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Maroodi Jeex: A Somaliland Alternative Newsletter
 Issue no. 8. (Spring 1998)

From *Blackwood's Magazine*
 Vol. 238, October 1938, pp.568-578.

QUEEN ARAWEILO

By Major Henry Rayne

A glance at the map reveals that the unattractive British Somaliland coast runs almost parallel with that of Southern Arabia, from east to west, and that the main Kafila or caravan routes into the interior strike southwards. There are three ports: Berbera in the centre, Laskhorei on the eastern or Burreh side, Zeila on the western or Galbeit side. All trade passes through Aden, some 145 miles distant from Zeila.

In racial characteristics, although all but the Zeila townsmen call themselves Somalis, the peoples who inhabit the Zeila, or Galbeit, area are markedly different from those who live in the Burreh area. Centuries ago Sheikh Saad-uddin, the Arab, established himself on an island five miles north of Zeila, built a town from which he operated against the Gallas, who lived then on the mainland, and drove such of them as survived, and were not made slaves, into what is now Abyssinian territory. The ruins of his town, called by his name, form a fitting monument to his memory. His history is well known, and does not enter into this story.

The main geographical feature of Zeila District is the steep forbidding escarpment that runs roughly parallel with the coast. Between Zeila port and the escarpment lies the thirsty maritime plain, sixty miles of desolation, in places a waste of sand, in others a nightmare of black rounded boulders. Above the escarpment one comes out on to a comparatively cool but desperately uninviting plateau. All these areas are remarkable for a dearth of timber and, particularly in the plain, a low rainfall. The inhabitants, except for a few traders and people of mixed origin living in Zeila, are nomadic breeders of cattle, sheep, goats and camels - particularly camels, because under prevailing conditions, these products of the desert are vital to the life of the community.

We had crossed the Zeila plain and were painfully climbing towards the crest of the escarpment, when Hajji Musa Farah pointed to a thicket of euphorbia on the false plateau, just above the track.

“Amud.”

“Amud what, Hajji?”

“An old town, Sahib, built by the old people.”

Any place in the whole world less likely to conceal an old town, in which to find a town, in which to build a town, less likely to support the inhabitants of even the tiniest village, I could not conceive; nor did I fail to say as much. After all, I was the District Commissioner and had never heard of such a place.

But, as he himself indignantly protested, Hajji Musa was not a man 'to pull the Sahib's leg'; nor was it a difficult matter to ascertain if he spoke the truth. Up there we climbed.

Hajji was right; inside the thicket lay the ruins of what had once been a town. Walls of stone set in mortar, some of them fifteen to twenty feet high; everywhere we attempted to penetrate that dense mass of euphorbia on the side from which we made our first essay were walls, stone walls, well built, unclimbable, plumb walls against which to bump my incredulous head.

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indication that cattle had ever sought shade or shelter, so scarce in the locality, beneath the trees.

On that, my first visit to Amud I carried away nothing but scratches and as much information as has been set down above. And because discretion forbade digging and systematic exploration (I could never ascertain in what degree of veneration, or of superstition, the old town was regarded by Somalis), subsequent visits furnished only what may be contained within a few paragraphs.

In the first place, the town had not fallen gradually into decay. There had been an orderly and simultaneous evacuation by people who entertained some intention of returning - every door and window had been carefully sealed with stone and mortar.

To my mind, the houses might well have been constructed, and the streets laid out, by men who built Zanzibar, or Harrar. But the smaller houses, all two-roomed, were of uniform plan - two interior walls, at right angles, set against a back corner of the shell, forming one small, inner, rectangular chamber that opened on to a larger L-shaped outer room.

The mortar that bound the stones was of superior quality, lime and sand; walls had been plastered, inside and out, and the plaster had set like cement; in places it had been used for doors.

The streets were narrow and well graded, the houses, possibly for reasons of defense, crowded and joining. The principal building might well have been a mosque, and was furnished with a large masonry water-tank set within the walls below the level of the ground. The foundations of a guard or customs house lay a few hundred yards clear of what appeared to be the main entrance to the town. There was a cemetery near the principal building; the graves, marked by plain stone, pointed east and west. Within them, possibly, lies the answer to a riddle that has not yet been solved.

The fruits of such search as I was able to make among the ruins were meagre-a few potsherds (some gilded crudely); a curious button, only one, fashioned from indigenous shale rock, threaded with an inch of gold wire; a piece of timber, possibly a door lintel, that answered a shattering blow with an overpowering scent of cedar.

During the several years following my first visit to Amud that I worked in Zeila District, I sought to extract information or clues that I felt the naturally secretive natives could furnish.

"Amud? Yes, we know Amud, Sahib."

"Who lived there? Have you Somalis no stories about the people?"

"The 'Old People,' the Harla; we know not whence they came nor whither they went. They had a Queen."

"What was her name?"

"Araweilo. She was a great warrior, and her people withstood the pagan invaders from the east until Sherlahgamahdi's daughter was burned."

"And why did they burn *gubadi* (the daughter of) Sherlahgamahdi?"

"She could see farther than the others: perhaps as far as a European with his telescope. So they stood her on the pinnacle of Mount Sau. When the pagans planned a night attack she always saw them approach the point they had chosen to strike from. Following many failures, they became wise as to the manner in which their attempts at a night surprise were frustrated!"

"And did her own people burn her because of that!"

"No. It was because one evening she reported that she had seen nothing all day but the jungle moving!"

"And did she see the jungle moving?"

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So they would have me believe.

Once on my last visit to Amud I was questioned myself.

"What does the Sahib himself think these people did here? "

"They may have mined."

"For what? "

"Diamonds."

Every Somali knows that the diamond is a priceless gem. A few moments later I was being pestered for an opinion on bright pebbles, fragments of crystallized quartz and whatnot. I told the fortune-hunters that, as the diamond was the hardest stone I knew, they might make their own test with the hammer I happened to be carrying on my camel.

I never saw that hammer again. As I rode away, it was being used, when not the centre of a rough-and-tumble for possession, to shatter anything that had a sparkle: who knows if a diamond or two passed undetected amongst all the rubbish that it welted to smithereens?

And as I left Amud knew only this much more than has been recorded above concerning the 'Old People' who once lived in the dead town. By the side of a path where it runs through a confusion of black boulders, between French and British Somaliland, lie two great monads of stone. As the Somali women pass these, each throws her stone on one of the mounds and cries: " Araweila, may you burn in hell until the rights of which you deprived us are restored!"

And should a man pass there he will throw a stone and a curse on the other: " Araweilo, burn for ever! "

Sometimes, should they pass together, a man and wife will quarrel about what they have just done.

Only that much more did I know. But a man waited at the wells below - where my kafila had already halted to fill our water *baramiels*, preparatory to crossing the terrible maritime plain between there and Zeila - a man who was to tell me more.

Midnight.

The baggage camels grumbled and fidgeted as I watched Fatuma, the wife of Police-corporal Hersi, roll her baby in a cloth, swing it to her back, and knot the cloth across her breasts.

Buralleh Robleh, inspecting the loads, turned to address Fatuma sharply: " Go up to the head of the line and stay there." Then to the head syce he called: " Look after this woman."

"And who are you? " Buralleh called to a slinking form that stole stealthily after Faterna as she moved forward. "It, I say, who are you? "

"I am a priest, and a servant of God."

"Well ! Mullah and servant of God though you may be, I want to look at you."

An officious policeman ran to drag the form from the shadow of the camels into the light of a camp fire. One by one the syces left their beasts to join in the excitement and make a noise. Babble, babble, babble !

"This Sheiba is too frail to cross the *ban* (plain) in the *khareef* (prevailing wind during the hot season). He will fall by the road and perish. What is his tribe? By Allah, he will cry and beg for our water ! Does he

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though ye be, I must appeal to your Sahib ! "

And the Sahib, because he noted the frailty and age of this Mullah and servant of God, reluctantly promised safe escort across the terrible plain.

"God will reward you!"

I shrugged my shoulders impatiently and ordered the old man to the head of the line of camels, telling him to be careful that he stayed there by the woman's side.

The kafila disappeared into the right.

Two hours later, mounted on riding camels, my interpreter and I followed the baggagers.

Shuffle, swish! Shuffle, swish, swish! With slithering strides, their long necks thrusting like steam pistons, the trotting camels covered the miles. At daybreak we overhauled a weary Fatuma trudging patiently towards the new camping - place, now within sight.

"Why are you behind?"

"As the camp was near and I was tired, they allowed me to rest."

A moment later we catch the Mullah; he, too, is alone. I dismount to remonstrate - fortunately the *khareef* is late today or this old man and the woman who follows might easily have lost the track. But the rising sun catches my eye and distracts my attention. Far away in the eastern sky a riot of colours heralds the approaching gale of sand-laden wind one expects at this time of year.

"Why does the Sahib look at the sky ?"-my interpreter was in a chatty mood.

I remained silent.

"Somalis never look at the red in the sky. They like to see black clouds that promise rain. It never rains at this time of year."

I answered, "When the white man wants rain he, too, rejoices to see the black clouds. Just now I look at those colours in the sky-do you not think they are beautiful? "

"A Somali sees nothing up there. After the rains, when the grass is lush, the animals sleek and fat, he loves to contemplate his herds; among them he finds all the beauty he seeks. A Somali would say that the Sahib at this moment is wasting his time."

The Mullah spoke. " That Somali woman," he pointed as Fatuma, cheered by the proximity of the camp, the child now at her breast, went swinging by-" that Somali woman finds more beauty in the child she carries than any man ever saw in his herds; more than the Sahib could make her see in the sky."

Fatuma, despite the dust that covered her, was comely and good to look upon; but the interpreter cast one contemptuous glance in her direction, spat on the ground, and only ejaculated, " Pah, women! "

"And yet," reflected the old Mullah dreamily, " and yet, once upon a time from the Gulf of Tajura to Las Khorai, and from the Gulf of Aden far back into the interior, this land was ruled by a woman."

At last! The story I was seeking.

"Are you hungry? "I asked the Mullah.

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all. Allah-ho Akbar ! "

A shrivelled old graybeard; brown, burning, intelligent eyes deep-set in a wrinkled face; hair and beard concealed under a dusty coloured cloth worn like a nun's veil; the Mullah, servant of God, a man versed in the true Law, sat cross-legged on the floor of my tent to tell me the story of Queen Araweilo.

"From Galbeit to Burreh the Somali hills were once clothed with forest. In those far-away days the land was blessed; rain fell regularly, the nullahs ran with water, grazing and food were plentiful. Here, to the Galbeit side, there came the Harla, where from only Allah but no living mush knows.

"They built the atone town the Sahib left yesterday; they built other towns, too. They felled the trees, they cultivated the land, they did many things of which the Sahib shall hear.

And then they disappeared. They left nothing but a curse, the stones they built, and the story of Araweilo.

"Araweilo, Araweila her husband, their only child, a daughter who bore one son called the Blind One, these are the people who enter into that story." The Mullah repeated the names, ticking them off on his fingers. " And Araweilo was Queen of the Harla, the ' Old People,'" he added.

"Before her marriage the Queen reflected long upon the cause of war. Resolving that it lay only in the turbulent spirit of the leading men, she could devise no better remedy than to reverse the conditions of men and women. The men could settle no serious matter without spilling blood, she reasoned, therefore she degraded them to the level at which they kept their women, and gave them no further opportunity of settling anything at all. The women she planned to exalt above the men.

"The men resisted; they were disarmed. The men still resisted; Araweilo armed the women. The ways of God are inscrutable. The Queen who sought to prevent war and bloodshed could achieve her purpose with no other instrument than the sword. When she thought she had gained that purpose she dared not lay the sword down.

"She was a great Queen, and in the end the men were forced to render an outward, but only outward, show of obedience. underneath they were rebellious and perpetually planning her overthrow.

"In these circumstances it was necessary to have every strong woman available for emergencies; but some of them had babies, as Allah intended they should, and no woman can fight with a baby in her arms-no woman should fight at all. The Queen, being obliged to use her women, decreed that the fathers must now tend their own children.

"That was unwise. Against Araweilo the married women joined with their husbands. Hopeless ! Supported by the virgins, she restored order at the cost of many lives. Afterwards, a woman who did more than give her baby the breast was severely punished.

"Then there was trouble about the meat: because the men's privilege to take for themselves the choicest joints, allowing the women only the scraggy necks, the lean forequarters, and all the inferior meat, went with an their other privileges to the women.

"Araweila, the most handsome among the Harla men, and secretly their leader, intrigued always to break the Queen's prestige. knowing this, she tried in many clever ways to discredit him.

"For instance, there grows in the jungle a sweet edible fruit, the Karl berry. When the fruit was ripe Araweila ordered his men to saddle the camels and go load them with the berries. As they were making

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"When this was done and the camels' backs were bare, she said: ' How go and harvest your berries; and should one of you carry a rope, or a bag, or place anything whatsoever save a berry on his camel's back, that one win forfeit his life.'

"They thought the Queen was mad; they protested; they reasoned. They wasted their words: *bil esh! bil esh!* useless, hopeless! The Queen had spoken.

"The men set out, Araweila at their head. He led them to a water-hole near the trees they sought to rob of fruit, and bade them make their camels roll in the mud. When the camels rose their backs were caked; their owners quickly gathered the berries, stuck them on, and marvelled at the wisdom of their leader.

"On its return the party was met by the Queen, who had brought her head women to laugh and jeer: she was not pleased by what she saw. ' Hidden among ye,' she addressed the fruit gatherers, ' is one of great cunning; it is meet that he should stand by his Queen's side in the Council. Name him! '

"But in that party there was not a man to betray Araweila.

"So living people talk today about Queen Araweilo: there are many, many stories. man will relate the tale of the berries, and a woman will answer how the Queen washed her hands.

"When the Queen saw how the men had frustrated her she ordered that none of the camels that carried the fruit should leave the enclosure until she had finished washing her hands. She washed one finger each day, and the camels had to wait ten days until she had done. And during those ten days their owners had to gather and carry in on their own backs enough forage to keep the animals alive.

"In time the Queen was married to Araweila, and bore a daughter. And this daughter gave birth to a son.

"While her grandson was still a child the Queen dreamed he would be responsible for her untimely death: further, she saw, as did all other observers, that he promised to grow into a strong and great leader, and decided it would be wise to have him put to death. From this fate the child was saved by the frantic prayers of his mother. But Araweilo caused his eyes to be put out, and he was afterwards known as the Blind One.

"The years passed and the Blind One grew to manhood. Suddenly from out the East came an invasion of pagans, army following army. From every side the Harla were pressed back to their chief town, Amud; the Queen, to save that last place left to her, re-armed her men, fought a great battle, and routed the enemy, who added north towards the sea.

"Then she led her army in pursuit, nor did she halt until near the border between the black and white flyer. There she made a camp and rested her people. In that camp Araweila led his blind grandson by night to its northern dank, placing a spear in one of his hands and a lion-skin in the other. Facing the Blind One southwards, Araweila said -

"' If you advance you will come upon the tent of the Queen who had your eyes put out. Between you and her there are a thousand camels. It is meet that you be the instrument of Divine vengeance upon a wicked woman: how say you? '

"The Blind One answered that he was afire to serve God for such a purpose, and, directed by Araweila, advanced towards the Queen's tent, drumming the lion - skin with the spear: *Ku-du-foh!* (lit. Strike, beat). The camels, stampeded by the noise, terrified by the scent from the skin, trampled upon Araweilo's tent.*Ku-du-foh! Ku-du-foh!* The Blind One stumbled on, came upon the Queen as she lay grievously hurt crying upon the ground, and plunged the spear into her side.

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bodyguard of virgins. Nobody suspected the Blind One, and he wisely did not interfere to save his grandfather. AS the women frenziedly cast stone after stone on the bleeding body of Araweila, the men retaliated by doing as much to the body of the Queen.

"So it was. The Sahib knows now the story of the two great monads that lie one each side of the Area track. He and I are men of ripe age and sound under standing, and may each, according to his own judgment, decide how much truth there is in that tale.

"Queen Araweilo's death was followed by a period of peace No leader, male or female, stood forth to uphold her policy, and men and women returned to the places that Almighty God created them to fill. What was in dispute the Blind One judged wisely and justly, favouring neither side.

"The matter of the meat was settled in this wise: twenty slaughtered animals were cub up and divided into two portions. From these, twenty paces distant, twenty women were instructed to choose that which pleased them best. They saw one portion was small and the other large; that the lesser packed the fat under which the greater was hidden. They chose the greater.

"Beneath the fat they found the scraggy necks, the lean fore-quarters, and the inferior meat; and from then, until this day, women within this land have accepted these, together with the rich fat, as their share from the slaughtered animals.

"The women pleaded that as the father was jointly responsible with the mother for the children the work of tending them should not revert solely to the woman. The Blond One ruled that no son of man could advise regarding that matter. He said, "Let a child cry for succour, and Allah alone will instruct who is to relieve it". That question was never raised again.

"The pagans returned. Army followed army, oll upon oll ('Oll=army). *Kudufoh! Kudufoh! Diliei, dilie!* striking at the Harla, slaying them, reducing and weakening them; out of all that confusion and bloodshed came no clear account of what actually happened. The Sahib has seen what remains of Amud, has walked its deserted streets and entered into the empty houses. He knows what he has read therein.

"And the Sahib asks what in my own heart I believe concerning the story I have told? I believe that the hills were once clothed with forest, that the nullahs ran with water, that the soil, rich then as it is barren now, was tilled by a people galled the Harla whose Queen was Araweilo. That the name Araweilo was a seed; that the seed grew into a tree, fruited and begat many others.

"Among the Zeila there exists one tribe, calling itself the Harla, that claims to be descended from the old people. I am a Harla."

The old man fell into a reverie; I sat quietly watching him. Still the khareef held off. Outside, Fatuma, the wife of Corporal Hersi, pounding rice in a wooden mortar, was singing-

"I strike, you strike, *dilei, dilei !* "

The Mullah bestirred himself. " You have earned your reward," I gently reminded him, hoping he would go.,br> "And will the Sahib himself see that I receive in full what he promised t " he inquired anxiously.

"I shall come now and pay the first instalment."

"Thanks be to Almighty God. The Sahib's men and I are not of the same tribe."

So we went out from the tent. Next morning we travelled safely together for the last time over that surface of the Zeila *Ban* which lay between ns and our destination. The Mullah died a few weeks later: I was

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appropriate page. I read-

Mysterious Somaliland Ruins

" There were five pages of photographs of East African interest in the ' *Illustrated London News* ' of 26th January, three of giraffes in Tanganyika, and two of the mined stone-walled towns of Somaliland.

" Dr John Parkinson, who led the British Inseam Dinosaur Expedition to East Africa in 1997 . . . supplied eight excellent photographs illustrating the remnants of ruined houses and towns which remain almost the sole relics of forgotten builders in Somaliland , from whence they were driven, he believes, by failure of the water supply.

" The lake at Eik shrank, the rivers at Amud and Abassa dwindled to the all but dry channels they are today; the plains, once clothed in fields of maize and pullet, grew in exorably arid; the cattle died," he writes. " The people who had come from the north moved on, the road was closed behind them; they moved on, and so remained one of the unsolved riddles of the Africa of today.

" Impelled forward, they looked back, remembering stories of the days when a great river ran below Amud, when the flats before Gorgab were green with crops, when the stronghold of Abassa was alive with men and worshipers, and the stately caravans of slaves and women from the highlands of Abyssinia filed down to Eik, to Magelleh Bun, to the craft awaiting them in the harbour of Berbera. All that had gone for ever." . .

It is my opinion that the ' stately caravans ' of those faraway days filed down to Zeila (not Berbera), the Aulites of the ancients, the port of the ancient kingdom of Axium, a port that until the establishment of Jibuti in 1884 (and for some years afterwards) still served the comparatively civilised peoples who to this day inhabit Abyssinia, the hinterland beyond Somaliland. Are there descendants of Queen Araweilo's subjects among those peoples today?

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