na’ib* influence fluctuated over time. At the peak of their power the *na’ibs* extended their authority over the totality of the Tigre-speaking pastoral and agro-pastoral populations in the regions of Semhar, Sahel, and the northern coasts as far as Aqiq, approximately two hundred miles north of Massawa. Early nineteenth century sources observed that Massawans traded with tribes in the Sawakin area and that the *na’ib* maintained relations with “his fellow-countrymen” in Sawakin.³² The most important groups (numerically) coming under *na’ib* control were the Habab, the Mensa, and segments of the Bayt Taqwe (Bilen).³³ The *na’ibs* also spread their influence over Saho-speaking pastoralists in the foothills of Tigray, Akkälä Guzay and Hamasien, of which the Asaorta and the Taora were the most dominant groups. Other, ‘Afar, Saho and

Tigre-speaking societies under *na’ib* influence inhabited the Buri peninsula, the Zula area, and regions on the ‘Afar coast as far south as ‘Edd, about three hundred miles south of Massawa, as well as the Dahlak islands.³⁴

In what follows, the political, economic, social and religious bases of *na’ib* authority and supremacy will be examined. The treatment follows an analytical-thematic approach which is not always chronological. Examples are drawn from the period between the 1700s and the 1850s.

Developing Power, Applying Force, and the Formation of Military Households

The most important source of power and authority that *na’ib* supremacy rested upon was control of an organized military apparatus in the coastlands, relying heavily on access to firearms via the Red Sea. The Ottomans withdrew most of their forces from Massawa in the late-sixteenth century, leaving only a small policing force and the customs house personnel on the island. A militia, composed of two forces, one made up of “Arabs” and the other of “Turks,” and placed under the authority of the *na’ib*, replaced the Ottoman military troops.³⁵ The commander of the so-called “Turkish” semi-regular militia held the Ottoman title *sirdar* (“supreme commander”), and was often kin-related to the *na’ib*. In the first decade of the nineteenth-century, for example, Lord Valentia reported that the *sirdar* was *na’ib* Idris’s own brother.³⁶ On the other hand, the “Arab” irregular militia was composed of servants, slaves and poor relatives of the *na’ib*, and was headed by a *kahya* (Tur. ‘majordomo’ or ‘quartermaster’). Both positions became hereditary within the families that controlled them. This process also comprised a gradual mixing of soldiers of the Ottoman garrison (mostly Albanians, but also Turks and Bosniaks) who married into local Balaw families.³⁷ Such practice was not uncommon on a wider scale in other regions of the Ottoman Empire (even closer to the imperial ‘center’), recalling the processes leading to the de-

velopment of the military households in seventeenth-century Egypt.³⁸

With time, several families who controlled troops and monopolized certain ranks emerged from this nucleus of forces as independent and potent families. Hence, the Bayt 'Asker and the Bayt Shawish were both descended from the troops of the kahya, and the Bayt Sardal, Bayt Kekiya (Kahya), Bayt Agha also became family-clans on their own. These families wielded much power in the region and were able, consequently, to convert their symbolic power and prestige into advantageous positions in commerce and local politics. Some, like the Kekiya family, have been especially active in Eritrea's twentieth-century history and have preserved political and economic prominence in the country to this very day.³⁹ But the na'ib's forces also recruited among other Saho- and Tigre-speaking populations of Semhar for their military expeditions. Together with the nucleus of Balaw soldiers their forces could often number several thousand men.

Na'ib military supremacy in the region depended on access to firearms and gunpowder via the coast. Their relationship with the Ottomans, who supplied them with rifles and gunpowder, secured this position of superiority.⁴⁰ When diplomacy and political accords failed to serve their interests, the na'ibs, supported by their military might, turned to the employment of outright force. At the height of their power they attempted to challenge the authority of larger entities such as the Ottomans, the Egyptians and the rulers of the northern highland provinces (usually Tigray) by recourse to force. Yet more often they utilized their coercive powers to open up or secure trade routes, force 'rebellious elements' to submit to their authority, or simply when taking over strategic territories or routes. Na'ib Muhammad 'Amir (r. 1737-1741), for example, conducted expeditions against the 'Afar Damoheita clan of the Buri peninsula who had been raiding Zula. Na'ib Ahmad Hasan (r. 1781-1801) was engaged in a long war with the inhabitants of

Debarwa, in the highlands, who had supported several villages in Serae that refused to pay tribute to the na'ib.⁴¹ At the turn of the nineteenth century, the *na'ibs* conducted an expedition against the port of 'Edd on the 'Afar coast. 'Edd had been providing an outlet for highland caravans, greatly displeasing the na'ibs whose interest it was to have all highland trade pass through their dominions, use Massawa as an outlet and pay them passage dues. The na'ib's forces attacked 'Edd, burnt the village and forced the village chief to submit to their authority and swear on the Qur'an that he would not allow highland caravans to pass through that port.⁴²

As the Ottoman-designated rulers of the region, the na'ibs also utilized their symbolic power in legitimizing their authority. Appointment by the Ottoman authorities in Jiddah, Mecca or in Istanbul added to the *na'ibs'* prestige and sway. Clearly, the association of the na'ibs with the most powerful Muslim empire in the area enhanced their position of prestige.

Controlling Space: Routes, Land, Villages, and Regional Markets

The control of valuable grazing and agricultural lands, caravan trading routes, the means of transportation, and strategic market villages in Massawa's orbit, were all central in establishing and securing na'ib power between the mountains and the sea. Spatial dominance involved forceful imposition, political agreements with highland and lowland rulers, and calculated marriage alliances with prominent chiefs, land-based merchants and commercial brokers. It also involved the settlement of originally Hirgigo-based (Balaw) families in key strategic locations, which oftentimes led to the establishment of new market-villages on the trading routes in the vicinities of Massawa and Hirgigo. This illustrates the ways by which the na'ibs secured the essential material bases of their power.

As a result of the prevailing state of political instability in the northern highland provinces the *na'ibs* were also able to

extend their authority over the Saho-speaking pastoral groups who moved their livestock between the lowlands, the foothills and into Akkälä Guzay, Hamasien and Tigray alternately between seasons.⁴³ At some point they also controlled several Tigrinya-speaking, mostly farming, populations in the highlands. According to the traditions collected by Odorizzi, na'ib 'Uthman 'Amir (r. 1741-1781) received from the highland rulers forty-four gult lands in exchange for firearms.⁴⁴ Odorizzi assumed that the number was exaggerated and located the territories at Zeban Zeghib near 'Addi Qayyeh, Ma'ereba west of Halay, Emba Derho, Beleza and Ko'asien north of Asmara, Bet Maka in the western part of Asmara, as well as other lands in Seräe and near Adwa.⁴⁵ The traditions collected by Kolmodin in Hamasien also suggest that *bahr negash* Solomon (ruled until c. 1743) had given the na'ib some lands. *Bahr negash* Bocru (r. c.1770-1776), Solomon's son, sustained antagonistic relations with the na'ib in power, culminating in violent conflict, and eventually took these lands back.⁴⁶ Guillaume Lejean also reported that the na'ib controlled sixteen villages in the region of Halaie, and Alberto Pollera noted that the na'ibs possessed *gult* lands on the edge of the plateau at Halhale in Tzelima, and Mezbir in Tigray.⁴⁷

In return for gult land and grazing rights on the plateau, the na'ibs were expected to pay the Tigrayan highland rulers regular tribute. This point would become a critical point of contention when later, in the mid-nineteenth century, as the 'scramble for the coast' gained momentum, the Tigrayan chiefs claimed authority over the na'ibs – and therefore legitimate rights of sovereignty on the coast – on the basis of past localized tribute payment in the highlands. This process was not uncommon in other settings at that period – for example in southeast Asia – where creeping imperialism led local rulers to claim tributary relations with territories sought after by European colonial or paracolonial powers.⁴⁸ Be that as it may, the possession of gult land by the na'ib and his vassals in the highland regions, relatively far from the coast, points to the extent of his power

at the period and also illustrates how na'ibs and highland chiefs could collaborate and serve their mutual interests. Nevertheless, by the 1870s, as a result of the increasing aspirations of Tigrayan rulers, the restoration of the centralized highland polity, and the ensuing decline of the position of the na'ibs, all gult land had been returned to highland rulers.

Alongside their actual settlement in Massawa's close environment in localities such as Omkullo, Hitumlo, Zaga and Emberemi, the na'ibs controlled all the trading routes from Massawa to the interior. They levied taxes on the lucrative caravans making their way via these routes from the interior to the coast. Most caravans transported slaves, ivory, civet, coffee, wax, hides, ghee and other commodities for exportation via Massawa. Two important routes linked the coast to Adwa in Tigray: one leaving Massawa through Omkullo and passing through Gura' and 'Addi Qhwalla; the other leaving Hirgigo and passing via Wi'a, Halay, and Tsorena. Both routes had check posts where caravans and travelers were obliged to pay a passage fee. The na'ibs directly controlled passage stations such as Halay.⁴⁹ They also controlled the two mainland caravan-departure villages in Massawa's suburbs: Hirgigo, as their chief village and seat of residence, and Omkullo, founded by a group of Hirgigo-based families under na'ib 'Uthman 'Amir (r. 1741-1781).⁵⁰ Furthermore, the na'ibs often controlled the means of transportation, and highland-bound travelers had to secure their services in order to be provided with camels and guides for travel towards Adwa.⁵¹ The documentary evidence abounds with the testimonies of European travelers who had experienced the stressful dependence on the na'ib's good will and permission to travel inland.

A second system of westerly trading routes left Omkullo and bifurcated at 'Aylat, a relatively large village, market center and caravan station situated roughly 30 kilometers to the west of Massawa. Four main routes lying within na'ib-controlled territories left 'Aylat towards Sanhit, Bayt Esheqan (Mensa'),

Karxum (?) and Hamasien.⁵² 'Aylat was the most important na'ib-dominated village in the inland. Like Omkullo, 'Aylat too was founded by Balaws of Hirgigo, specifically by the descendants of the sons of na'ib 'Amir 'Ali (r. 1690-1720), 'Abd al-Rasul and Osman Shagarai, who had migrated to the site and ended up settling there.⁵³ 'Aylat gradually attracted other settlers, most importantly the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud (from Zula) and the Tsaura, both originally Saho-speaking groups who had gradually adopted the Tigre language. 'Aylat was ideally situated at the foothills of the plateau between the highland and lowland grazing regions and at a crossroads of convenient cross-regional routes. Its position had made it the most important market village between the coast and the highlands in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Surrounding pastoral groups brought livestock and produce to 'Aylat, before it was dispatched to Massawa through the coast-controlled networks handled by Balaw merchants. During the rainy seasons 'Aylat's inhabitants also practiced agriculture.⁵⁴ The strong association of the na'ibs with the region is further attested by the settlement of the 'Ad 'Asker near 'Aylat, on the plains towards Sabarguma. The 'Ad 'Asker were a mixed Saho clan who had gradually adopted the Tigre language and who, prior to their settlement in this region, served those soldiers from Hirgigo who had moved to this area following their release from duty.⁵⁵

Finally, although the settlements of 'Asus and Gumhod were slightly smaller than 'Aylat, their economic role as market centers at the foothills of the escarpment and as points of encounter and exchange between coast-based merchants and pastoralists, all of whom were tributary to the na'ibs, was fairly similar. Both Gumhod and 'Asus were settled by members of originally Hirgigo-based households and family relatives of the na'ibs who developed patron-client relations with local pastoralist clans.⁵⁶ The importance of this lies in demonstrating the closely-knit social, political and economic webs that linked the people of the region within the framework of Otto-

man indirect control, and the pivotal role of the na'ibs in the process.

Collecting Revenues: Ottoman Stipends, Taxes and Tribute

The control of grazing and agricultural lands, trade routes and centers of commercial exchange provided the na'ibs with economic revenue as privileged participants in the regional economic system. Traveling and settled merchants from Hirgigo and pastoral and agro-pastoral producers throughout the region, exchanged livestock, camels, goats and agricultural products for manufactured goods imported at Massawa. In addition, their position as power holders in the region enabled the na'ibs to derive considerable revenue from Ottoman stipends, tax levying on caravans and travelers, and from the collection of tribute – mostly in kind – from the societies subject to them.⁵⁷ The na'ibs received a sum of 1005 thalers per month from the Massawa customs administration under na'ib Idris 'Uthman (r. 1801-1831). This sum was supposed to enable the na'ib to keep a force of approximately four-hundred soldiers and provide for his militias.⁵⁸ The na'ib, according to this arrangement, kept one-fifteenth of the sum to himself while the soldiers and the militias at Hirgigo shared the remaining cash. The na'ib, for his part, paid the government 1000 thalers per year as recognition of its sovereignty over the province. The Massawa administration paid the na'ibs an additional sum of 90 thalers per month, in exchange for the supply of wood from Hirgigo.⁵⁹

Between roughly 1750 and 1850 most foreign travelers, missionaries, official envoys, pilgrims and caravan merchants passing through na'ib-dominated territories complained of the high taxes that the na'ib forced them to pay. The basic duty that the na'ibs collected on entrance to Massawa was called the *avaït*. Caravan merchants paid the *avaït* to secure their caravans the right of entry to the port. The *avaït* was divided among the branches of the Balaw family. The na'ibs also collected the *fascès*,

or exit rights, but handed these funds over to the Ottoman authorities, possibly the customs administration which had always depended on the provincial central administration in Jiddah.⁶⁰ In addition to the *avaït* the na'ibs levied taxes on commodities carried into Massawa by caravans or boats. In the first decade of the nineteenth century Valentia reported that the na'ib received 10% of the value of all goods exported and imported at Massawa and one thaler for each person entering the country to trade.⁶¹ A report dating from the 1830s stated that the na'ibs levied one thaler per slave, one thaler per horn of musk (the government taking one tenth of all musk), and one thaler on every ivory tooth weighing 40 lbs. (equal to approx. 5% of its contemporary value).⁶² South of Massawa, the na'ibs established a post at Giumbedli, near Arafayle (Irafayle), on the road to the Buri peninsula, where they collected one rohoia (between three and four litres) for every animal laden with salt arriving from the salt fields of Meka'enile. On every butter-laden camel arriving at Gherar, opposite Massawa, the na'ibs could draw one kubba (a little less than a rohoia, hence, less than 3-4 liters).⁶³ Although the sum was negotiable, the na'ib also required travelers, envoys and pilgrims to pay passage duties - a distressing and nerve-racking experience as reported by most European travelers. The na'ib usually demanded exorbitant sums from Europeans. Henry Salt, for example, was asked by the na'ib to pay 1000 thalers, and a group of Catholic missionaries were requested to pay 1000 écus for travel into the interior.⁶⁴ In the 1830s the na'ib required a group of Christian Habesha pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to pay him and leave all their animals with him at Hirgigo.⁶⁵

The question of tribute collected from the populations under the na'ibs passed through different phases between the late eighteenth century and the 1850s. Evidence suggests that in the early period the na'ib levied tribute mostly in kind, used mainly for provisioning his militias and for sale or exchange on Massawa's markets. At the beginning of the nineteenth century,

Lord Valentia reported that the na'ib received 60 thalers in cash and camels, goats and asses from the chief of the Dahlak islands.⁶⁶ Tribute collection in the early period was rather irregular, erratic and specifically targeted. Only later, after relatively wealthy groups came under the na'ib's authority, in particular the Habab, the payment of tribute became a more important political tool for establishing authority, enforcing recognition, and one other efficient method of filling up the na'ib's cashbox. As such, tribute was also collected following the investiture of chiefs and the mediation of disputes, both performed by the na'ib. Thus, after the investiture of a *kantibay* of the Habab by the na'ib, the newly elected kantibay gave the na'ib 100 camels, 100 cows, 100 goats, and 100 woollen blankets in exchange for his confirmation.⁶⁷ According to Captain Boari's analysis of the tributes in Semhar, the na'ibs maintained a flexible balance in the collection of tribute and avoided heavy taxing that would disturb the regular briskness of regional commerce.⁶⁸

Beginning in the early 1850s, the gradual transition from indirect to direct control radically transformed the structure of tribute relations. It curtailed the na'ibs' political power and ended their state of autonomy and quasi independence in conducting their regional affairs. The aspiring-to-modernize administration in Massawa introduced a well-regulated annual cash tribute on groups of the Semhar and Sahel areas. The Habab were to pay 3000 thalers, the 'Ad Takles, the 'Ad Temariam and the Semhar groups 1000 thalers each. Exempt from the new tribute regime were the town of Massawa and the settled centers of Hirgigo, Hitumlo, Omkullo and Embereme, which were commercial centers with little property in livestock or agricultural produce. Enfeebled politically, but still useful to the government, the na'ibs were given the role of collecting tribute from the region's various populations for the administration.⁶⁹

Political Stratagems: Marriage Alliances, Chief Investiture, and the Administration of Justice

Writing in the 1850s Werner Munzinger exposed his views on the political strategies devised by the na'ibs in imposing their command over their subjects:

In a strict sense, the subjects [of the na'ib] included the Beduins of Semhar and the Chohos [Saho]. Nevertheless, in their astuteness, the na'ibs were able to impose their right of arbitration on the entire coast up to the Abyssinian borders by establishing their influence through marriage and by creating divisions and dissent [among these other societies], which they fully used to their advantage. After some time they were proclaimed, without any opposition, the princes of the land where the Tigre language is spoken. The aim of their efforts was to have all caravans from Abyssinia pass via Massawa, securing them significant revenues.⁷⁰

Many examples illustrate the extent to which marriage alliances between members of the na'ib family and important local chiefs or wealthy merchants was a common tool used by na'ibs in the process of establishing their ascendancy in the region. The 'Ad Shuma, for example, tell of Shuma, the founding female ancestor of the group, who married a member of the na'ib family from Hirgigo. Her sister, Fatma, also married into the na'ib family.⁷¹ This practice was even more commonplace between the Balaw and high-status Saho-speaking groups from the area between Hirgigo and Zula. One such group, the Muslim holy clan of Bayt Shaykh Mahmud, was closely allied through marriage connections with the na'ibs.⁷² The history of the foundation of Omkullo (located several kilometers inland from Massawa) in the second half of the eighteenth century is also rooted in a marriage alliance between the na'ib family and a family of Hadrami sada and prominent merchants in Massawa.⁷³ Traditions relate that na'ib 'Uthman's (r.1741-1781)

daughter, Settel, married a member of the Ba 'Alawi family and, due to reasons of health, they both settled on the less oppressively hot site of Omkullo. From that point on Beduin families from the Sahel and Semhar began settling there.⁷⁴

Throughout their area of influence the na'ibs also invested chiefs, mediated between contestant parties, and arbitrated in legal disputes. Munzinger, again, described the mechanisms through which the na'ib built and exercised his political power:

The na'ib traveled most of the year accompanied by a large party. To one site he came to pronounce arbitration, at another place he settled disputes concerning borders, repress brigandage and recover stolen goods. He also toured the region and collected the annual tribute. He seldom intervened in internal matters, except among the Beduins and the Chohos [Saho] in order to confirm the schum [shum]. His supremacy was not that of a regular monarch [sic], but was limited to arbitration among societies living in regular interaction and who were incessantly in conflict with each other. The only thing common to them all was their dependence on the na'ib.⁷⁵

As a symbol of their formal investiture, the chiefs of 'Aylat received several meters of silk or cotton cloth from the na'ib.⁷⁶ The na'ib judged cases in the *chassamet*, his court of justice, an institution that all recognized and about which we have little knowledge. With his typical anti-na'ib slant, Munzinger observed that arbitrating between litigants could be profitable for the na'ibs, since they required the guilty party to pay them the objects – slaves, cows, or money – that were the subject of dispute.⁷⁷

Mensa' local traditions provide a relatively detailed example of the na'ib's role in internal politics. The Mensa' were cultivators and pastoralists inhabiting a region approximately 50 kilometers northwest of Massawa. They were divided into two groups: the Mensa' Bet Esheqan and the Mensa' Bet Abrehe.⁷⁸

Alliance with (often through marriage) or opposition to the na'ibs was a central issue in Mensa' internal power politics and contestations. Mensa' chiefs manipulated regional politics by allying with one another, a strategy aimed at undermining the rivalry between the na'ibs and the Tigrinya-speaking highland rulers for influence and authority over the Mensa.⁷⁹

Mensa' Bet Abrehe historical traditions tell of the story of the investiture of Tedros by na'ib Hasan Idris (r. 1845-1849).⁸⁰ The account is revealing of the political processes of a small inland society and of the tortuous and intricate – yet critical – relationship between the na'ibs and their subjects. Following the death of kantibay Tesfamikael, his grandson Tedros expected to be invested as kantibay of the Mensa' Bayt Abrehe.⁸¹ While na'ib Hasan Idris was collecting tribute from the 'Ad Temariam in Afabet, the two brothers Jahad and 'Adala, from the 'Ad 'Alai clan of the Mensa' Bet Abrehe, approached the na'ib and asked him to appoint Jahad as kantibay in return for 500 head of cattle. Fully aware of Tedros's expectation to be appointed to office, the na'ib sent for him to give him the opportunity to confront the brothers and claim his rights before them. Subsequently, Tedros's representative offered the na'ib 1500 head of cattle in return for Tedros's investiture as kantibay. The na'ib asked the brothers if they were able to match this offer or raise it. They eventually backed off. Tedros was invested as *kantibay* and was handed the symbolic tribal drum, a European sword, a robe, cap, and a golden bracelet.⁸² Some time later, na'ib Hasan was displeased with *kantibay* Tedros who failed to send him tribute in gifts of livestock. The na'ib launched an expedition against the *kantibay* but the latter had already fled from his camp. Tradition relates that a man approached the na'ib and informed him that Tedros was frightened but not rebellious. If the na'ib promised not to arrest him, the man would bring Tedros to the na'ib. Na'ib Hasan promised but failed to keep his word. Tedros was taken to the medún, to Hírgigo, where he was imprisoned for two years.⁸³ Tedros was released and re-invested kantibay

only after na'ib Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahim overthrew na'ib Hasan from power. *Kantibay* Tedros offered the new na'ib a daughter in marriage and some cattle.⁸⁴

Spreading Islam: Na'ibs and Holy Families

The extension and consolidation of na'ib supremacy accompanied a spectacular process of Islamic diffusion among Tigre-speaking societies, namely the Bet Asgede confederation (Habab, 'Ad Takles, 'Ad Temaryam), Mensa, Maria, Bet Juk and segments of the Bilen. Several extra- and cross-regional factors account for the context of this process, which is located in the first half of the nineteenth century, especially between the 1820s and 1850s. The energetic activities of several Muslim holy families and Sufi brotherhoods (Ar. sin. *tariqa*, pl. *turuq*) such as the Qadiriyya, but much more notably the Khatmiyya, reflected this reawakening in the wider area. In the lowland plains between Massawa and the highlands the atmosphere of Islamic revival inspired and fueled intense and widespread propagating activities by Muslim holy clans and families such as the 'Ad Shaykh, the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud, the 'Ad Mu'alim and the 'Ad Derqi.⁸⁵

From the 1820s onwards the conjuncture, in the Braudelian sense, of Egyptian expansion into the Sudan under Muhammad 'Ali (r. 1805-1849), with the revitalization of the commercial axes connecting the Red Sea and the Nile Valley both fueled and catalyzed the spectacular process of Islamic diffusion among the largely Tigre-speaking societies of the Eritrean region. Some groups such as the Bet Asgede confederation, the Maria, the Mensa' and the Bilen, had practiced, in different forms and to varying degrees, forms of Orthodox Christianity until then. The political decentralization of the Christian Ethiopian state and the vulnerability of predominantly pastoralist societies on its northern fringes were also conducive to the success of the spread of Islam in the area. Northern highland Christian chiefs tended to raid these societies intermittently but persistently in an effort to extend their rule over them and impose tribute payment.

The struggle between Egyptians and Tigrinya-speaking highlanders for the control of the northern territories and eventual Egyptian military superiority provided a fertile ground for the activities of Muslim preachers and traders, but also Egyptian official "persuasion" to adopt Islam.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the revival of Red Sea trade directly influenced the intensity and character of inland trade, and an increasing number of Muslim traders, both from the Sudanese region and from across the Red Sea, participated actively in preaching and propagating Islam along trade routes and in market villages.⁸⁷ Conversion to Islam in this context vested Tigre-speaking communities with a new identity and a powerful counter-hegemonic force and ideology, endowing them with a source of authority and political legitimacy.

The na'ibs and other na'ib-related families from Semhar were active participants in the process of extending their influence hand in hand with the diffusion of Islam. The na'ibs developed an increasing position of prestige and religious sanction as Muslims, mainly by their association with the Islamic institutions at Massawa and with a number of holy clans and families in the Semhar and Sahel. One such clan was the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud who propagated Islam throughout the region as far as the Sahel, the Keren area and the Barka. The na'ibs were closely associated with the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud with whom they shared the control of important mainland suburbs of Massawa (Hirgigo and Omkullo) and important inland villages ('Aylat and Gumhod).⁸⁸ In Hirgigo, the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud was the most prominent group after the cluster of originally-Balaw families, with whom many were linked in marriage. Several in particular were connected with the Kekiya family.⁸⁹ The na'ibs cooperated with the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud by sending families of this clan to provide religious services among groups such as the Ghedem Sicta, 'Ad Ha and 'Ad 'Asker.⁹⁰ The same pattern of cooperation, perhaps to a more limited extent than with the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud, may have occurred with

the 'Ad Mu'alim, serving especially the 'Ad Temariam, and the 'Ad Derki who were active among the Habab⁹¹.

Of equal, if not surpassing importance, a pattern of co-operation subsisted between the na'ibs and the potent 'Ad Shaykh holy family, the most influential in the region before its prominence was surpassed by the Khatmiyya tariqa under Italian colonial rule. In the early nineteenth century, the family was especially active in the Sahel region. It was led by Shaykh al-Amin b. Hamid b. Nafutay who gradually gained widespread reputation through his preaching and miracle working among the Muslim Tigre serf classes of the Bet Asgede who approached him to seek his *baraka* (blessing). Thus began a process of marriages with that group, eventually resulting in the conversion of the Tigre class of the Bet Asgede to Islam, and marking their social liberation and emancipation.⁹² The 'Ad Shaykh undermined the prevailing social structure and manipulated the social distinction between Bet Asgede 'nobles' and Tigre 'serfs' to their advantage. They allied themselves with the latter and provided them with a new counter-hegemonic ideology that challenged their state of subservience.⁹³ Subsequently, Shaykh al-Amin married the daughter of the kantibay of the Bet Asgede marking the conversion of the upper class as well. Many of the newly converted joined the 'Ad Shaykh holy family that enlarged itself relatively rapidly and gradually became an independent group. In the process the family accumulated considerable wealth from gifts and offerings in return for *baraka*.⁹⁴

In the course of the century, sections of the family split off from the main group and moved westwards to Barka, and Anseba. One group, led by Shaykh Muhammad b. Ali b. al-Amin (c. 1795-1877), settled in Semhar. After twelve years in Hirgigo, Shaykh Muhammad moved to Embereme around 1840 where he established the 'Ad Shaykh center in Semhar. Shaykh Muhammad was undoubtedly one of the more influential religious figures of the coastlands and the interior from the 1840s to his death in 1877. He was responsible for converting numer-

ous Tigre-speaking people (especially from among the Habab) and was an object of great veneration in the wider area. His *baraka* attracted scores of pilgrims to Embereme, which one mid-nineteenth century observer qualified as a "little Mecca."⁹⁵ The 'Ad Shaykh operated in tandem with the na'ibs in the process of diffusing Islam and attracted adepts into the *Qadiriyya tariqa*, mostly from among the Maria and the Mensa.⁹⁶ Later in the nineteenth century, and concomitantly with the transformation of na'ib power, the influence of the 'Ad Shaykh waned in favor of the *Khatmiyya tariqa*, which flourished under Egyptian and Italian colonial rule.

The na'ibs may have also exercised a certain degree of influence and authority in the administration of Islamic law. Even though local qadis judged within their societies, they tended to approach either the na'ib, or knowledgeable shaykhs and 'ulama in the region, or the qadis and muftis of Massawa for further advice in complex matters.⁹⁷ The identification of the legal rites (*madhhab*) of the societies subject to the na'ibs reveals that a sweeping majority were Hanafi, the official *madhhab* of the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptians.⁹⁸

Return of the Pashas: The Scramble for the Coast and the Transformation of Na'ib Political Agency (1840s and 1850s)

A change in the geopolitical position of the Red Sea area and northeast Africa marked the beginning of the nineteenth century. The slow but steady revival of Red Sea trade, the mounting regional imperialist ambitions of Muhammad 'Ali's Egypt, the renewed Ottoman centralizing impulse, and the gradual consolidation of political power in the northern highland province of Tigray, transformed the regional power balance and presented the na'ibs with new pressures and challenges. The rulers of Tigray were increasingly interested in securing their access to the sea through which they could procure arms and strengthen their position vis-à-vis other central highland politi-

cal formations. The revitalization of trade, the stabilization of security and the introduction of steamship navigation to the Red Sea area in the 1830s also triggered European interest in commerce and politics in the region. This process accompanied and fueled the renewal of imperial power politics and external intervention in the area. From the 1830s Europeans attempted to establish direct relations with Tigrayan and other highland rulers. The na'ibs found themselves at the heart of 'big power' political and diplomatic competition and saw their power progressively erode.⁹⁹

Past historiography, by focusing almost exclusively on political and diplomatic dimensions, has tended all too lightly to mark the end of na'ib power as a result of various skirmishes or incidents initiated by the larger contenders for power in the region - be they Ottoman, Egyptian or Ethiopian. These perceptions may have reflected the wishful thinking of European semi-official and official envoys writing reports to their governments in London and Paris. Historians have advanced various dates - among which 1808-9, 1813-14, 1847-9, 1865-6 - as marking the supposed 'end' of the power of the na'ibs.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, the power of the na'ibs had begun a process of gradual erosion since the first decade of the nineteenth century and throughout the chequered, albeit overall progressive, transition from Ottoman indirect control to Egyptian direct administration. However, their power was still several decades away from being totally eclipsed. At the regional level, the na'ibs were able to maintain and even strengthen their power among Tigre- and Saho-speaking groups mostly as a result of conversions to Islam and the control of trade routes and markets in a period of commercial revival. Militarily too, the na'ibs maintained their power up to the middle of the century, as several examples of trials of force between na'ibs, Ottomans, Egyptians and Tigrayans clearly demonstrate.

The first significant change in the na'ib's position may be traced to the end of 1808 when the sharif Ghalib of Mecca

sent troops to Massawa to establish his authority in the port.¹⁰¹ Sources based on na'ib traditions suggest that the action was triggered by growing internal struggles within the family following na'ib Idris 'Uthman's (r. 1801-1831) appeal for the sharif's assistance to suppress a local revolt, possibly instigated by a family rival.¹⁰² Three years later, following the Egyptian conquest of the Hijaz, a Wahhabi fleet attempted unsuccessfully to seize Massawa.¹⁰³ In 1814, the newly appointed Egyptian Governor of the Wilaya of Jiddah, Ahmad Tusun, sent a force of 60 soldiers and a qa'im maqam to Massawa. Ottoman-Egyptian trials of power, as they played out in the southern coasts of the Red Sea, did not – at least at this point – alter the na'ib's position, who retained his authority and his monthly stipend.¹⁰⁴

Muhammad Ali's invasion of Arabia in 1811-18 and his campaign in the Sudan in 1818-20 prompted increasing Egyptian efforts to tighten their control over Massawa and, in effect, set in motion a gradual process of the establishment of direct control. The Egyptians incessantly put to the test the limits of their power both vis-à-vis the Ottoman Porte and locally, in their newly occupied dominions. In 1826 the qa'im maqam at Massawa suspended the monthly pay of the na'ib's militias. This gesture induced the rebellion of the na'ib who sent his soldiers to attack Massawa and cut the island-port's water supply. The qa'im maqam fled from Massawa taking three of the na'ib's officials as hostages. They were eventually left in the Dahlak islands.¹⁰⁵ In the wake of this trial of power, and upon the request of the inhabitants of Massawa, a new Egyptian qa'im maqam returned to the port with a new modest garrison. Nevertheless, real power still remained in the hands of the na'ib.¹⁰⁶

In the 1830s, political developments in the northern areas of the highland plateau, European ventures to establish relations with highland rulers, and Egyptian advances on the western fringes of the plateau and in the Red Sea, greatly affected the situation on the coast. The new regional order that began taking shape brushed aside the na'ibs. By 1831, dājazmatch Wube

Haile Mariam (1799-1867) had succeeded in placing himself as the most powerful ruler in the northern highlands, where he controlled a vast territory that included Tigray, Semien, Wolqayt and Wogera.¹⁰⁷ Wube's precise relationship with the na'ib is not very clear but the Tigrayans were increasingly disposed to claim sovereignty over the coast without the actual means (in terms of military capacity, for example), and/or desire, to enforce it in practice and translate it into effective presence.¹⁰⁸ Between 1832 and 1837 pressure escalated on the western marches of the plateau as a result of Khurshid Pasha's methodical extension towards and into the highlands.¹⁰⁹ The Egyptian takeover of Kassala in 1840 and the fear of imminent Egyptian ambitions to secure territorial continuity between the Nile and the Red Sea impelled a decade of triangular confrontations between Wube, the na'ibs and the Egyptians, out of which the na'ibs emerged considerably diminished politically. Tensions heightened as Europeans manipulated all sides, seeking to promote their own agenda and drag their governments into greater involvement in the region.

Massawa remained under Egyptian domination (but not sovereignty, which remained with Istanbul) from 1813, until in early 1841 an agreement between the Ottoman Porte and Muhammad 'Ali led to the evacuation of the Egyptian troops from the port-town. The Ottomans garrisoned Massawa under a qa'im maqam with a handful of soldiers, but were unable to exercise effective control. The Egyptians returned only five years later, in 1846, after the Ottoman Sultan leased both Massawa and Sawakin to Muhammad 'Ali against payment of an annual tribute of 5000 purses.¹¹⁰ In the interval, the na'ibs once again held effective power in Semhar and challenged Wube's aspirations to impose his authority over the areas between the highland and the sea. Conflict mounted during the second half of the year 1843. After na'ib Yahya Ahmad's (r. 1841-44) son raided Hamasien, took 3000 head of cattle and burnt a village, Wube threatened to reciprocate and raid Hirgigo if the cattle and a

sum of 4000 francs (ca. 600 thalers) of caravan taxes were not returned. The issue was brought before the majlis (council) at Massawa and, fearing a destructive raid, the na'ib accepted Wube's demands.¹¹¹ Notwithstanding, Wube eventually conducted a furtive raid in the na'ib's lands in December 1843 but returned rapidly to the highlands. In September 1844 hostilities resumed but not for long. As a result of increased Egyptian military pressure on Wube's northern borders, his armies had their hands full as they raided the Bogos and Habab areas.¹¹²

As the struggle over the coast mounted, Wube made some efforts to establish his authority in Semhar by applying pressure over the na'ibs and by playing on the historical division and rivalry within the Balaw dynasty between the Bayt 'Uthman and the Bayt Hasan branches. Following na'ib Yahya Ahmad's death in 1844 na'ib Hasan Idris replaced him in office.¹¹³ Wube calculatingly exploited the divisions in the family by recognizing and trying to co-opt the late na'ib Yahya's son, Muhammad Yahya, as the only na'ib, but to no avail at that stage. Wube also sought the French government's protection in return for an eventual territorial foothold in the bay of Hirgigo. Approaching Consul Degoutin, Wube justified and claimed his rights on the coast with the tribute the na'ibs had paid him - an assertion that was only partly accurate since it only applied to land and grazing rights in the highlands and on the northeastern rims of the plateau. The French, who were unwilling to put their delicate relationship with the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul at risk, refused to venture themselves in the affair.¹¹⁴ In December 1845, Rustum Agha, the Ottoman governor of Massawa, appointed Muhammad Yahya as na'ib, and thus satisfied Wube's political speculation. Soon after, following the withholding of their payment, the na'ibs once again rebelled against Ottoman authority. Rustum Agha attacked Hirgigo where he encountered resolute resistance by a united front of both branches of the na'ib family, compelling the Ottoman forces to withdraw to the island which the na'ibs blockaded again.¹¹⁵

All in all, the return of Massawa and the coast to the Egyptian government in 1846 signaled a further blow to na'ib authority. The Egyptians, who perceived the connection of their Sudanese possessions - especially the province of Taka - with the Red Sea coast as vital to their imperialist hegemonic aspirations, pursued a more aggressive policy of direct control in the ports and their surroundings. This attitude built up towards a head-to-head confrontation with the na'ibs and in March 1847, a resolute new Egyptian governor, Isma'il Haqqi, arrived at Massawa with a relatively important infantry force. Determined to eliminate the na'ibs, his forces landed in Hirgigo on June 16, 1847. They burnt down the village, destroyed the houses of the na'ib and those of other important Balaw dignitaries, and ordered the construction of a fortress and placed a battalion to guard the wells that provided Massawa with water. Many of Hirgigo's inhabitants left the area and sought refuge on the mountain slopes. Omkullo, another important na'ib stronghold, was also garrisoned by one hundred soldiers.¹¹⁶

Grasping the geopolitical significance of the resolute Egyptian encroachment on the coast, Wube sent his own forces to raid the Semhar and attempt to capture Hirgigo. His forces raided Omkullo and destroyed it on 6 January 1849, before pillaging Hirgigo and other coastal villages and leaving 500 dead, capturing 500 prisoners and taking 10,000 head of cattle. Observers reported that about 15,000 of the mainland inhabitants opposite Massawa and the surrounding villages sought refuge on the island-port.¹¹⁷ Wube continued to demand tribute payment and threatened to pillage the coast if it was not made. In the wake of Wube's devastating raid in Semhar, and as a result of internal Egyptian political developments in the aftermath of Muhammad 'Ali's death in 1849, Massawa and Sawakin returned to the Porte in that same year. The ports would stay in Ottoman hands until 1865.

During the ups and downs of the 1840s, sovereignty over the port was transferred between Ottomans and Egyptians three

times. The na'ibs continued to enjoy a high degree of autonomy especially in the period of Ottoman sovereignty (1841-1846). In 1847 Plowden noted that "within the last eight years it is evident also that the na'ib has been considered in all respects (...) as an independent Sovereign on the mainland." The na'ib, the British consul's memorandum continued, "makes war or peace at pleasure, receives tribute from all the native tribes and sells land to individuals."¹¹⁸ But the increasing involvement of Egypt in the second half of the decade changed this state of affairs and, again, further impeded the na'ibs' political power. Nevertheless, even following the return of Massawa to the Porte the gradual erosion of their power continued.

The transformation of the structure of relations between the na'ibs and the Egyptians (and the Ottomans) was a direct result of their growing military presence and interventionist approach in Massawa and the mainland. The interference in, and manipulation of, local family politics and the transition to a direct mode of tribute collection in the interior undermined the authority of the na'ib, cut off part of his direct revenues and, overall, contributed to the wearing away of his pervasive influence. As their interest in regaining a foothold on the Red Sea coasts mounted, the Ottoman authorities sought to find a way to somehow curtail and neutralize the now-redundant influence of the na'ibs. As in the past, the cooption by Ottoman governors of one na'ib over a rival pretender to the office was highly characteristic of this transitional period and resulted in vesting governors with more practical power. As governors changed, alliances also tended to switch. A good example illustrating this pattern was the rivalry between na'ib Hasan Idris (Bayt 'Uthman, r.1843-47 and r.1849-51) and na'ib Muhammad Yahya (Bayt Hasan, r.1847-49) and their descendants throughout the 1850s and 1860s.¹¹⁹ The typical pattern involved the deportation of the deposed or un-appointed na'ib to Mecca, the seat of the mushir. He stayed there until the authorities either reinstated him and sent him back to Hirgigo, or until he

was sent back to Hirgigo in the company of a new governor with whom he was to exercise control in tandem.¹²⁰

Na'ib Hasan Idris's re-appointment in 1849 changed his position considerably in comparison with his first term in office in the middle of the same decade. While in the past the na'ibs had received an annual pay from the Ottoman authorities they were now required to pay tribute to the governor. To such request the na'ibs are reported to have replied: "We are accustomed to receive tribute, not pay it."¹²¹ Na'ib Hasan's position, the sources continue, resembled that of a "civil servant" who received a pay of 30 thalers per month and who was charged to collect tribute for the Ottoman government from the pastoralist populations of Semhar. "The governors from Constantinople," Consul Plowden remarked in his long report of 1854, "(...) have but one thought, the extraction of money."¹²² The combination of these changes upset the relative state of stability in Semhar and unsettled the control of coastal authority over inland populations. Plowden remarked again that, "having destroyed the power of the na'ibs, the whole land is without law or security."¹²³

Indeed, the interior groups - especially the Saho-speaking and the Habab - rebelled against Ottoman efforts to extract the tribute by force. At the end of June 1850 a force of 250 Ottoman soldiers, together with segments of the na'ib's militias, attacked Habab territory where they met with firm resistance. Similarly, in February 1853 the Pasha in Massawa prepared a joint land and seaborne expedition against the small port of Amphila, south of Massawa, to confirm there the Ottoman Sultan's authority and collect tribute. There too, the Saho-speaking groups assembled 3000 men and threatened to pillage the territory to their north. The na'ib succeeded in "pacifying" them and eventually called off the expedition.¹²⁴ However, the tensions between Saho-speaking groups of the area and the Ottoman authorities in Massawa continued to destabilize communications between the coast and the highlands since the 'Saho'

controlled the principal routes and the means of transportation, namely camels. Munzinger remarked that following the clashes of 1853-54 the 'Saho' "had lost all respect for these authorities and security was never totally re-established."¹²⁵ As was the case on several occasions in the past, na'ibs that were either removed from office or out of official power allied themselves with mainland "rebellious" groups and attempted to challenge coastal authority and rivaling acting na'ibs. Thus, na'ib Idris allied himself with the Saho-speaking groups against the Ottomans and na'ib Muhammad Yahya. Together, they attacked the villages of 'Aylat, Zaga, Omkullo and ravaged the suburbs of Massawa in December 1854. Idris demanded that the Ottomans withdraw from Hirgigo but an Egyptian force of 360 soldiers coming from Taka assisted them in reestablishing a state of relative order only in 1856.¹²⁶

The na'ibs' new capacity as tribute collectors for the Ottoman governor placed them under substantial pressure. They were able to preserve their wavering powers over societies between the coast and the mountains only through force-induced tribute collection and subordination. Both the need for income from tribute and the redefinition of their position under a reinvigorated Ottoman administration on the coast and on the mainland put the na'ibs in a difficult position. They were caught in an uneasy spot between the authorities, to whom they owed the survival – even if diminished – of their authority and the inland populations who could not ignore the new situation as they were put under growing pressure both by the authorities in Massawa and the na'ibs. The transformation in the structure of relations between the na'ibs and inland populations was abrupt in relation to past, more flexible relations permitting various degrees of political and economic cooperation and founded on an intricate web of regionally-based economic and social ties. The "modern" Ottoman-Egyptian regime of tribute collection ended this order. During the 1850s and 1860s the na'ibs conducted forceful expeditions - often in tandem with

Ottoman forces - against populations in the Hamasien, Mensa and Bogos areas.¹²⁷

Even though the political power of the na'ibs declined considerably, they were able to capitalize on their pivotal position in regional commercial networks and on their position of prestige among lowland societies, established over time. They thus converted their political capital into economic capital. As a result of the trials of power of the 1840s and 1850s that culminated in their enfeeblement (and the destruction of their centers of power in Hirgigo) many na'ib-associated families and individuals left the area and devoted themselves to trade between the coast and the White Nile. They dispersed among all the lowland groups where they often settled and married into local families.¹²⁸ Dominating the commerce with the coast they brought ivory from the Nile region, wax and coffee from Metemma, and dispatched those commodities via Keren to Massawa. Munzinger remarked that these new commercial entrepreneurs "are known everywhere by the name 'askar (soldiers) and are in general highly esteemed thus," he added, "the ex-inhabitants of Hirgigo flourish among strangers."¹²⁹

Concluding Remarks

The conjuncture of a decentralized and indirect mode of Ottoman control, the unwillingness or inability of highland rulers to take control over the Red Sea coastlands, and the political instability in the central and northern highlands during the so-called *zämäna mäsäfint* (1769-1855) denoted the absence of a strong state in the region between the coast and the mountains between the early 1600s and the middle of the nineteenth century. This state of affairs enabled the na'ibs to acquire power, impose their authority and extend their influence over societies of the region. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the hegemonic order established by the na'ibs provided relative security and stability in the area through political, economic, social and religious strategies and means. The effective control of

major trade routes, strategically important market villages and the ports of Hirgigo and Massawa were crucial in securing the basis for a relatively stable regional political economy. It would seem reasonable to argue that the pastoralist and agro-pastoralist groups of the coastlands and the interior benefited, at least to some extent, from na'ib control over grazing regions in the lowlands and the highland escarpments. This situation enabled them to realize more fully the intrinsic attributes of their mode of production by taking advantage of the system of seasonal complementarity of lowlands with highlands. The alternative, as proven both before and after the na'ibs' heyday, was recurrent physical and economic insecurity, instability, and a continued position of inferiority vis-à-vis larger and mightier powers competing over supremacy in the region.

The political, economic and social networks and fields of action linking the coast-based na'ibs with interior societies, contributed to shape the mostly lowland region of present-day eastern Eritrea and beyond.¹³⁰ The laying out of a regional infrastructure of social, political, commercial, and religious networks and alliances connected and gravitating towards Massawa, was one of the outcomes of these processes. Moreover, the association of the na'ibs with Ottoman and Egyptian imperial power and the region's close administrative association with the Hijaz and the Islamic "holy lands" conferred on the na'ibs a prestigious status among lowland societies. Most of these societies were indeed in that very period induced by the na'ibs to convert to Islam and adopt Islamic practices. This point is important when assessing the formation and development of a distinct or idealized sense of identity in Massawa and its region, a disposition that - to this day - is closely associated in the popular historical imagination with the history of Islam and its connections with the Red Sea world and Middle Eastern imperial entities.

Notwithstanding, the making of a region in Massawa's close and medium-ranged hinterlands does not preclude this region's

fluid and dynamic connections and interactions with and across adjacent regions. This study challenges primordial and historically deterministic perceptions that tend to emphasize the historical disconnectedness of modern Eritrea's different regions in the pre-colonial era. I argue that the various regional arenas in the territory that would become Eritrea were not, as one historian put it, "independent cultural entities with dissimilar historical orientations" but were much more flexible, interconnected and porous, even before Khedival Egypt's direct role in the area in the 1860s and 1870s.¹³¹ Economically, the revival of commerce in the Red Sea area in the second quarter of the nineteenth century reanimated the Kassala-Massawa caravan route which connected producers, consumers, as well as networks of traders and transporters between Barka and Semhar. Religious-based webs of connections also defy the idea of isolated areas before the last third of the nineteenth century. Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani, founder of the Khatmiyya Sufi brotherhood, initiated followers among the Bani Amer, Marya, as well as in Sahel, Semhar and in the urban coastal centers of Massawa and Hirgigo in the 1820s.¹³² The Ad Shaykh holy family, too, manipulated a system of family circuits and networks straddling the region between Barka and the Red Sea, at least from the 1830s onwards. Finally, as this study has shown, in various periods the coast-based na'ibs interacted with highland rulers and chiefs - and not exclusively in antagonistic circumstances.

From around the 1830s onwards the introduction of steamship navigation and the subsequent commercial boom in the Red Sea area sparked off a truculent struggle between large rivaling polities - be they from beyond the sea or from the inland - over control of the coastlands. From the mid-1840s the clash of sovereignties' resulted in the transition from indirect to direct Ottoman and Egyptian control, which significantly eroded the power of the na'ibs and transformed their political status and influence. The diminution of na'ib political power

reflected the transformation in the meanings of sovereignty typical of other localities in Asia and Africa at that time. As this study has shown, Ottoman indirect control and na'ib ascendancy enabled the inhabitants of Massawa, Hirgigo and the wider region to develop autonomous political, economic and social spaces. From mid-century, with the revival of commerce and the wave of reinvigorated imperialism – both European and non-European, in this context – the notion of indivisible and unitary sovereignty was increasingly imposed, representing a break from the more amorphous methods of governance and legitimacy that had been common under the Ottomans in the past.¹³³ An intimately related consequence of creeping imperialism from mid-century onwards was a gradual shift in the conception and meaning of borders. Effective military occupation and control, together with a centralized and modernized imperial administration, translated into a more rigidified notion of frontiers – one that was not there beforehand when boundaries were nebulous and undefined. Egypt's expansionist enterprise and imperialist ambitions in northeast Africa under Muhammad Ali and the khedives, aspired to create territorial continuities between possessions in the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coasts – a process that led to a more pronounced definition of territorial-political boundaries. The rigidification of frontiers culminated in the late nineteenth century with the creation and consolidation of the Italian colony of Eritrea.

Following a period of instability in mid-century, the 'scramble' for the Red Sea coast culminated with the Egyptian occupation (1865-85) of parts of the coastlands controlled by the na'ibs until then.¹³⁴ The rise of Massawa to its position as a major Red Sea hub in a period of spectacular commercial expansion crystallized and cemented even further the region between the mountains and the sea. The port's role as the focal point for not only economic and political, but also social, religious and cultural activities and influence throughout the region was further enhanced. In any case, the 'story' of the na'ibs

does not end there. It is important to stress that na'ib influence did not disappear altogether. The na'ib family continued to wield power, at a first stage first and foremost through the domination of a widespread web of commercial networks connecting Massawa with the Nile Valley in a period of intense commercial vitality. There is no doubt that to some extent it also maintained the bases of its regional authority. The Egyptians and later the Italians were eager to develop with the na'ib family relations of accommodation which assisted them in the administration of their territories and in maintaining stability. A certain degree of interdependence ultimately benefited both parties. The na'ibs therefore continued to convert and re-convert the political, economic and social capital acquired in past centuries by adjusting and accommodating to rapidly changing times and new opportunities.

The Egyptian administration made efforts to hold a tighter grip on the populations of their dominions in Massawa's hinterlands and in the process coopted the na'ibs whose political, economic and social networks in the region were deemed instrumental for mobilizing local populations and securing their loyalty to the government. In the early 1870s the Egyptian administration awarded na'ib Idris Hasan (c. 1825-1905) the honorary military title of Major (*sagh qol aghasi*) and appointed him *na'zir* of Semhar.¹³⁵ But such gestures were more symbolic than anything else. Much like in the eighteenth century under the Ottomans, both the Egyptians and the Italians (from 1885) capitalized on the historic rivalry between two factions of the na'ib family, the Bayt Hasan and Bayt 'Uthman, and manipulated contesting holders to the office of the na'ib and its privileges, in employing "divide and rule" tactics. In the Italian colonial period, the na'ibs worked with the administration in various capacities, received government subventions and maintained some minimal administrative autonomy in their villages in Massawa's suburbs (especially Hirgigo and Omkullo). Accommodation to Italian colonial rule was instrumental in promot-

ing local municipal and economic interests, but the na'ibs' former politically powerful position remained a symbolic vestige of the past. In 1888 the Italian authorities formally divided the now diminished office of the na'ib between the two family lines. The Bayt Hasan retained Hirgigo under 'Abd al-Karim Abd al-Rahim, and the Bayt 'Uthman took charge of Omkullo and Hetumlo under Idris Hasan.¹³⁶ Further research into the position, role and bases of power of the na'ibs as power brokers under the Egyptians (1865-1885), the Italians (1885-1941) and beyond, is therefore warmly encouraged.

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Note:

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NOTES:

This article draws on a chapter in my doctoral dissertation, 'Facing the land, facing the sea: commercial transformation and urban dynamics in the Red Sea port of Massawa, 1840s-1900s,' Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, 2004. Research was supported by a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship (IDRF) in 1999-2000. I would like to thank Richard Reid and Bairu Tafla for reading earlier drafts of this article and providing useful suggestions and remarks. I am also indebted to Awet Ermias, who helped me to locate an important source used in this study.

1. Letter from *na'ib* Idris 'Uthman to Lord Valentia, [July 1805]. Document no. 1 in S. Rubenson (1987: 3). Also, G. Valentia (1809: III, 252).
2. W. Munzinger (1858: 15), G. Lejean (1865a: 169).
3. The intellectual roots of this outlook can be traced even further back to the popular medieval legend of the Christian Kingdom of Prester John.
4. Although I have read extensively in the English, French and Italian sources I have not conducted a systematic survey of anti-*na'ib* slant in the literature. However, for a sample of this tendency see E. Combes and M. Tamisier (1838: 92-3); W. Munzinger (1858: 8-9); G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 235). See also M. Abir (1975: 550, 563, 567-8) and M. Abir (1968: 8).
5. On the uses of the past in constructing legitimacy in the present and examples of how mid-nineteenth-century European observers constructed a "good" highlander vs. "bad" lowlander dichotomy, see R. Reid (2001: 239-272).
6. F. Cooper (2000: 318).
7. S. Faroqhi (2002).
8. "balāwi" means "Arab" in Bejja. For the most detailed analysis of Balaw etymology, origins and migrations see D. Morin (1997: 2-7) and D. Morin (1999: 15-17). See also A. Paul (1954: 80-90). On the presence of the Balaw in the Eritrean region, see C. Conti-Rossini (1913: 61-90).
9. According to Odorizzi, Zaga was indeed a relatively old settlement in Semhar and was founded about two centuries before Moncullo, hence in the sixteenth century. The Balaw 'Ad Jamil is noted as constituting an important segment of its population. D. Odorizzi (1911: 186); W. Munzinger, (1890: 111, 113, 129); Muhammad 'Uthman Abu Bakr (1994: 282, 305) and Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 1).
10. According to traditions collected by Salvadei, Sayyid 'Amir Qunnu traced his descent from 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas, the Prophet's uncle. G. Salvadei (1913: 1831). "Dokono" means "elephant" in Saho and Afar. The town is referred to as Dokono by its Saho-speaking population. Its preeminently Tigre-speaking inhabitants call their town 'Hirgigo.' In its Arabized form it is also referred to as 'Harqiqu,' subsequently Italianized to 'Archico.' On Hirgigo toponymy see D. Odorizzi (1911: 126-7).
11. See descriptions and versions of this tradition in W. Munzinger (1890: 130) and D. Odorizzi (1911: 132). There are incoherencies and discrepancies regarding dates and persons stemming from the use/misuse of the term *na'ib* as the leader of the family in its earlier stages in

- Semhar. Clearly, the *na'ib* was appointed by the Ottomans only later, but nineteenth-century traditions were unsurprisingly inclined to establish a *na'ib* as the founder of the Balaw dynasty in Semhar. Some versions place Hummad's father, Sayyid 'Amir Qunnu as the founder of the dynasty. See the genealogical tree of the *na'ibs* in D. Odorizzi (1911: 150-2).
12. For details on Hirgigo prior to the nineteenth century see R. Pankhurst (1975: 93-5) and R. Pankhurst (1982: 82-3).
 13. D. Odorizzi (1911: 127, 159) and interviews with Salih 'Abd Allah Zubayr, Hirgigo, 7 March 2000 and Nafi' Khaydar, Hirgigo, 7 March 2000, both from the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud. On the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud see also Muhammad 'Uthman Abu Bakr (1994: 312-6).
 14. Examples of the Balaw Yusuf Hasab Allah include the Shiniti and Hamido families, and examples of the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud include the Faras and Mantay families.
 15. See detailed family lists with origins in D. Odorizzi (1911: Massawa families 112-5; Hirgigo families 159-160) and Muhammad 'Uthman Abu Bakr (1994: Massawa 294-7, Hirgigo 304-11).
 16. For a detailed study of the Ottoman province of Habesh based on Ottoman archives see C. Orhonlu, (1974a) (in Turkish). The limitations of my linguistic skills have prevented me from making any significant use of this original study, which includes a reproduction of 96 official Ottoman documents pertaining to Ethiopia and covering the years 1553-1897 (pp. 181-291). See also C. Orhonlu (1974b). It does not seem, however, that the book adds substantial information about the *na'ibs*, who appear in the text only four times (134, 137, 138, 147 [n.30]). See W. Smidt (2005: 950-2) and A. Gori (2003).
 17. The appearance of firearms in the Red Sea area in the sixteenth-century significantly strengthened the *bahr negash*. Some, like *bahr negash* Ishaq, had sought to gain more independence from the Ethiopian king. S. Chernetsov and W. Smidt (2003: 444-5). For more detailed information about Ottoman-Abyssinian struggles from the 1560s through the 1590s, see C. Orhonlu (1974a: 48-68). Hourani (1991: 226) and Faroqhi (2004: 75-97).
 18. See Çelebi's description of Massawa, Hirgigo and the Dahlak islands under the Ottomans in A. Bombaci (1943: 263-270).
 19. F. Dombrowski (1985: 21-3; 32-4); A. Guérinot (1917-18: 20-1); E. Van Donzel, "Masawwa" *EI*, New Edition (2nd), p. 642, and R. Pankhurst (1982: 86-91).
- For information on the 1701 administrative reform (drawing from Orhonlu's book) I wish to thank Wolbert Smidt (personal communication, 4 February 2006).

22. Some versions relate that Hummad was the first appointed *na'ib*.
23. A. Pollera (1935: 217-18); D. Odorizzi (1911: 132-4); G. Salvadei (1913: 1831). Odorizzi estimated that this had taken place around 1690. Salvadei put it around 1680. Lejean reports that the Balaws of Hirgigo comprised 600 families. G. Lejean (1868: 56).
24. D. Odorizzi (1911: 137-8); W. Munzinger (1890: 130); G. Salvadei (1913: 1831-2). Full accounts of *na'ib* dynastic history are given in D. Odorizzi (1911: 132-152) and W. Munzinger (1890: 130-140).
25. Historically, in some cases when a strong emperor acceded to the throne he renewed territorial claims over the peripheral regions, including the coastal area.
26. S. Faroghi (2002: 366).
27. F. Dombrowski (1985: 38-9); R. Pankhurst (1982: 91-2) and J. S. Trimingham (1952: 105).
28. J. Bruce (1790: III, 5-6).
29. See a general note on the *na'ibs* and their history with excerpts by travelers in R. Perini (1905: 226-31).
30. Consul Plowden to the Earl of Clarendon (No. 184), Massowah, July 9, 1854. Report. *Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers. Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868* (London, 1868), p. 124.
31. W. Munzinger (1890: 109).
32. J. F. E. Bloss (1936: 296). Bloss relies on Henry Salt's account.
33. G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 234). On the Bayt Taqwe – *Na'ib* link see W. Munzinger (1890: 160).
34. G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 235); W. Munzinger (1890: 139); W. Munzinger (1858: 9-10); G. Lejean (1865a: 171) and G. Valentia (1809: I, 31-2).
35. D. Odorizzi (1911: 134); A. Pollera (1935: 218-9) and G. Lejean (1868: 56). According to Odorizzi this had occurred during the period of *na'ib* 'Amir's rule (r. 1690-1720, the year of his death).
36. G. Valentia (1809: I, 54).
37. They are often referred to as the "Arnauts" (irregular infantry serving in the Ottoman army, especially composed of Albanians). W. Munzinger (1890: 130) and Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 3).
38. A. Hourani (1991: 227) and J. Hathaway (1997).
39. On notable members of the Kekiya family see G. Puglisi (1952: 169, 262) and T. Killion (1998: 282-3).
40. W. Munzinger (1890: 139). Traditions from Hamasien collected by Kolmodin suggest that in some military campaigns in the highlands the *na'ib* was aided by the Ottomans ("... le naib revint, ayant reçu des renforts du Turc ..."). It would be reasonable to assume that the

- reference is to those coast-based militias initially formed by the Ottomans. Kolmodin (1915: 76)
41. D. Odorizzi (1911: 136).
 42. W. Munzinger (1890: 139) and G. Lejean (1865a: 171).
 43. W. Munzinger (1890: 137); G. Lejean (1868: 61-2) and P. Ferret and J. Galinier (1847: 389).
 44. 'gult' is a bundle of income rights associated with highland peasant agriculture. Unlike in Europe, where fiefs entailed ownership of land, *gult* granted 'sovereignty,' or tributary rights that derived from a position of political overlordship. See more in D. Donham (1986: 5-11).
 45. D. Odorizzi (1911: 136).
 46. Kolmodin (1915: 75-6); idem (1914: xiii). According to these traditions the *na'ib* in question was Yahya Ahmad (r. 1831-38 and 1841-44). As is clear in this case, all dates should be taken with extreme caution.
 47. G. Lejean (1865a: 168-9); G. Lejean (1865b: 145); A. Pollera (1935: 48); A. d'Avray (1996: 5-6); E. Rüppell (1838-40: I, 310). Pennazzi put the number at 17 villages. L. Pennazzi (1880: 329). The following is Abir's rendering of the circumstances of the handing over of gults: "Taking advantage of the disorder in Ethiopia ... the *na'ib* of Hirgigo forced the weak *bahr negash* who ruled some of the provinces north of the Marëb to cede him a number of districts in Hamasien and Akk?l? Guzay." M. Abir (1975: 567).
 48. S. Bose (2006: 52).
 49. A. d'Abbadie (1890: 51).
 50. On Omkullo see D. Odorizzi (1911: 164-7).
 51. A. d'Abbadie (1868: I, 10).
 52. A. d'Abbadie (1890: 41).
 53. On 'Aylat see D. Odorizzi (1911: 175-180). See also an interesting and vivid description of 'Aylat's inhabitants, their customs and Islamic practices in M. Parkyns (1868: 34-8). 'Amir Nuray was chief of 'Aylat in the mid-1880s. He was originally from Hirgigo and a descendant of the *Na'ib* family. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (henceforth ASDMAE), *Archivio Eritrea* (henceforth AE), b. 53 (17) memo: "Amer Nurai," Massaua, 2.5.1888.
 54. G. Salvadei (1913: 1835).
 55. D. Odorizzi (1911: 194-5); A. Pollera (1935: 220); G. Salvadei (1913: 1836). On the 'Ad Asker see ASDMAE, AE, b. 178, "Notabili e capi indigeni dipendenti dal Commissariato Regionale di Massaua" (1902-3), entry: "Scium Idris Zaccari (Ad Ascar)," p. 20. The Ghedem Sicta clan also served in this function, see D. Odorizzi (1911: 208-11).

56. On Gumhod and 'Asus see D. Odorizzi (1911: 180-5). See also G. Salvadei (1913: 1835).
57. W. Munzinger (1890: 137); G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 234).
58. D. Odorizzi (1911: 141).
59. E. Combes et M. Tamisier (1838: 113); P. Ferret et J. Galinier (1847: 375); Nott (1838: 34). Nott estimated the annual sum paid by the *na'ib* to the government at 1600-1700 thalers.
60. G. Lejean (1868: 56).
61. G. Valentia (1809: I, 57).
62. Nott (1838: 32-4).
63. *The Nakfa Documents*, Document 81, Captain Boari to the Gov. Civile e Militare della Colonia Eritrea (Massaua), Asmara, 11 March 1891, "Tributi nel Semhar e paesi limitrofi," in Anthony d'Avray (2000: 274). Plowden notes that a *koba* is 2.5 lbs.
64. G. Valentia (1809: I, 449); W. Munzinger (1858: 15).
65. A. d'Abbadie (1868: I, 548).
66. G. Valentia (1809: I, 55).
67. W. Munzinger (1890: 111).
68. *The Nakfa Documents*, Document 81, Captain Boari to the Gov. Civile e Militare della Colonia Eritrea (Massaua), Asmara, 11 March 1891, in A. d'Avray (2000: 273-4).
69. *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5.
70. W. Munzinger (1858: 9).
71. Interview with Muhammad Sa'id Shumay, Asmara, 30 November 1999.
72. Interview with 'Captain' Ahmad Shaykh Ibrahim Faras, Massawa, 3 March 2000. For an example of further evidence to marriage alliances between the *na'ib* family and Saho-speaking peoples see D. de Rivoyre (1885: 253-4).
73. The *sada* (sing. *sayyid*) claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad.
74. D. Odorizzi (1911: 164).
75. W. Munzinger (1858: 14).
76. D. Odorizzi (1911: 177).
77. W. Munzinger (1890: 124, 138).
78. J. S. Trimingham (1952: 162).
79. K. G. Rodén (1913: 49, 60).
80. On *na'ib* Hasan Idris see D. Odorizzi (1911: 138).
81. Since Tedros's father, Idris, had died before his father, Tesfamikael.
82. K. G. Rodén (1913: 96-8).
83. 'Medún,' derived from Arabic meaning 'town,' 'city' (Ar. 'madina') or 'urban setting.' This was how the Mensa referred to the urban centers

- on the coast. See more on this word in K. G. Rodén (1913: 76) and W. Munzinger (1890: 106). Some sources claim that the term *mudun* designated the Semhar region at large. D. Odorizzi (1911: 108) and L. Gatta (1885: 476).
84. K. G. Rodén (1913: 102-4). Guillaume Lejean sees the episode as part of *na'ib* Hasan's efforts to convert the Mensa to Islam. G. Lejean (1868: 59).
85. See a more detailed account of the diffusion of Islam in the Eritrean region in the nineteenth century in J. Miran (2005: 183-194).
86. See for example an account of the socially devastating Abyssinian and Egyptian raids against the Bilen in the 1850s. M. Ghabher (1993: 12-22).
87. Sapeto tells of the numerous *faqirs* who travel throughout the region (Keren and Bogos area, in this case) preaching Islam, giving talismans to the sick, and "generating moral disorder." G. Sapeto (1857: 156-7). The book contains interesting and useful descriptions of the recently converted Tigre-speaking societies in the northern Abyssinian region. See esp. pp. 145-262.
88. D. Odorizzi (1911: 159, 167, 178, 181).
89. Interviews with "Captain" Ahmad Shaykh Ibrahim Faras, Massawa, 3 March 2000 and 'Uthman Hajji Mahmud, Massawa, 5 May 2000. The families of both interviewees are linked to the Kekiyas by marriage.
90. The Ghedem Sicta asked the *na'ib* to send them a religious chief. G. Salvadei (1913: 1837). Their chiefs were also appointed by the *na'ib*: ASDMAE, *AE*, b. 178, "Notabili e capi indigeni dipendenti dal Commissariato Regionale di Massaua" (1902-3), entry: "Scium Ali Ghenenai," p. 35. The composition of the clan as noted in the early twentieth century includes important elements of the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud. So as the other clans mentioned. See D. Odorizzi (1911: 210 [Ghedem Sicta]; 189ff ['Ad Ha]; 194ff ['Ad Asket]).
91. Muhammad 'Uthman Abu Bakr (1994: 312-6); J. Miran (2003a: 67-8).
92. On the Bet Asgede and Habab adoption of Islam estimated at ca. 1820 see W. Munzinger (1858: 10); W. Munzinger (1890: 112); J. S. Trimingham (1952: 113, 160-1) and A. Pollera (1935: 200). See A. d'Avray (1996: 63).
93. On the 'Ad Shaykh see J. S. Trimingham (1952: 153-55); J. Miran (2003b: 68-9); A. Pollera (1935: 204-210); M. H?fner (1961: 181-203). See also Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI), Governatorato dell'Eritrea b. 1066. Allegato no 9. Amerio Liberati, "Note sul commissariato regionale di Cheren,"

- Cheren, July 1928, 53-57 and Trevaskis Papers, Box 1, File 2, "The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Eritrea. A Survey of the Keren Division," pp. 19-20.
95. According to a short manuscript note on Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Amin given to me during the celebrations of the yearly *ḥijra* (pilgrimage) in Embereme on 24 March 2000. On the same occasion I was given the *nisha* (line of descent) of Shaykh Hamid b. Naḥutay. Members of the family believe that the *nisha* has been given to Abu Bakr b. Ibrahim b. Hamid b. Naḥutay in Mecca in 999/1590. See more on Embereme and Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Amin in G. Lejean (1865a:142).
 96. On the Maria's adoption of Islam see J. S. Trimingham (1952: 113, 168); A. Pollera (1935: 185). On the Mensa's adoption of Islam see W. Munzinger (1858: 11); J. S. Trimingham (1952: 162); A. Pollera (1935: 176). On the propagation of Islam by the 'Ad Shaykh among groups in the region see A. Pollera (1935: 200); J. S. Trimingham (1952: 113, 161-2) and A. d'Avray (1996: 63).
 97. G. Salvadei (1913: 1830).
 98. J. S. Trimingham (1952: 232).
 99. M. Abir (1967: 443-461).
 100. For example 1808-9: Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 4). 1813-14: R. Pankhurst (1996: 423). 1847-9: M. Abir, (1968: 132), F. Dombrowski (1985: 48); S. Rubenson (1991: 117). 1865-6: R. Perini (1905: 231).
 101. M. Abir (1968: 6); S. Rubenson (1991: 44).
 102. Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 4) and, *The Nakfa Documents*, Document 81, Captain Boari to the Gov. Civile e Militare della Colonia Eritrea (Massaua), Asmara, 11 March 1891, "Tributi nel Semhar e paesi limitrofi," in A. d'Avray (2000: 274).
 103. E. Ruppell (1838-40: I, 188). (in M. Abir (1968: 6).
 104. M. Abir (1968: 6); S. Rubenson (1991: 57); Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 4).
 105. Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 4-5); R. Pankhurst (1982: 243-4). Events in the mid-1820s would benefit from further clarification. See supplementary details in W. Smidt (2005: 951).
 106. E. Ruppell (1838-40: I, 189).
 107. M. Abir (1968: 33-7); M. Abir (1967: 443-4); S. Rubenson (1991: 66-8).
 108. For an analysis of the concept of borders in the Ethiopian region in the nineteenth century see M. Abir (1967:459).
 109. Ibid, p. 449.
 110. Bayyumi (1999: 141-2); M. Abir (1968: 119).
 111. G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 235), S. Rubenson (1991: 104-6).
 112. S. Rubenson (1991: 108).
 113. D. Odorizzi (1911: 138); M. Abir (1968:121).
 114. On the French role in the region see G. Malécot (1972).
 115. G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 236-7); M. Abir (1968: 122-3).
 116. G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 238-9); M. Abir (1968: 132).
 117. G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 240-1). For the description of Wube's raid see L. des Avanchers (1851: 370) and G. Lejean (1868: 56).
 118. Plowden to Addington, August 28, 1847. Memorandum. *Great Britain. Parliamentary Papers. Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868* (London, 1868), p. 8A.
 119. D. Odorizzi (1911: 138-9, 154-5); G. Douin, (1936-41: III, i, 238-43), Abdu Ali Habib, (1973: 5ff).
 120. See for example the convoluted career of *na'ib* Hasan Idris. ASDMAE, AE, b. 178 'Notabili e capi indigeni dipendenti dal Commissariato Regionale di Massaua (1902-3),' p. 11. Also D. Odorizzi (1911: 140-3).
 121. W. Munzinger (1858: 22); G. Lejean (1865a: 168-9).
 122. Plowden to Clarendon, July 9, 1854. Report. *Great Britain. Parliamentary Papers. Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868*, p. 129, and G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 243).
 123. Ibidem.
 124. G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 244).
 125. W. Munzinger (1858: 17-8).
 126. W. Munzinger, (1858: 19); G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 247); G. Lejean (1868: 57).
 127. Abdu Ali Habib (1973: 8-9). See also *The Nakfa Documents*, Document 81, Captain Boari to the Gov. Civile e militare della Colonia Eritrea (Massaua), Asmara, 11 March 1891, "Tributi nel Semhar e paesi limitrofi," in A. d'Avray (2000: 274-6).
 128. For example, various Balaw families settled among the Marya. It appears that after the Italian occupation of Massawa (1885), many of these families returned to Hirgigo. *Trevaskis Papers*, Box 1, File 2, "The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Eritrea. A Survey of the Keren Division," pp. 25-6.
 129. W. Munzinger (1890: 140); G. Douin (1936-41: III, i, 255, 258) ("Commerce is in the hands of the people of Hirgigo. They only pay their hosts small gifts *en route*. Their hosts, in turn, provide them with safe passage from one tribe to another."). Following the burning of Hirgigo approximately 80 Balaws settled among the Maria. W. Munzinger (1890: 190).
 130. See an indicative illustration of how this became 'common knowledge' in Abdu Ali Habib's definition of "Massawa" in his B.A. thesis. "My use of the name Massawa may confuse readers. Strictly speak-

ing, the name refers to the island-port. The author took it in a broader sense as to include all its suburbs and the territory which extended from Zula to Ghinda since these areas were largely affected by events in the island." Abdu Ali Habib (1973: i).

131. The quotation is from H. Erlich (2005: 358-9)
132. Al-Rubatabi (1991: 105-108); Miran (forthcoming).
133. For this idea as exemplified in the wider Indian Ocean world see S. Bose (2006: 36-55).
134. This period is covered, albeit from an Egyptian-centered perspective, by G. H Talhami (1979).
135. *Nazir al-kbutt* is a notable in charge of a subdivision of an administrative district.
136. D. Odorizzi (1911: 142-150).

THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF KEREN IN THE MASSAWA-KHASSALA TRADE ROUTE

Adhana Mengstaab

This brief article¹ attempts to present the strategic importance of the Keren district in the Eritrean northern caravan trade route from the earliest times to the nineteenth century.

The Geo-Strategic Location of Keren

The district of Keren, known as Bogos by the Tigrigna-speaking neighboring district, and as Sanhit by the Tigrae-speaking districts, is a mountainous region tightly welded to the Hamasen plateau. It may be considered the northern appendage of that plateau. It is a centre of the Ansaba valley which extends from the Barka valley to the Red Sea Coast. The deep valley of the river Ansaba splits that mountainous mass into two: the eastern part constitutes the Habab and Mansa, while the western portion constitutes the Marya and the Land of the Blean (Bogos, Sanhit). Bogos, which forms a sort of lower shelf of the Hamasen plateau, stands at about 700 meters above the Barka and 800 meters below Hamasen. It is bordered by the Marya and Habab in the north, by Bejjuk and Mansa in the east, by