

Some Notes on Harar and the local Trade Routes: A Report on the view of ex-merchants of Shäwa (1839-1935)

In: Annales d'Ethiopie. Volume 17, année 2001. pp. 141-149.

Résumé

Résumé : À partir de manuscrits familiaux et de récits oraux, cette étude éclaire certains aspects du commerce entre Harar et le Shäwa à la fin du XIXe siècle, en particulier les biens échangés (esclaves, sel...) et les routes empruntées.

Abstract

Abstract : Based upon family manuscripts and oral traditions, this study highlights some aspects of the trade activities between Harar and Shäwa at the end of the 19th century, mainly the goods involved (slaves, salt...) and the routes.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Omer Ahmed Hassen. Some Notes on Harar and the local Trade Routes: A Report on the view of ex-merchants of Shäwa (1839-1935). In: Annales d'Ethiopie. Volume 17, année 2001. pp. 141-149.

doi : 10.3406/ethio.2001.995

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ethio_0066-2127_2001_num_17_1_995

SOME NOTES ON HARAR AND THE LOCAL TRADE ROUTES: A REPORT ON THE VIEW OF EX-MERCHANTS OF SHÄWA (1839-1935)

AHMED HASSEN OMER*

Résumé : À partir de manuscrits familiaux et de récits oraux, cette étude éclaire certains aspects du commerce entre Harar et le Shäwa à la fin du XIX^e siècle, en particulier les biens échangés (esclaves, sel...) et les routes empruntées.

Mots-clefs : Shäwa, Harar, commerce, esclaves.

Abstract : Based upon family manuscripts and oral traditions, this study highlights some aspects of the trade activities between Harar and Shäwa at the end of the 19th century, mainly the goods involved (slaves, salt...) and the routes.

Keywords : Shäwa, Harar, trade, slaves.

The present researcher is not a specialist of the city of Harar. However, for economic, political and cultural reasons there are possibilities to establish a historical tie between Harar and other regions. Shäwa being one of such regions seems to have developed its ties in many ways.

In this case, there are many possibilities to establish regarding what is Harar to the regional history of northeastern Ethiopia in general and Shäwa in particular. This report takes into account some notes on Harar and the local trade routes. The trade routes we are talking about were those which converged at Aleyu Amba and finally connecting Shäwa with Harar. A rather modest detail will be given on this issue. This report is largely dependent on oral traditions, written family diaries kept in private hands and the existing literature. The view of the ex-merchants of Shäwa and their family tradition will, however, play an important role in filling some of the inevitable historical gaps. The four informants, from the region of northern Shäwa, who have divulged their intimate knowledge for this report were: Jalällé Sayed (1879? -1994) was an Oromo, who used to live at Chäffa-élemo. A series of interviews were undertaken with him between July and September 1993; *Skeikh* Mohammad Saleh

* Université de Provence

(d.1993), who claimed his origin from the Argobba Walasma family of Yefat. He contributed his knowledge during the two long interviews with him in 1991 and 1992; *Balambaras* Ali Murado, a local Afar chief and famous storyteller (d.1992). He was interviewed three times in 1986, 1991 and 1992 ; and Seyyedu Nuré, an Argobba storyteller (d. 1990).

What is interesting about these family traditions is that two of them have supported their oral traditions by presenting diaries written in Amharic (sometimes in Oromo language using Amharic script)¹ and in Arabic². The oral traditions of the other two, who did not preserve any written document, are related to each other and also with that of *Ato* Jalällé's family. These two documents indicate that the forefathers of Jalällé and *Sheikh* Mohamed Saleh were merchants, who participated, for long time, in the Shäwa – Harar trade. A rather thought provoking informant was Jalällé Sayed, who confidently asserted that his father was a close friend of Asmä Giyorgis³, commonly known as *Aläqa* Atsmé. He further pushes that he himself knew him both at Haramba, Ankobar, and Aleyu Amba and finally at Harar. Atsmé stated here, as is well known, was the late 19th century writer and historian. In the words of Bairu Tafla, it was he, being the first among the Ethiopian writers of his time, who treated a history of the Muslim Emirate of Harar as opposed to his contemporaries⁴. Born at Harramba, grew up at Ankobar and passed the last years of his life at Harar “until shortly before his death in February 1915”⁵. Jalällé mentioned the name of *Aläqa* Atsmé not only because the latter was born at Haramba, but also because his father was used by Atsmé as his *érgäma* (agent in the Oromo language), and even a close friend afterwards. That Jalällé was born in 1879 and later on worked with his father; and, that his father was a close friend of Atsmé, it is possible that he could have known him. Atsmä Giyorgis acquired Arabic and knowledge of the Muslim Communities because of his relations with the Muslims at Farré and Rassa so that Jalällé's claim could also make sense for his family lived one time at the village of Rassa and at another at Farré⁶.

According to Jalällé, his father Sayed started his business career in 1854. The family diary he kept also confirms the same reality. One thing very important in Jalällé's document (folio 8) is that his father took over the business of his grandfather which the latter started much earlier in 1839. Jalällé did not hide the fact that his family involved in slave trade. That his family were speakers of both Oromo and Amharic languages, sometimes, we see Oromo terms and sentences written in Amharic scripts and that appear in the text here and there. It is largely using this document that we will further develop this preliminary report. In this document (folio 13,17), it is mentioned that Jalällé's grandfather and his business partners used to bring, each turn, to the market of Abdul Rasul about 90 to 100 slaves in search of the highest price. The following lines reflect the same historical development:

ዘጠና አስተ መቶ ባሩ አምተተነናል... ዋጋውን አሱ ራሱ አላህ ያብጅው...

1 *Yä Hiwot Tarik* A diary in the hand of the late Jalällé Seyd. Written in Amharic. Sometimes it consists of some Oromo words written in Amharic script, 134 folios.

2 *Tarikh al a'ilat* (Family biography). A manuscript in Arabic and kept in the hand of the late *Sheikh* Mohammad Saleh, 165 folios.

3 For the lifetime and activities of Asma Giyorgis, see Bairu Tafla ed., *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of Galla and the Kingdom of Shäwa* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp.55-64.

4 *Ibid.* pp.53-55,64-65,851-853, 911-9113, 940-942.

5 *Ibid.* pp.53,63-64.

6 Regarding Atsmé's relations with the Muslims of Farré, cf. Bairu, *op. cit.*, pp.63-64.

የደክሙትን አስር ባሩ ገን ተመገድ አሣርፈናቸዋል...

It seems that Jalällé's father bequeathed written diary, from his father, and added whatever important things he did in his business career. Another thing is that Jalällé did not add his own diary to keep the continuity of his family tradition. Although this document has rich data on business activities between 1839 and 1935, the latter part of it was in fact written by his own father and not by him. It is indicated that his father Sayed and his grandfather Mohammed Ibrahim undertook business as far as Harar. They themselves were familiar with this long distance trade route and they could not use the support of the *abban* (those who used to guide merchants and travellers).

Amolé salt was also another item of trade which is mentioned both by Jalällé and his document : “አሞላ ጨው ገንድ አጅግ ያሠራናል :: ደገሞ ደህ የታወቀ የገንድ ጉዳይ ነው”. An interesting statement is how much heavy it was to transport. The following quotation ዛደያሽህሙ አደሞከረ ነው :: ያበሉትን መብል ያስመልሳል :: ሁሉ አደደፈረ ነው :: ዋየው ገመል አኛን ጠቅሞ ራሱ መጉደተ! ... ታስሩ ባሩ አንደት ሴት ገመል ጥቅምዋ ይበልጣል :: indicates the heavy nature of *amolé*, the mechanism of transport and the value of camel in this regard. It also compares the advantage of camels with that of slaves. ጉዳ ደገሞ ገመሉቸ መገንድ ተሳተ ደገኛሉ :: መጥፎው ገን እና መዘዝ ያለው ባሩ መገንድ ተሳተ ነው :: This roughly means that camels if they lost their way they could be recollected. The worst thing is when the *barwa* (slave) lost his way. Jalällé was of the opinion that the sense of the document is to note that slaves, when lost their way, could not come back. Rather they escaped the traders as much as possible and in a way achieved their freedom.

It is further mentioned, in the document, that it was better to use camel labour than slaves along the trade routes. It mentions when camels were lost they could be collected with the *amolé*; and this is not the case regarding slaves. Slaves escaped with the *amolé* could highly affect the profit of the local merchants. One thing very important and mentioned by this document is that salt was not only transported by camel labour but also slaves, who were going to be sold, were transporting *amolé* at the same time.

Part of this document which Jalällé's father is reported to have written (folio 89) tells us the story of heavy taxation imposed on the local merchants by the Egyptians during their occupation of Harar between 1875 and 1885. The statements in this document (folio 91,92), which discuss on this period, contain the following statements:

አወደ የሰው ነገር በቃኝን አያውቅም :: አግየያገገው አገር ሐረር መጥቶ ደክን ኩሉ ክፈሉ ብሉ በአኛ በባላገር ላይ መቀረጡ... በአንሱ ምክኛት ያዳም ዘር ሐረር ላይ መጨነቀን ገን አይስተትም ::

After reading this part of the document, it is interesting to raise a question regarding what the term *yaddam zär* indicates. Jalällé was of the opinion that it represents the various merchants, the inhabitants of Harar, and the surrounding communities. Armenians, Greeks and Indians (Banians) are also mentioned by him. In fact the participation of foreigners, in the local trade and the market of Aleyu Amba,

is mentioned in other important sources and the same could be true in as far as Harar is concerned⁷.

Jalällé mentions that he did not follow the tradition of his father and grandfather in keeping the continuity of writing family diary. He raised two reasons for not doing that. The first reason was that he, unlike his family, did not have the skill of writing neither in Arabic nor in Amharic; and, secondly, he mentioned that he changed his way of life and led his new one being a cattle keeper and cultivator. This is what he and other informants called *temur gebreenna* (a term which indicates semi-nomadic way of life)⁸.

Jalällé had his own reason why he had given up his business career. The first reason he gives for this is that Emperor Hayla Sellasé I (r.1930–1974) discouraged slavery as an institution and the slave trade itself since the 1920s. Secondly, after the Italians occupied Ethiopia in May 1936, the practice of slavery and slave trade was highly discouraged. It was not an encouraging business in front of a secret business in firearms. Jalällé did not join this kind of trade because he did not have access to it. In the words of Jalällé, other merchants from Rayya region were well known in the trade of *gobazayyāhu*, *Ramanto*⁹, and their bullets. Another serious informant, *Ato* Däbalqué Menguddaw supported Jalällé's opinion¹⁰. Jalällé indicates that this business demanded the knowledge of any responsible group who could monopolize the business in arms. Jalällé further mentioned that he did not create connections with Rayya merchants whose business was highly related to the trade in firearms.

The second informant, already cited above, who contributed his knowledge including presentation of his family's document, was *Sheikh* Muhammad Saleh. He himself and his family's document have rich account on the Shäwa, Harar and Shäwa-Zayla trade routes. Taking into account the purpose of this report, a special emphasis will be given to the Shäwa-Harar trade route. The other part will demand time and opportunity to be written and delivered in the same way or another. *Sheikh* Muhammad's grand father, *Sheikh* Muhammad Awal, had been one of the members of the Argobba *Arho* (salt traders) and passed almost half of his life time in the long distance Shäwa-Harar trade route.

Tarik al-'ailat, a manuscript in possession of *Sheikh* Muhammad Saleh, mentions that his grand father *Sheikh* Mohammed Awal was born in 1839 at Čänno. While a young man, he frequently traded at one time between Shäwa and Awsa; and between Shäwa and Harar at another. The main route along which they traded was the one which was particularly revived and developed further in the early days of the rise and consolidation of the kingdom of Shäwa. It was used by merchants as a more direct

7 Cf. Bairu, *op. cit.* pp. 64-65; Cf. also W.C. Harris, *The Highlands of Aethiopia*, vol. I (London, 1844) p.355.

8 About *Temmur gebreenna* see Ahmed Hassan Omer, "Aspects of the History of Efrata-Jillé (Shoa Region) with Particular Reference to the Twentieth Century", B.A.Essay, Addis Ababa University, History, 1987), p.3.

9 *Gobazayyāhu* was a type of gun imported from Italy in the 1880s. For further information see Bairu *op. cit.*, pp.841,922. Similarly, *Ramanto* (=Remington) was a type of gun fabricated in the United States of America and imported to Ethiopia during the Ethio-Egyptian War of 1875-1876. For further information see *ibid.*, p. 960.

10 Informant *Ato* Dabalqué Menguddaw, Ephésou, November, 1993.

line of communication with Awsa and Harar. The Argobba and Amhara traditions refer to this road as *Ya Tachegnaw Godana*, to mean “the lower route”. *Kära jällarra* by the Oromo and *adagagitta* (market route) by the Afar are the two cushitic nomenclatures to refer to this same route¹¹. The importance of this route continued even long after the reign of Sahlä Sellsé (1813-1847) in the 1870s, when its major focus was connecting the market town of Aleyu Amba with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean coast through the Harar plateau. Jalällé’s family, the family of *Sheikh* Muhammad Saleh, and those of two other informants to be discussed in the following pages, were therefore some of the 19th century Shāwan merchants. As almost all of the local merchants of the 19th century were the Argobba, the Warjeh, the Afar, the Harari, the Somali and in some cases the Oromo, these four families correctly fit into these domains. Why the Oromo did not take part in the long distance trade route as did the Argobba, Afar and others is not mentioned in *Sheikh* Muhammad’s manuscript. It is Jalällé’s one which is important in this case; for it refers to this point in the following manner:

የ ርብን ርቤ እንን አርገና
 ደቺን ሂን መገርሣ
 የ ርብን ሃንቀቱ ብታ አላላ
 ከራን ጉዳን ራያ አውሣ ነግ ቡሣ
 የ ምርጋ ከጄሌ ሐረር ነግ ቡሣ

Rough translation :

*If the sky gives rain there is milk
 And we would also cultivate [our land]
 If there is no rainfall we can [make business]
 Along the Rayya Awsa route looking at the left.
 Or if we need to look at the right, we can trade
 as long as Harar exists.*

This quotation directly indicates what Harar and Awsa were to the semi-nomadic Oromo of the region let alone the chequered life of the regular traders in the course of history. It also indicates the importance of a free flow of trade between Harar and Shewa and a slight disturbance of which might have been a rather odd incidence for the kingdom of Shāwa and its inhabitants. That is why King Menelik, in October 1880, carried his campaigns deep into the remote lowlands of the Awash basin, from Temmuga Oromo districts as far as the foot hills of the Azälo mountain in the Awash valley¹³. Besides the family document of *Sheikh* Muhammad Saleh, one has to look, at the same time, at the view of Menelik’s court as far as the Temmuga campaign was concerned. Menelik’s chronicler, Gäbrä Sellasé, relates that the main reason for Menelik’s fury against the Temmuga Oromo at the time was that they interfered with the caravan road to the country of the Afar, looting the merchants along the trade route,

11 See Ahmed Hassen Omer, “A Historical Survey of Ethnic Relations in Yefat and Temmuga, Northeast Shāwa (1889-1974)” (M.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, History, 1994), pp. 34-35. See also *Yä Hiwot Tarik...*, folio 48.

12 *Ya Hiwot Tarik*, folio 53.

13 Ahmed Hassen Omer, “A Historical Survey...” p. 34; Cf. R. H. K. Darkwah, *Shawa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire: 1813-1889* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 156-157.

and making the whole area unsafe and thus reducing the king's revenues from the long distance trade¹⁴.

The document of *Sheikh* Muhammad Saleh (folio 29) and Oromo as well as Afar traditions unanimously confirm those hostilities on the caravan routes. It was on the part of the "Lower Route," indicated above, which comes from Harar via Tchertcher countryside and joined the Awash river through the foot hills of Azalo. It was the same route that connected Taddächaa Mälka, Abdul Rasul, Aleyou Amba, Čänno, Hawadi, Rassa, Qärsa Harré, Waldaha, Oftuha, Aleyu Malka, Hula Fursa, Miotu, Idaltu, Billeyyé, Hiddi, Hayamata Arba, Daway Rahmado, Dawway Uččurru, and Urungu (in the Afar inhabited areas of southeastern Wällo). This route finally joined the main Awsa - Obock route¹⁵.

As *Sheikh* Mohammed Saleh himself recounted, and also as it is noted in his document, it was while his grandfather and his father were on their way to Čänno, from Harar, that they encountered with the Menelik's campaign and the Timmuga Oromo hostility of the year 1880. This was when some of the merchants were killed and their properties robbed. It is stated in the document and *Sheikh* Mohammed had also the same opinion that those merchants who survived from that danger were escorted by some members of Menelik's force while crossing the Awash and until they would reach Abdul Rasul.

When *Sheikh* Muhammad's grand father died at Korragussa in 1900, it was *Sheikh* Saleh (informant's father) who took all the responsibilities in as far as the family's business was concerned. Nevertheless, Saleh did not frequently visit Harar as he did with his father in 1880s and 1890s. However, he had access to the trade in salt and gun. Moreover, unlike Jalällé's family, Saleh did not involve in the slave trade and continued his business in salt and gun until 1935. After 1935, it is indicated that *Sheikh* Saleh stopped his business because of the problem of his health and as a result of which he was forced to terminate his business career. It is further indicated that he passed the whole five years of the Italian occupation in the mosques of Karragoussa and Čänno by undertaking religious activities and teaching the Argobba children at the two centres of Islamic learning.

Sheikh Mohammed (our informant who was born in 1918) also joined his father for he to push in Islamic study than business. He also taught at Čänno, Mätäqläya and Khayramba. In the 1950s he moved to Addis Ababa and he was employed to teach at *Däjazmach* Umer Sämatär school until his death in 1993. As in the case of Jalällé's, here also we do not see any business activities undertaken by this family after 1935.

It is already stated that, the last two informants, *Balambaras* Ali Murädo and Seyedu Nuré did not preserve any written documents. What is important here is their oral tradition. While Seyedu's father, Nuré's role is associated with the story of slave trade, that of Ali Murado is related to *Leğ* Iyyasu's move from Harar to Wällo in 1916. Seydu Nuré lived at Lugo in Yefat. He knew *Ato* Jalällé after the 1950s. What he did

14 Gäbrä Sellasé, *Tarikä Zämän Zä Dagmawi Menelik Negusä Nägäst Zä Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, Behanenna Sälam, 1959 E.C.), p. 100.

15 Cf. Ahmed Hassen Omer, "A Historical Survey...", pp. 35-36.

not really know is the fact that the story of his father is mentioned in the family document kept by *Ato* Jalällé. Although Jalällé could not read and write, he studied from his father that Nuré was the one who lived for long time at Lugo and, who was also a business partner of Jalällé's father in the 1890s and 1900s. According to Jalällé's document (folio 32), Nuré involved in camel trade and it was he, for example, who supplied 50 camels to the *Arho* Argobba in 1891. Nuré further stated in (folio 34) as *gemäl aqrabew* Nuré ("Nuré who supplies camel"). As already stated above, this document sometimes contains Oromiña but written in Amharic script. Nuré is again described (folio 57) as:

ኑረ አባ ጋላ

ብኒገስ ኑሩታ ሃያ አላ ገላ ::

which literally means:

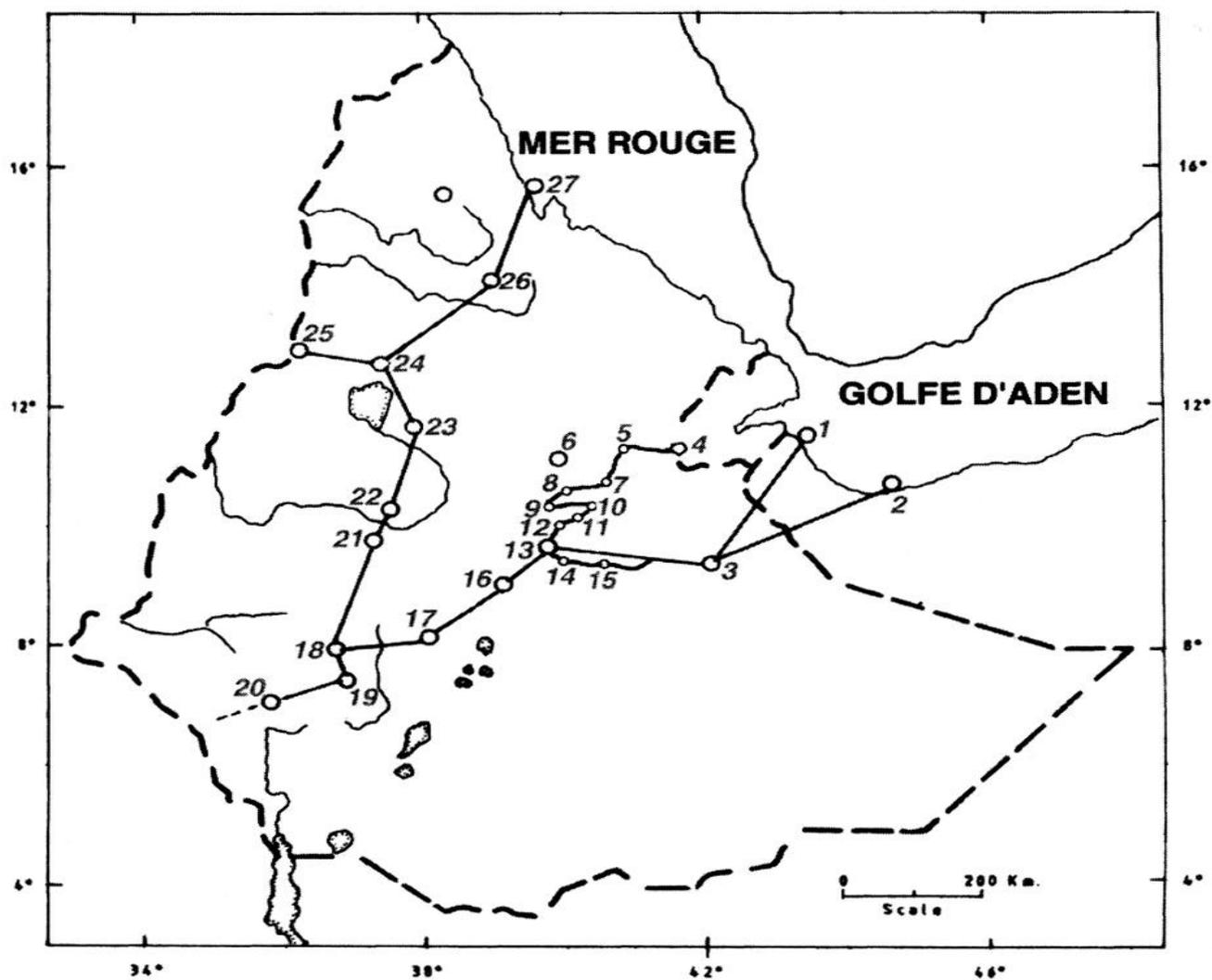
*Nuré the camel owner, Let us go home, otherwise
we would be eaten by wild beasts.*

Although Sayedu was not able to integrate this poem into the main stream of the content, it did not take much time for Jalällé, who quickly recounted why this poem was composed in those days. Nuré used to assign his brother's at Lugo, Rassa and Čänno while he was undertaking business in camel along Čänno, Aleyu Amba and Harar route. Sometimes it was difficult for him to reach home on time. His brothers, who used to buy camels for him from the local Afar people, would expect him until midnight and back to home knowing that he could not arrive after midnight. Trade in camel was the best profit making task for men like Nuré. It could not demand market place for exchange and every village along the trade route could help as a centre for exchange. This was because the *Arho* who could take rest at each village bought camels and sold their commodities to the villagers. For example, if one set out from Aleyu Amba before reaching Harar he could see thirteen villages in each of which camels could be sold and other business such as salt and gun trade were undertaken by the *Arho* (folio 71) in these villages. As stated in this document (folio 83), the price of camel was not high at Aleyu Amba or Harar. This was because everybody in these towns had camels with fresh energy. At half way from Harar to Aleyu Amba the price of camel was higher. This was due to the absence of big markets in which camels and other items of trade were easily available. This was also true in the case of traders from Aleyu Amba and set out for Awsa and Obock.

The last informant was *Balambaras* Ali Murädo whose story was inevitably associated not with Jalällé's family but with that of Nuré's. It was neither Jalällé nor Seydu Nuré who established this fact. It was *Balambaras* Ali, one of the very famous Afar story tellers who recounts it. Interestingly, Seydu was amazed by Ali's flow of ideas, when the latter went deep into the course of history and placed Nuré's father in the proper setting. Ali stated that his father was Nuré's partner in the camel trade; and, generally speaking it was the camels of the Modayto and Gibdossa Afar clans which Nuré used to buy and further traded with. This fact was a result of group interview deliberately arranged after the business connection of these families was carefully established in an earlier interview that was undertaken with Ali in 1986. It was by then that Ali mentioned the business partnership between his father and Nuré.

The other interesting point Ali raised so many times was the different problems which the Afar and other merchants could encounter along the trade routes. He, leaving aside all other problems, raised that of malaria as a case in point. Ali did not hide that he bequeathed this tradition from his father. He said his father told him, that one had to get all the necessary medicine from Harar to recover from it. About what medicine was there, traditional or modern, it was beyond Ali's capacity to comment on it. But the late Jalällé left for us that there were members of the Armenian and Greek communities who involved in the trade of modern medicine. Although this needs further follow up, Jalällé recounts that in the 1890s any medicine brought from Harar to the region of Shäwa was known by the name "Harar". Under what appellation it was known in other regions, he took reservation to comment on. However, he further consolidated "Harar" as follows in the Oromo language: "*Yo Harar chétan 'Hrar' nubita!*" which literally means: "*if you go to Harar could you please buy for us 'Harar'*" – i.e. the medicine. The last point that Ali raised was about *Leḡ Iyyassu's* move from Harar. This happened following his downfall from power in 1916. Ali recounts that his father had seen the young prince escorted by few men along Harar-Shäwa trade route. It was particularly to the area of northern Shäwa, around his new town of Waynä Hara, that he rushed across the Awash via the foot hills near Azälo. This was soon after his defeat by his opponents in Harar. Ali mentioned that his father and other Afar chiefs directly involved by helping the young prince. They assisted him all the way when he moved from Harar or during his travel to Wällo by way of Awsa and Bati¹⁶. Finally, this is a short account on the reminiscences and views of the ex-merchants of Shäwa. Though short it is part of our current effort to reconstruct a history of the region of central and eastern Ethiopia based on available written and oral sources.

16 *Ibid.* pp. 70; see also the map attached.



- | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1. Zeila | 11. Hawadi | 21. Assandabo |
| 2. Berbera | 12. Cänno | 22. Basso |
| 3. Harar | 13. Aleyou Amba | 23. Darita |
| 4. Awsa | 14. Abdul Rasul | 24. Gondar |
| 5. Dawway Uchurru | 15. Tadacha Malka | 25. Matamma |
| 6. Bati | 16. Rogé | 26. Adwa |
| 7. Daway Rahmado | 17. Soddo | 27. Masawwa |
| 8. Hayamata Arba | 18. Saqa | |
| 9. Idaltu | 19. Jiren | |
| 10. Rassa | 20. Bonga | |