



THE CITY - STATE OF HARAR

1800-1850

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1. Introduction

2. Political Conditions

3. Economic Activity

4. External Relation

Introduction

This paper deals with the state of Harar in the first half of the 19th century. At this time for reasons explained in the first chapter Harar was no longer a strong sultanate it has been in its heyday of the 16th century. War with the Christian highland coupled with the Oromo raids has adversely affected the peaceful pursuit of the economic life, which factor was instrumental on the ultimate degeneration of the state power.

Nonetheless throughout these centuries and notably between the years 1800-50 the city - state passed into significant process of transformation. By this time the Oromo became used to sedentary life and established symbiotic relations with the Amirate of Harar. Harar managed to retain its distinction as the center of an urban culture based on trade, agriculture and industry.

It was in a position, as such, to disseminate its way of life to the sedentary and to a lesser extent to the nomadic Oromo and Somali tribes through peaceful propaganda based on the Islamic religion. This was made possible by the geographically strategic position of the city itself supported by political, economic and military institutions which were relatively far advanced in their content.

Throughout this time when northern Christian highland was in the "Era of warlords" Harar Established relations with the Kingdom of Shoa. Though at times hampered by Oromo raids Harar merchants used the trade routes that connected their city with Ogaden, Gurage, Shoa and the coast: Zaila and Barbra. In this way they came into contact different civilizations which have influenced their way of development.

It is hoped that the following few pages will have to tell on this general outline about the city states history in the first half of the 19th century.

Political Conditions

The great **Harar** Kingdom of the 16th century past into process of disintegration in a matter of generation after Gagn's death. But it has continued to be "the seat for an Amirate which, although small in size, was noted as a center of trade and Islamic learning in the horn of Africa."⁽¹⁾

1. Structure

The internal political strife combined with the Galla invasion constitutes the main reason why the Amirate steadily degenerated during the ensuing centuries until finally lost its independence by the Egyptian conquest of 1875. The first half of the 19th century is characterized by the relative isolation of the state and increasing intensity of religious fanaticism.

Richard Burton who managed to enter **Harar** in 1855 gave one of the most indispensable accounts of the situation at the time, which could partially be referred to for the historical research of the period in question which was distinguished by the internal political strife among the claimants for the throne. "These petty princes have a habit of killing and imprisoning all those who are suspected of aspiring to the throne. Ahmed's grandfather died in jail....."⁽²⁾

Ahmed Ibn Mohamed (1794-1821) was the first Amir of the century who was known for his successful expeditions against the Oromo. Political stability was adversely affected after his death due to the rising tide of power struggle amongst brother claimants of the Amirate. Of special interest is the one between abd al-Rahman and abd al-Karim who contended each with his own faction of population behind him.

Abd al-Rahman titled the balance power by rallying around him the support of the babile Oromo thereby defeating abd al-Karim and imprisoning him. However, three years latter the faction behind Abd al-Karim managed to lead a successful civil war in which he also had to fight the "Arab mercenaries at the cost who intervened abortively in **Harar** politics".⁽³⁾ Amir Abd al-Karim had the support of the masses especially as his brother became unpopular for his dealing the Gallas.

In his reign the city-state had kept the necessary balance between force and diplomacy in her dealings with the Oromo until it was upset after his death in 1834. Amir Abubaker (1834-52) became the next ruler. In his reign the Oromo began to have the upper hand, even though until 1841 he "was reputed among the **Harari** merchants in Shewa to be a ' brave prince leading the soray in person and taking the front in the battle field'".⁽⁴⁾

Harar traditions identify of the geographical divisions of the city-state based on the difference in their economics significance. These regions could be visualized as three concentric circles whose inner most one is represented by the city (Gey), followed by the adjacent gardens and grain fields (Geey fagaay) and lastly the whole region outside which was left fallow (Gaffa) before the sedentary Gallas occupied it.

Harar was as such surrounded by the constantly irrigated belt of gardens beyond which cereals were grown. "Beyond this, as far as the borders of Shoa on one side and the limits of **Harar** plateau in the direction of the sea on the other, the land belonged nominally to the Amir but was in fact in the hand of the Galla and Somali tribes".⁽⁵⁾

The state of **Harar** had centralized administrative apparatus by which means it exercised considerable political influence in these regions. The Amir appointed bureaucratic administrators whose main purpose it was to collect taxes and execute cases among people. The title **dogin** was given for the first person after the Amir in the hierarchy who was in charge of the whole of the outer districts, under whom comes the **damine**, the chief of the tribe. The **GARAD** and **malaqs** represented the Amir on village and town quarters' level.

Only this kind of political organization of a city culture can provide an explanation for the survival of a city-state amidst changing and extremely hostile external conditions. The Oromo had the courage, the number and the strategy necessary to destroy the city, and they "might have captured the place but they preserved for their own continence".⁽⁶⁾ The fact was the city provided them with the market which made their relation with it quite symbiotic.

2. Influence

Harari traditions tell us that the Oromo, who were nomads and pastoralists originally, learned farming methods from their ancestors. As they became increasingly used to sedentary life they lacked their former organization and were subject to political and military⁽⁷⁾ domination of the city state. This section of the Oromo (the Qottu) as opposed to pastoralists (prontuma) together with their Somali counterparts lived in the vicinity of **Harar**.

They paid taxes for the permanence of their holdings which they acquired through conquest or gift by the Amir. The Amirs married into the Galla and Somali tribes to strengthen their authority and stop or minimize their political influence of the state. But they were not as such successful in their endeavor as the Oromos usually interfered in the affairs of the city state thereby bringing into power their own choice of Amirs or at least affecting their policy to adopt their own policy.

Thus when diplomacy failed to work both parties used force. The internal political strife gave the Oromo a good opportunity to invade the agricultural land adjacent to the town, held by the **Hararis**. The Amirs, forced to preserve their authority and prestige, attacked the Oromos by their small army mainly to keep the gardens in the **Harari** holding

and the caravan routes open. This proved to be increasingly impossible after 1825 that military escort was needed to safeguard caravans and caravan routes from Galla attacks.

Payment of 'presents' to the Oromo chiefs was part of the Amirs' diplomatic measures to check their advance for domination. The Amirs used to give titles or donate lands for the purpose of saving the city states economy from total collapse. It appears that it was not until 1841 that "the lands subject to **Hararis** were overrun by warlike Oromo who extorted payments from the townsmen attacking them even in the nearby gardens during the day. The city itself was spared only on payment of tribute".

However, on the whole, the city maintained some authority over the Oromo that they came to regard its Amir as part of their own social structure. Accordingly, the Oromo and Somali chiefs

*sought investiture and title from him. **Harar** was also necessary to the Galla economy since by the nineteenth century Galla agriculturalists and pastoralists had surplus of coffee, saffron, hides and cattle as well as some ivory and occasionally slaves.*⁽⁸⁾

Many of the Oromos, by the second quarter of the 19th century, were semi nomadic or settled. The city state retained its political influence, among others, by launching propaganda campaign through Islamic religion which was, if only nominally, accepted. The vast mass of the nomadic Oromo, however, retained its characteristic pagan institutions and were uninfluenced. By the same token the political influence of **Harar** on the Arusi-Borena group was less pronounced.

Harar remained to be a Commerica and religious city state but of little political importance compared to its past glorious years. "It no longer attempted to spread Islam by extending political power, but through peaceful propaganda was to be the chief agency for its dissemination throughout southern Ethiopia....."⁽⁹⁾

Economic Activity

The people of the city were occupied in their economic activity with agriculture industry and trade which formed the basis of their urban culture that have extended throughout their history.

1. Agriculture

Farming plots around the city were (and are) organized according to their location from the city's five gates which are then sub-divided into districts by their location from rivers and other geographical relief. On the other hand the gardens were divided into irrigated (masnu) and non-irrigated (bukhra) fields. Irrigation, widely spread by the 19th century, was done by building dams (kuri) in which river water or flood is reserved to be driven through the ditches which run along privately owned gardens.

"The construction of kuri /is/ done cooperatively by all the farmers of a certain area".⁽¹⁾ This was unlike the practice in digging the ditches which were done by individual effort of the plot holders. The local farmers elected a chief called **miy malaq** to administer the distribution of water among them according to a given schedule. Apart from the usual number of time a person is entitled to get the water supply depending on the magnitude of the reservoir etc., the benefitted by an additional turn which he may use or sell to other farmers.

Land ownership, and the ownership of the houses for that matter, "was recognized officially by the government. The owner was given a document which recognized his ownership".⁽²⁾ As these documents are dated they are indispensable as source materials to the study in the historical development of irrigation etc. The same could be said in relation to industrial developments and architect.

2. Industry

Masonry, wood work, metallurgy and weaving were among the important industries. The technical development stage in carpentry and metallurgy is observable - to date - in the context of architectural works, notably the installed cupboards, the door and boxes. Different crafts had been long associated with district social groups of the **Hararis** whose descendants are known to this day by their family names.

Among industries the most popular in terms of labor intensity and magnitude of income was the cotton cottage industry⁽³⁾ which appears to have reached in the 19th century its zenith. The tobe, equivalent to the Amharic shema still used by the older generation of male **Hararis**, and "shashes of **Harar** are considered equal to the celebrated clothes of Shoa:

Hand woven, they as far surpass, in beauty and durability, the vapid produce of European manufacturers, as the perfect hand of man excels the finest machinery".⁽⁴⁾

3. Trade

Mahallaq has been the local currency issued at this time. It was made locally out of brass and has engraved on it the year 1248 A.H. which approximates 1825 A.D. It was preceded by **saq** which simply mean minted and as such was used in general sense for Mahallaq (from the **Harari** word Mahelaq: to count). The city made use of other currencies like the Shoan "Meneni Qarshi" (21 Saqs) and south Arabia "A'na" (0.5 Saq).⁽⁵⁾

This money economy undoubtedly was instrumental in the proliferation of commerce which was very important though it occupied smaller proportion of the population. The city used the foreign currency in a very limited manner mainly to combat inflation⁽⁶⁾, that "The Amir pitilessly punished all those who pass in the city any other coin".⁽⁷⁾

External Relations

1. Harar Region

At the opening of the 19th century "the Galla were kept at the bay and the caravan routs into the interior were opened to trade [and travelers]".⁽⁸⁾ The towns relation with the sedentary Oromo and Somali was quite symbolic as the latter frequented the city market with their surplus agricultural products. They depend on the city for their clothes, salt and a few other goods. For the Hararis the Oromo trade was important stimulus for the improvement of the security situations in the long distance trade routs.

Relations with Shoa was quite friendly. Shoa was largely dependent on Harar for its external trade and communication as Zaila-Harar route "was the only one used extensively between southern Ethiopia, Showa and the coast".⁽⁹⁾ Thus, the route connecting Showa with Harar was significant in the proliferation of the city states long distance trade activities.

This condition, however, began to change after 1825, when Amir Abdulkarim established smooth relations with the Oromo following the three year of hostility that preceded his ascendancy to the throne. However, the early part of his reign was distinguished by the rise in state income through the rise in the revenue that came from trade and agriculture. As such his reign is "viewed as a golden age"⁽¹⁰⁾ of the city state. Further, he was in such a good term with the Oromo warlords that through them he got redress for all injuries done to the townsmen and that the Gottus all paid their taxes.

At a later time, the Oromo-Somali raid became worse than ever especially on the rout that connected Harar with Shoa that it had to be abandoned and replaced by an independent Shoa-Tajura route. Harar's external relation with the hinterland also included the Sodo and Gurage region south of Shoa. The route was equally , if not more, unsafe than that which connected the city with Shoa.

2. Shoa and Others

The increasing importance of Tajura (beginning from 1810) and the Shoan expansion in 1830s opened for Shoa an area of economic prosperity which made her independent from Harar. On the contrary, the latter was forced to open trading center at Aliyu Amba to maintain its relation with the southern highlands through Shoa.

Frequent messages were exchanged, and the head of the Harari community in Aliyu Amba was appointed by the Amir of Harar and recognized by the ruler of Shoa as a 'consul' representing his master and having jurisdiction over Harari subjects.⁽¹¹⁾

This was a turning point in the decline of the Harari economy since the Shoan position in the highlands and coastal areas undermined its traditional supremacy in the region. Zaila enviably declined and if it were not for another factor, the emergence of Barbera as the main port used by Harari merchants and their clients, the historical destiny of the state would have been dubious.

The reason for this shift in the coastal trading ports is provided by the general revival of trade in Ethiopian highlands and the red sea coast with the arrival of western, notably American merchants. Added to this is the fact that Barbera was, beginning with, free from customs duty and as it was more safe from raiders it was preferred to Zaila by the Indian, Arabian and Egyptian merchants who had long standing relation with the Harari commerce.

From the preceding paragraphs it is safe to conclude that Harar was by no means in a state of economic depression when its relation of interdependence with Shoa was reversed by shifts in trade routes. It is plausible that it entered the second quarter of the 19th century with great expectations by reason of the fact that the contemporary Amir established smooth relations with the Oromo and his time regarded as the golden age etc.

Later developments, however, resulted in sharp economic decline of the state which fact entailed corresponding deterioration in cultural and political fields. This became clear especially after 1840 when Oromo began to occupy Harari operated gardens around the city, which formed the basis for its industry and trade, hence its state power. The close of the decade herald the decay of the city-state, and it was only two and a half decades before it finally lost its independence to the Egyptian Conquest.

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7. The army comprised of conventionally armed slaves, a canon and " 50 match lockman of Arab origin, long settled in the place.... " Ibid., p.225. Abir & others emphasize the role of Artilleries and the townsmen.

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