

The Genealogy and Ethnic Identity of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi (Gragh) of Ethiopia: A Historiographical Reappraisal

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Article History: Received: July 03, 2017; Revised: November 15, 2017; Accepted: November 23, 2017

Abstract: In Ethiopia, legend and folklore-based claims always confuse with historical fact. Until more primary sources are found, read and interpreted, uncertainties will remain. One of such historical controversies is the ethnic and social origins of Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi. Both Muslim and Christian sources forward their case/argument in order to support contemporary popular views. The objective of this paper is to weave available primary and secondary sources, which are pertinent to the genealogy of Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi. It is based on published and unpublished materials from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) library. Accordingly, the existing sources are put together and critically reviewed, crosschecked and historically narrated. The paper offers interpretation that takes a different line of argument from the existing paradigm on the subject. Based on the analysis of the evidences, the paper argues that Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi has more of a Balaw and Afar ethnic background paternally and maternally respectively. What has been commonly argued as a Somali, Harla, a Harari or even an Oromo background are more of idea and claim than reality.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Ethnic identity; Folklore; Genealogy; Imam Ahmed; Legend; Muslim sultanates

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1. Brief Historical Outline

The Sultanate of Adal (C. 1415-1576) was a multiethnic Muslim state in the horn of Africa during the medieval period. Adal is first mentioned in the Arabic account of the last days of the Shawan Sultanate as being conquered along with other smaller Muslim principalities in 1288 by the Walasma ruler of Ifat. Adal like Shawa and Buqulzar, was one of the “mother cities” of the kingdom of Ifat and is probably located south of Ifat. This position implies that it is a region of Ifat like Shawa. One may then conjecture that Adal was a district or a pastoral tribe more or less subject to Ifat at least up to 1415. When the ruling walasma dynasty was defeated and the ruling Sultan Sa’adaddin Abul Barakat Muhammed b. Ahmed was killed by King Ishaq in 1415 members of the Walasma family fled to Yemen and Adal was no longer subordinate to Ifat. With the return of the ruling family of Ifat from Yemen shortly they took the title of “the Sultans of Adal” instead of Ifat and moved their headquarters to somewhere near the present location of Harar.¹ Due to threats of the Oromo expansion and internal dissension, the Sultanate of Adal was transferred to the lowland of Awsa, lower part of Awash; in 1576 by Muhammed Gaza I bin Ibrahim.²

With the decline and demise of the sultanate of Adal in the second half of the 16th century, the Sultanate of Harar came into the limelight of history. The historical narratives produced for public consumption do not clearly establish the relationship between the Sultanates of Harar, Adal and Ifat. Sober historical analysis, however, establishes, the fact that the three Sultanates were organically linked with Islamic principles and have had historical continuity in the change of political center from Ifat to Adal and ultimately to Harar. The Sultanate of Harar, as one of the last Islamic political centers initially led by Ifat then by Adal was the largest and most influential Sultanate.³

It was in this part of the horn that Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi alias *Grag* – the left handed (as Christian sources pejoratively nicknamed him) came to power in the first decade of the 16th century and became the national hero of Ethiopian Muslims. Imam Ahmed, born in 1506 at Hubat (specifically at Za’ka, 32 kms North east of Harar town), was the leader of the militant Muslim Sultanate of Adal which embarked on a conquest of the Christian highland kingdom between 1529 and 1543.

¹ Ewald Wagner, “The Genealogy of the Later Walasma’ Sultans of Adal and Harar”. In *proceedings of the eleventh international conference of Ethiopian studies*. Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst and Taddese Beyene (Eds.), Vol. 1 (1994). P. 135.

² Ewald Wagner, “Adal” *Encyclopedia Aethiopia: A-C*. Herausgeben Von Uhlig (ed) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag), pp.71-72.; See also Ulrich Braukamper, *Islamic history and culture in Southern Ethiopia. Collected essays* (Munster: Hamburg and London, 2002), pp.3-4.

³ Merid W. Aregay, “Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508-1708, with special reference to the [Oromo] migration and their consequences” (Unpublished Phd Thesis, 1971), p.41. The exact location of the kingdom of Adal was not clearly established. Merid claims that the Sultanate of Adal proper consisted of the lowlands which stretched from the Awash to the neighboring lake Abbe. Various small emirates tributary to the Sultanate of Adal were found in the more arid plains between the lake and the Gulf of Tajura. One of these Emirates was Awsa, situated to the south east of the lake. Alvarez says the Adal Kingdom in 1520-1527 bordered on Fatagar and Shawa and extended as far south as cape Guardafi, which obviously included Zeila in its Eastern extension. The word Adal appears in a number of different versions (Adal, Adel, Adail, Adela and others. Here in this work we use Adal).

As a result of this conquest, he brought three quarters of Ethiopia under Muslim administration and established his head quarter at Dembiya.⁴ Yet, it is the irony of Ethiopian historiography that such a domineering historical figure should pass through to historical obscurity.

Imam Ahmed's family genealogy and ethnic identity has been little studied and has been highly mystified and distorted. So were the portrayal of his gigantic stature and the colossal size of his steed erroneous to say the least legendary. *Gragn* was said to have wielded a brand twenty feet in length; he can easily throw big stones and destroy buildings; he was said to have unusually long spears and swords. In short, his personality was constructed out of the image of a human being. The French traveler, Arnolde de' Abbade wrote his reminiscence when he stayed in Ethiopia at the middle of the 19th century and provided a wealth of data he collected from his informants who narrated about Imam Ahmed (they referred him *Gragn*) in Gondar. His companions described a huge stone pile thrown by *Gragn* while he was fighting against the Christian kingdom, the atrocities he committed against the Christians to the extent of forcefully converting captives into Islam and the magnitude of destructions and lootings he made on the churches and monasteries.⁵

The narratives on Imam Ahmed (*Gragn*), have apparently made such an impression on Ethiopian imagination that it remained vivid until now and many monuments or their devastations are still quite mistakenly ascribed to him. For example, the famous phallic stones in Hararge and Sidamo are considered to have been principally erected for Imam Ahmed (*Gragn*) to "tie his horses". Equally flawed is a belief that the unfinished church of Yeka Mikeal, near Addis Ababa, was because of the destruction by Imam Ahmed.⁶

Every Christian highlander still hears stories of Imam Ahmed during their childhood. Hailessilassie referred to him in his memories, as also did Paul Henze in *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* in which villagers in northern Ethiopia point out sites of towns, forts, churches and monasteries destroyed by '*Gragn*' as if these catastrophes had occurred only yesterday.⁷ The argument here is not to claim that Imam Ahmed was not destructive, but rather the destruction he caused has been exaggerated. As a result, the question remains 'To what extent?' A question far difficult to address.

⁴ Shihabadin, Futuh Al Habasha, p.8. See also Ahmedin Jabal, *Ya Itopiya muslimoch ya chiqonana ya tagadilo tarik* ((Amharic version). "A history of Ethiopian Muslims oppression and their struggle for freedom CA 615-1700". (Addis Ababa: Marawa Publishing, 2011), pp.185-187; Franz-Christoph Muth, "Ahmed b. Ibrahim Al-Gazi" In *Encyclopadea Aethiopoca*.Vol.1, Siegbert Uhlig (ed), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), pp.155-157.

⁵ Arnolde Michel de' Abbade, "Ba Itopiya Kafitagna Tararoch Koyita,1992" (Trans),Genet Ayele. 2009. See also Mekuria Teklestadik, *Ya Gragn Warara* . (Amharic) "The conquest of Gragn". (Addis Ababa: Birhane Ena Selam Printing, 1967); See also Cornwallis, W. Harris, *The highlands of Ethiopia*, Vol. II. (London: Longmans Publishing, 1844), pp.255-256.

⁶ Stanislaw Chonacski, "A second note on the Ethiopian national flag, with comments on its historical and sociological sources." In *proceedings of the 3rd international conference of Ethiopian Studies*,Vol. I.(Addis Ababa, 1966), P.149.

⁷ Paul, Henze, *Layers of time: A history of Ethiopia*. (Newyork: Palgraves, 2000), p. 90.

Equally unhistorical was the portrayal of Imam Ahmed as a scourge from God in an attempt to justify the continuous and crushing defeats at his hands. The chronicles as cited in Demoz Abraham describe that ‘*Gragn*’ arose in response to some boastful statements of Lebne Dengel. It reads “... This king asked how many horses he had in his household;” “thirty thousand” someone answered him. “Of what use are they to me” said the king, “ for I have no enemies” then arose Gragn from Tequr mare⁸.

So much thus, the literature in Ethiopian history concerning Imam Ahmed manifest distortions and a lack of historical objectivity. This paper engages in the discussion of the sources by focusing on one of the least studied aspects of Imam Ahmed Ibin Ibrahim Al-Gazi, that is, his ethnic identity and family genealogy. The significance of genealogy, i.e. the history of descent of a family or descent groups and the system describing it, is well appreciated and plays a crucial role in written and oral historiography among the various ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa. It is an important political instrument for enforcing solidarity within the group and even across its border. Therefore, knowledge of genealogy is utmost importance for cultures and local politics having to some extent very practical purposes.

Given this historical value of genealogy, however, no contemporary historical evidence addresses Imam Ahmed’s ethnic origins and his genealogy significantly. The extant sources consulted for the purpose of this paper variously claim that Imam Ahmed belonged to the ethnic Somali, Harari, Afar, Balaw, Oromo and even that he was an Arab. However, none of these discussions offer convincing evidence for their assertions.

By using both primary and secondary sources of domestic and foreign origins with new insights and interpretations, I argue that Imam Ahmed belonged to the ethnic Afar and Balaw. Here, the sources are not new but the interpretation opens a new trajectory. The paper is organized into three parts. The introduction is followed by part two which gives due attention to the different traditions concerning the ethnic background of Imam Ahmed. This part is the core of my paper and is subdivided into the Somali, the Afar, the Balaw, the Harari and the religious traditions. Part three renders concluding remarks.

2. Discussion of Different Traditions

2.1. The Somali Tradition

Imam Ahmed (nicknamed *Gurey*) in Somali and *Gragn* in Amharic, both meant “the left handed”, as he was, is often represented as an ethnic Somali. The issue of his ethnic identity is politically sensitive to many Somalis as he has been re-imagined as a Somali hero and crusader or Jihadist, against a hostile Christian Ethiopian state. A number of sources discuss his identity in line with his Somali origin.

Franz-Christoph Muth, in the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, describes Imam Ahmed is of Somali origin adding that his nickname “Gurey” is a Somali term given by his relatives. According to this same source, his nickname is deliberately ignored by the

⁸ Demoz, Abraham, “Muslims and Islam in Ethiopic literature.” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*.Vol.X., No.1.(Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press,1972), p.8.

primary sources that describe Imam Ahmed's activity i.e the *Futuh al Habasha* (the Conquest of Abyssinia) written by a Yemeni Arab chronicler known as Shihab al-din Ahmed bin Abd al-Qader bin Salem bin Uthman (for short Shihab al din, *alias* known as Arab Faqih in Ethiopian sources).⁹ Of course, Shihabaldin did not mention the term *Gurey*, but whatever the case might be, the term *Gurey* is Somali, the title with which *Gragn* was commonly known.

It is typical of the Somali tradition to give dignitaries titles such as Ugas, Waber, Suldaan or Islao¹⁰ implying the strong clan identity of the Somali. Still to this day, among the Somali, the only security is provided by small bands of kinsmen; the loyalties of kin and clan have persisted supreme.¹¹ In light of this, therefore, it would have been reasonable to argue that Imam Ahmed was a Somali had he been called by the traditional clan titles rather than by other titles like Imam, which was common for all Muslim communities.

I. M. Lewis, a famous scholar of Somali studies, also claims that Imam Ahmed was a Somali. In his *A Modern History of the Somali*, Lewis argues that two well-known illustrations of honored traditions in the Somali national consciousness were the prominent Islamic champion Ahmed *Gragn* who occupied and temporarily reigned the Christian Ethiopian heartland in the 16th century and the blistering 20th century Dervish hero- Sayyid Muhammed Abdille Hasan (1864-1920).¹² According to Lewis, some Somalis suppose *Gragn* to have been a patrilineal ancestor of the head of the former president of the Somali republic, Siyad Barre.¹³ But this is a tenuous argument to trace the genealogy of Barre in the 20th century to the Imam who lived in the 16th century through oral sources. In view of the nature of the subject matter, this approach is appropriate but unreliable since the memory of oral tradition may not be properly remiscined or narrated.

The contribution of the Somali contingents in the Imam's victories was also forwarded as an indication of the Imam's Somali origin. Huntingford, among others, in his the *Historical Geography of Ethiopia from the first century to 1704* shares this argument. He suggests that Imam Ahmed's command centers were on the edge of Somali country. Several Somali tribes are cited by names, principally Harti, Haber,

⁹Franz-Christoph Muth, "Ahmed b.Ibrahim Al-Gazi". In Encyclopedia Aethiopica.Vol.1, Siegbert Uhlig (ed), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), p.155. The Ogaden, the Merhan, Gadabursi, Darod, Dir and a number of other Somali clans claim that Imam Ahmed was from these respective clans, but none of them cite a reference.

¹⁰Lee. V. Cassanelli, "Migrations, Islam and Politics in the Somali Benadir 1500-1843." *Proceedings of the first United States conference on Ethiopian studies center*. Harold Marcus (Ed) (Michigan: Michigan State University, 1973), p.102.

¹¹I. M Lewis, *A Modern History of Somali. Easter African Studies* 4th Ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), p. 64.

¹².Ibid.,p.224.

¹³ Ibid. Sayid Mohammed Abdulle Hassan was Ogaden on his father's side and Mohammed Siyad Barre was Ogaden on his mother's side and Merhan on his father's side which by inference means Imam Ahmed was Marhan on his father's side, because it was claimed that he belonged paternally to Siyad Barre. But Marhan is the clan of his brother-in-law, Mattan. Therefore, Mattan could not have married Firdoussa, Imam Ahmed's sister, since a person's descent among some Cushitic communities including the Somali is traced through the father's side. Incidentally, Imam Ahmed's statue was built in Moqadishu and more recently in Jigjiga, a political center of Ethio-Somalis. This situation probably reflects how Somali nationalism has been politicized in line with the identity of Imam Ahmed.

Magdale, Merhan, Girri and Zerba-Yibberi and the country East of Ethiopia from Harar to the sea was Somali.¹⁴ It is also argued, after disagreeing with the Sultan Umaradin over taxation issues that was among the Somali, that Imam Ahmed took refuge and organized his forces to launch campaigns.¹⁵

Tekletsadik Mekuria, a widely read public historian on Ethiopian history, in his book *Ya Gragn Warara* (The conquest of *Gragn*) claims that *Gragn* was a Somali from the Hawiye clan in Ogaden on his father's side and probably Harla on his mother's side.¹⁶ But from the *Futuh*, it can be argued that the Harla and the Somali were separate regiments led by their respective clan chiefs, while *Gragn* led the *Malasay* who were distinct from both the Somali and the Harla.¹⁷ As for the *Malasay*, I will return soon.

The conventional interpretation of his ethnicity as Somali has, however, been challenged. It is actually quite a dubious possibility, although he did have strong ties with the Somali community. In relation to this, Paul Henze aptly argues "Though some modern Somali nationalists have attempted to make him a national hero, the case is unconvincing. Somali tribes had not developed a sense of common identity in his [*Gragn's*] time."¹⁸ Even though Somali clans principally played a strong role in the subjugation of Christian Ethiopia, these clans went to war not so much as Somalis but as Muslim under the Sultanate of Adal. As a multiethnic state, Adal was comprised of Afar, Somalis, Harla etc. So, too, was the Imam's army, which was from the very beginning multiethnic in its composition and religion. In other words, the social construction of ethnic identity was not a binding factor for Imam Ahmed's army.¹⁹

More importantly, our primary source for the Muslim-Christian conflict, i.e. the *Futuh* has never explicitly mentioned the ethnic identity of Imam Ahmed, possibly because Shihabadin found it unimportant believing that it was known to his readers or because it was assumed the war was a religious and not an ethnic one. It was also possible that perhaps the Imam deliberately obscured this information with the aim of uniting his followers by religion instead of dividing them by the complications of ethnic rivalries or still it is possible that his followers would not have known his ethnic background. But there are a number of clues in the *Futuh* worth considering which argue against the proposition that the Imam descended from the Somali ancestry, although in any case there are undeniable Somali families who claim to be his descendants. The clues are discussed as follows.

¹⁴ G. W. B. Huntingford, *The historical geography of Ethiopia from the first century to 1704*. R. Pankhurst (ed). (London: Oxford University press, 1988), p.135.

¹⁵ Shihabadin, *Futuh Al Habasha*, pp.102-103.

¹⁶ Mekuria, Teklestadik, *The conquest of Gragn*, p. 177.

¹⁷ Shihabadin, *Futuh Al Habasha*, p.69.

¹⁸ Paul, Henze, *Layers of time :A history of Ethiopia*. (Newyork: Palgraves, 2000), p. 90.

¹⁹ G. W. B. Huntingford, *The historical Geography of Ethiopia from the first century to 1704*. R. Pankhurst (ed). (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.135. A number of sources indicate this state of affairs. See for example Shihabadin's *Futuh al Habasha*, pp.69, 85; J. S. Triminhgam, *Islam in Ethiopia*.

A. Many of Imam Ahmed's relatives were identified. His sister, Firdausa, was said to have been married to the chieftain Mattan who was identified as a Somali²⁰ unlike her and her brother Imam Ahmed. Imam Ahmed's brother was Mohammed bin Ibrahim, who was chieftain of the tribes of Shawa and Hargaya²¹ before he joined the Imam against the Christian highland kingdom. He had a cousin, Mohammed bin Ali, whose mother was the Imam's aunt; Mohammed was the Sultan of the Somali tribe of Zarba.

B. There were a number of occasions where the *Futuh* supplied evidences for an argument from silence. There were numerous passages in the *Futuh* where the Imam Ahmed and the Somali people were mentioned together and never once did Shihabadin mention the clan connection. Furthermore, the Somali warriors were described as having fled during the battle of ShimbraKure.²² Had the Imam been Somali, would the *Futuh*, which otherwise praises the Imam at every turn, mentions this disconcerting details of the Imam's kinsmen?

C. In the *Futuh*, it was discussed that Imam Ahmed arranged his army into three regiments based on their ethnic identity. Accordingly, the left wing was made of the Somali under the leadership of his brother in-law, Mattan; the right wing was made of the Harla under the leadership of his cousin, Mohammed Bin Ali. The central army was made of the *Malasay*.²³ Who were the *Malasay*? We will see it later but obviously they were not Somali or Harla for they were already mentioned in the *Futuh* as separate identities.

Although I. M. Lewis implies that Imam Ahmed was referred as "the left handed", this appellation is essentially never used for him in the text. He seems to have actually recognized that it was partly the misunderstanding and eventually the connection of Imam Ahmed with the Somali which resulted from this similarity in name. He considered Ahmed to be the namesake of Imam Ahmed (*Gragh*) from the Somali Darod clan.²⁴ Here is a direct quote from the *Futuh* on the Somali leader: "The first of the tribes to reach the Imam was Haber Maqdi with their lord and Chieftain Ahmed Girri bin Hussain, the Somali."²⁵

One of the Ahmed Guray's was the famous Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi, while the other was Ahmed Xuseyn, a Somali chief (Ahmed Guray). The existence of two such characters, of course, does not eliminate the possibility that both were Somali. However, the fact that Imam Ahmed was never described as Somali while other important characters were named as "Somali" (the Somali) would strongly suggest against it.

²⁰ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, pp.50, 69.

²¹ Ibid. Haragaya is also a place probably located, according to Huntingford, between Kwelgora and Bequlzar in Shawa. According to Braukamper, it is to be found to the west of Harar between the Carchar Mountains and the Middle Awash. But it should not be confused with Hargeisa, a city in Northwestern Somalia.

²² Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, p.50.

²³ Ibid.; p. 69.

²⁴ I. M. Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali*, p.26.

²⁵ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, p.43. Reference is also made on pages 49, 76 and 82.

2.2. The Afar Tradition

A number of literary productions [found at our disposal] discuss the family genealogy of Imam Ahmed by relating him with the Afar. One of the works which provides an immense contribution to the subject under investigation is a book written by Shaik Jamaladin and his son Hashim. The book, entitled *Ya Afar Hizb Tarik Arki Minchi* (History of the Afar and its sources), was originally written in Arabic and was translated into Amharic by Ahmed Mohammed Kibo. Although the authors are not professional historians and their assertion needs some caution, they have used primary sources produced in Arabic and other European languages some of which are attached as appendices of the book.

According to the authors, Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al-Gazi was an ethnic Afar. They offered varied evidences for their argument. On the basis of linguistic evidence, the authors argued that the Muslim Sultanate called Adal, although geographically based on the Harar plateau, was essentially an Afar Sultanate. The name Adal is a derivation from the Afar tribal name Ad-Ali, people who inhabited the vast lowland region governed under the Sultanate of Awsa, another small emirate under Adal.²⁶

Indeed, the name Adal refers to the Afar as a number of historical evidences prove. It is also true that Imam Ahmed organized his military contingents largely from this group, at least at the initial stage of the Jihad. Ewald Wagner also postulates that "... the main population of Adal may have been of Afar stock."²⁷ The Afar in general formed the nomadic part of the peoples of the kingdom of Adal and a considerable number of Imam Ahmed's armies. However, his army was multiethnic because we see in the *Futuh* the Somali, the Harla, Harari and even Arab and Turkish soldiers who actively took part in the various wars Imam Ahmed fought.²⁸ So were the leaders and generals of the Imam for they were also from different ethnic groups, such as Mattan from the Merahan clan of the Somali.

Again, based on linguistic evidences, these authors associate Imam Ahmed with the Afar. The very name of his wife Del wan Bara is said to have been Afar. As the authors claim, it is composed of two Afar words –Delwan and Bar[dh]a. The former means something (body) which is deeply attached affectionately while Bar[dh] means child. Hence, a child who is emotionally and affectionately attached, probably with her parents.²⁹

In this connection, Dilwanbara (wenbere, the "a" referring to the first order not a long "a"), is not an Amharic name (which as some, would associate it to 'dil wenber' meaning 'throne' or 'victory seat' but rather an Amharic attempt to emulate the Afar Dele-wanbar[dh]a= the consonant 'dh' is in fact usually represented as 'r'. Hence,

²⁶ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, *Ya Afar [Danakil] Hizb Tarik Arki Minchi* (Amharic). "A History of the Afar and its Sources." Ahmed Mohammed (Trans). (Addis Ababa: Arki Sira Publishing, 2007), p. 287. Adal is a name that refers the Afar by the Amhara. They are also called Taltal by the Tigreans, Danakil by the Yemenei Arabs and Udal or Uda Ali by the Somali.

²⁷ Ewald Wagner, "Adal" *Encyclopedia of Aethiopia*: A-C. Siegbert Uhlig (ed). (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), p.71.

²⁸ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, pp. 69-70, 85.

²⁹ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, *Ya Afar [Danakil] Hizb Tarik Arki Minchi* (Amharic). "A history of the Afar and its sources." Ahmed Mohammed (Trans). (Addis Ababa: Arki Sira Publishing, 2007), p. 283.

wanbara for wanbadha; Hanfare for ‘hanfadhe.’ Jamaladin and Hashim claim that the ‘dh’ gives a sound ‘r’ and this is found only in Afar language.³⁰

Although the argument forwarded by the authors seems plausible, it requires further investigation by linguists and other social scientists before coming to the conclusion that Imam Ahmed was an ethnic Afar based on this evidence. There are in fact other Cushitic languages, which apply and make use of the consonant ‘dh’ to produce a different sound. A case in point is Afaan Oromo in which the consonant ‘dh’ produces a sound difficult to pronounce for other language speakers.

Besides, the wife of Imam Ahmed, Del wenbera, has been claimed by other competing traditions, as will be seen later. It is, thus, reasonable to weigh the different traditions and the evidences presented before arriving at the conclusion reached by Jamaladin and Hashim.

Another evidence presented by Jamaladin Ibrahim and Hashim Jamaladin for their assertion of Imam Ahmed’s ethnic Afar origin is the role played by the Harla people. The authors claim that the Harla were one branch of the Afar people, which was why the Imam gave them an important position in the war. They further claim that still today the Harla exist among the Afar as numerical minority and have held some government offices like *Qadi*.³¹

In fact, the author of the *Futuh* indicates that the Harla, under the leadership of Sultan Mohammed bin Ali (the son of the aunt of the Imam), made up the right flank of the Imam’s contingents. They were composed of the different Harla clans such as Zemenber, Barzar, Buqla, Jasar, Arbatuhan and Alqa.³² However, Shahabadin does not tell us that these Harla clans belonged to the Afar. Indeed, he never mentions the name Afar even once. It is also possible that the Imam’s aunt might have been married to any other ethnic group to which the Imam did not belong thereby denying the possibility of Sultan Mohammed bin Ali’s being what the authors claim. Intermarriage across ethnic groups was quite a common phenomenon among the patrilineal society in which a son’s identity is traced from the father’s side.

In addition, there is confusion in the extant literature concerning the Harla. Braukamper presents the Harla as the remnant of the Semitic settlement in Harar plateau and the founders of the ancient civilization with peasant agriculture along the trade route that traverse some urban centers to Somaliland.³³ Taking this line of argument into consideration, it appears less plausible to associate the Afar, who are identifiably Cushitic stock, with the Semitic stock.

Jamaladin and Hashim provide other evidence for the Imam being an ethnic Afar. A major player in the Imam’s victorious army was the group called the Malasay.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, *Ya Afar [Danakil] Hizb Tarik Arki Minchi* (Amharic). “A History of the Afar and its Sources.” Ahmed Mohammed (Trans). (Addis Ababa: Arki Sira Publishing, 2007), p.285. *Qadi* is a judge in the shari’a court.

³² Shahabadin, *Futuh al-Habasha*, p.80.

³³ Ulrich Braukamper, “Notes on the Islamization and the Muslim Shrines of Harar Plateau.” In *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies*. (Thomas Labhan (ed). (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 1983), p.146.; Ulrich Braukamper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia. Collected Essays*, Munster:Hamburg and London, 2004, p.107.

They, according to the *Futuh* and the authors under discussion, were invincible and were determined to die. In trying to define what *Malasay* means, Jamaladin and Hashim say that historically among the Afar clans there was a special warrior group called Gobad. This literary means strong soldier armed with white shields. The name Gobad is given for the southern parts of the Sultanate of Awsa from where the *Malasay* were recruited. From this fact, the authors deduce that the *Malasay* were not a specific clan group but were composed of the different clans of Afar.³⁴ On the other hand, Franz-Christophe Muth claims that the *Malasay* were an important force in the army of Imam Ahmed, although their exact position was not yet clearly established historically.³⁵

According to Franz-Christophe Muth, the term *Malasay* might indicate an elite unit force, probably having its genesis in Harar in the area controlled by the Sultanate of Adal, with a remarkable component of cavalry fighting unit. In other instances, the term is frequently used in the ethnic collocation.³⁶ In the *Futuh*, Shihabadin provides evidences that during the battle of Shimbra Kure and the subsequent military engagements, Imam Ahmed arranged his army such that the different Somali clans controlled the left hand and the Harla the right, each side being led by their respective clan chiefs. Imam Ahmed, for his part, was in command of the central army which was entirely composed of the *Malasay*.³⁷ This implies that the *Malasay* are repeatedly juxtaposed with the Somali, the Harla and even the Arab forces within the Imam's army.

In this juxtaposition, the Afar were not contrasted with the *Malasay*, which is a strong evidence to be skeptical that the Imam was indeed from the Afar region. In relation to this point, Franz-Christoph Muth concurs that Imam Ahmed was possibly from Afar ethnic group, because, within the joint Jihad army of *Gagn*, the *Malasay* were regularly contrasted in the *Futuh* with the Somali fighters, with the Harla, with the Arabs and even with the Mahra from Hadramawt.³⁸ On top of this, the same source argues the fact that the terms Afar and its equivalent 'Danakil' which actually never appear in our major source, i.e. the *Futuh*, might suggest that the *Malasay* is simply the ethnic appellation for the Afar³⁹, hence indicating Imam Ahmed's identity.

One may also conjecture why the soldiers were divided into different regiments based on ethnic identity. We can guess there might have been language difference and hence perhaps to avoid misunderstanding in communication. The Imam found it functional to group them based on their languages and the leaders were arranged

³⁴ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, pp. 286-287; See also Franz-Christoph Muth, "Malasay", *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*: Vol.3. Siegbert Uhlig (ed), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), pp. 693-694.

The term seems to have been derived from *malas* or *malays* ('try to kill or a shooter'). Among the Harari, the term is used as a military officer's rank or as a title in the context of Harari youth mobs as it is reflected in the long soldier song "Malasay Faqar."

³⁵ Franz-Christoph Muth, "Malasay", *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol.3. Siegbert Uhlig (ed), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), pp. 693-694.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, p.69.

³⁸ Franz-Christoph Muth, "Malasay", *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 3. Siegbert Uhlig (ed), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), pp.693-694.

³⁹ Ibid

accordingly. In supporting this, the available literature also indicate that Imam Ahmed's army did not speak a common language. Imam Ahmed himself spoke Arabic plus some other local languages, which the sources are not clear about.

The role the Afar played in the Jihad also gives some clue to Gragn's affiliation with the Afar. Ahmed *Gragh* frequently retreated to the lowlands beyond the escarpment whenever his forces faced defeats and the lowland provided every accommodation and reinforcement for his force, including the safe passage of weapons from the ports. A good example of this situation, which has been extensively discussed by different sources including the *Futuh*, is when Imam Ahmed was defeated and wounded by the Portuguese forces at Anasa near Lake Ashange in 1542 and retreated into the Zobel Mountains in Afar. It was also in Afar that the military camps were established where new recruits for the Jihad were trained and mobilized.⁴⁰

Another strong piece of evidence for *Gragh's* Afar background is in command. Trimingham, in his classic work *Islam in Ethiopia*, relates pre-Islamic practices of the Afar to an incident in one of the campaigns Imam Ahmed made in northern Ethiopia. It is a common practice by the Afar and the Somali to prove the truth of a witness by resorting to trial by fire when they face grave matters. The Afar method as discussed by Trimingham was throwing oneself into fire or less often placing a red hot iron axe between the hands of the suspected person, for example in theft and make him hold it for a while to be decided by the judge who bases his verdict upon the state of the hands of the suspect. Surprisingly, the Imam used the first method during the sack of Lalibela.⁴¹ In an attempt to corroborate the discussion by Trimingham, I came across the same information in the *Futuh* and in Tekletsadik Mekuria's book mentioned earlier. In both of these works, it is reported that by the time *Gragh* reached the Rock Hewn churches of Lalibela, priests were gathered in great number ready to die for their religion. *Gragh* then had the articles of wood piled up and set on fire in one of the churches, apparently not the Rock Hewn churches, wishing to see what they would do. He put them to the test and instructed them to select one person from the Christians and one from the Muslims, presumably to prove the true religion. Then, the chief of the priests made himself ready to throw into a raging blaze fanned deliberately. But before that, a certain lady who were told, was a nun, took the initiative and threw herself into the fire and ultimately half of her face was burnt before *Gragh* instructed his followers to pull her out.⁴² As for the Muslims, our sources remain silent.

A cross reference to the same practice amply demonstrates Jamaladin and Hashims's discussion about the subject. These authors have vividly indicated that pre-Islamic Afar culture, the practice of the ordeal by fire and the burden of proof by taking oath in fire, was a common practice. This practice rests on the assumption that

⁴⁰ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, p. 295.

⁴¹ J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*. (London: Oxford University press, 1952), 267.

⁴² Shihabadin, *Futuh al-Habash*, 347; Tekletsadik Mekuria, *Ya Gragh warara*, P. 483; See also R. Pankhurst, (ed.). *The Ethiopian royal chronicles; Libnadingle, Galawdewos, Susenyos* (London: 1967), 68.

fire consumes only those who are not innocent. The Afar frequently practice it to identify theft and other injustices in the community.⁴³

Questions also arise naturally about Imam's motivation and practice of the same pre-Islamic culture. For what purpose did *Gragn* carry on the practice of oath through fire? From where did *Gragn* bring this practice? Trimmingham claims that "They [Afar] cannot be called fanatical Muslims ... they are extremely lax in the practice of their Islam and many of the remnants of their former 'paganism' persists."⁴⁴

Based on the aforementioned range of evidences, I presume that the pre-Islamic practices like taking an oath through fire by the Afar might have influenced *Gragn*. In addition, from the available evidences, the conversion of the Afar into Islam took place by the 14th century.⁴⁵ But, Islam, by its very nature, is tolerant to traditional practices and has the tendency of syncretizing the elements of traditional belief systems. Moreover, this practice was done in a faraway land where the natives were non-Afar population and where the influence of Afar on the culture of the population is insignificant not to say nonexistent. It, thus, probes one to guess that *Gragn* might have implemented the practice of oath through fire because it was the practice of his ancestors.

2.3. The Balaw Tradition

There is some clue in the *Futuh*, though not irrefutable, that Ahmed *Gragn* was a member of the Balaw community. The Balaw are Muslim population who currently live in Eritrea. According to Merid, based on the Christian chronicles, the name Balaw is associated with the people who are assumed more generally to all the adherents of Islam who live in the areas between the Taka and Fagzuli. It is further indicated that in 1535 Imam Ahmed gave the eastern part of Taka for one of his officers, which implies that the region belongs to the Ethiopian empire.⁴⁶ On the other hand, according to the definition given in the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* by Didier Morin, Balaw seems to refer to Arabized Beja groups or Beja-ized Arab groups who ruled Sudan specifically where the Beja predominated and parts of Eritrea (i.e Kunama and Naralands). Also, Didier Morin mentions that, Baset, in his French translation of the *Futuh*, Imam Ahmed was Balaw.⁴⁷

However, the term also seems to refer to Christianized rulers of northern Ethiopia (Tigray and Eritrea) of Beja stock during the Zagwe dynasty. Tadesse Tamrat, in his seminal work *Church and State*, also supports this version.⁴⁸ Their origin seems to be diverse, though the rulers might have been members of a group similar to the Tigre,

⁴³ Ibrahim Jamaladin and Hashim Jamaladin, pp.198-199.

⁴⁴ J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p.176.

⁴⁵ J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp.60-61; See also Ulrich Braukamper, "Notes on the Islamization and the Muslim shrines of Harar Plateau." In *proceedings of the second international congress of Somali studies*. Thomas Labhan (ed), Vol. II (Hamburge: University of Hamburge, 1983), pp. 146-148.

⁴⁶ Walda Aregay, Merid, "Southern Ethiopia and the Christian kingdom 1508-1708, with special reference to [Oromo] migration and their consequences." (Phd Thesis, SOAS, 1971), P. 24.

⁴⁷ Didier Morin, "Balaw", *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 1.p. 455; See also J. S. Trimmingham, p.169.

⁴⁸ Tamrat Taddese, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp.75-80.

of nomadic origin, who are speakers of Tigrigna or related language. Spencer Trimingham on his part claims that the Beja were the governors of the East coast from Massawa to Zeila from the 14th century to the 16th century.⁴⁹ Whatever the case may be, the Balaw have helped the Turks in the occupation and administration of Massawa and the coastal parts southwards and even became part of the ruling class among the Sultanate of Adal.

How then was Imam Ahmed related to the Beja or the Balaw? The *Futuh* states that the first Balaw who migrated to Adal (Balaw Abda Allah) in the time of Sa'ad ad din married one of the latter's daughters and that every son she bore him was called Ura'I and every daughter Ba'tiya=Bati. This is in reference to a Balaw from the Mahawara tribe head named Ura'I AbuBakre⁵⁰. Thus, it may just represent one group's tradition since Sultan Ibrahim is identified as Balaw. In this connection, given her first name, i.e. Bati may also mean that Bati Dil Wenbere was a Balaw from Northern Ethiopia as the above tradition indicates.

A number of other sources further indicate that Ahmed Gragn's wife Bati Dil Wenbera took refuge in Mazega (of Daka). This area was a Balaw fief, an indication that the Imam camped and made his base among the Balaw in western Tigray before pillaging Axum.⁵¹

More importantly, there is a strong evidence in the *Futuh* that Ahmed may have been a Balaw at least on his father's side. The *Futuh* mentions Ibrahim bin Ahmed as a ruler of the Adal sultanate for three months; his name suggests that he may have been the Imam's father. The only character by the name of "Ibrahim", actually mentioned in the *Futuh*, is a certain Balaw chief of Hubat, a village (a town) near Harar, where *Gragn* was said to be born. It reads:

Returning to his country, Sultan Muhammad was murdered by his in-law Muhammed bin Abu Bakre bin Mahfuz, a prominent person in the country, who ruled the country after him for one year. Then, Muhammad bin Abu Bakre bin Mahfuz was in turn murdered. His killer was Ibrahim bin Ahmed, ruler of the country of Hubat of the tribe of Balaw, a prominent person in the country who ruled the country for three months.⁵²

The same Ibrahim bin Ahmed is later referred to as "Garad Ibrahim." It is almost certain that these two are one and the same, as Ibrahim was himself a ruler of Adal for a time, and the *Futuh* constantly refers to Adal's leaders as "Garad" and "Emir". The connection between Ahmed *Gragn* and *Garad* Ibrahim has been made twice in the *Futuh*:

They gathered in Amajah where they stayed three days. It was one of the towns in Abyssinia that had Muslim living in it. But it belonged to the king. Its inhabitants then went to the Imam Ahmed and said "The king of Abyssinia had a mighty force with him; the number of his horses is incalculable. Only the Most High God knows the number of his coats of mail, helmets, foot-soldiers and shields made of hide. Your fathers, your ancestors, the emir Ali, the Emir Mahfuz, your father –in law, along with

⁴⁹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p.169.

⁵⁰ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habash*, p.191. For detail discussion of the Balaw, see also Didier Morin, "Balaw". *Encyclopadea Aethiopica*, Vol.1, p.455.

⁵¹ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habash*, p. 352; Teklestadik Mekuria, *Ya Gragn warara*.

⁵² Shihabadin, *Futuh Al Habash*, p. 8.

Garad Ibrahim and the sultans who long ago used to rule in the country of Sa'ad ad din –not one of them has ever attacked the king of Abyssinia in his own country, in his own dwelling place.⁵³

Furthermore, concrete evidence (the third and final mention of Ibrahim bin Ahmed/*Garad* Ibrahim) is provided by a letter of the Christian highland noble (patrician) wasan Sagad that was sent to Imam Ahmed via Shahabadin and reads:

...it was I who long ago killed your brother Garad Abun, son of Garad Ibrahim, who was older than you in years. I routed his army, and did so more than once. Don't imagine that I am like any of the patricians whom you have encountered up till now. I am wasan Sagad.⁵⁴

This letter clearly elucidates that *Garad* Abun, a former 'sultan' (the terms emir, sultan, *Garad* and others are used interchangeably here, as this is also how the *Futuh* uses them), of Adal, was Ahmed b. Ibrahim's older brother and that *Garad* Ibrahim was his father. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that Ahmed *Grag*n first served as a knight under *Garad* Abun, upon whom Shihabadin bestows many praises. Here is an example from the *Futuh*:

Our lord, the Imam of the Muslims, Ahmed bin Ibrahim al –Ghazi was at that time a knight under Garad Abun, endowed with intelligence and foresight who consulted, in his youth and his prime, the inspiration of God the Most High in regard to the commission that God willed should be entrusted to him .Garad Abun loved him mightily, when he saw how courageous and astute he was.⁵⁵

Strengthening Ahmed's connection to *Garad* Ibrahim of Hubat are the Imam's ties to the land, which seems to be one of Ahmed *Grag*n's bases (although his home was in Za'ka): 'He [Ahmed] went to his home in a town called Za'ka, a day's journey from the town of the sultan.'⁵⁶

Thus far, the discussion in relation to the Balaw tradition strongly supports Imam Ahmed's Balaw background on his father's side. It is established that *Garad* Abun was the son of *Garad* Ibrahim. It is also established that *Garad* Abun was the brother of Imam Ahmed. The *Futuh* also mentions that *Garad* Ibrahim, who was from the Balaw, was the father of Imam Ibrahim which implies considering the patrilineal descent, common in northeast Africa, Imam Ahmed was from Balaw.

Here, one may ask a legitimate question due to the fact that the statements in the *Futuh* for example "your father", "brother" mentioned in names may not necessarily indicate a biological link between the Imam and the names so mentioned. In the *Futuh*, the author has mentioned names of individuals who have biological relations with the Imam in clear terms. He has also mentioned the type of biological relations unequivocally. For example, he cites names such as Emir Zaharibu Muhammed, cousin of Imam Ahmed; Sultan Mohammed, Son of the paternal aunt of the Imam; Mattan, brother-in-law of the Imam; Emir Mahfuz, Father in-law; Mohammed bin Ibrahim, brother of the Imam, etc. The author also mentions the sisters, children and

⁵³ Ibid. p. 59. Garad or more properly Garaad; Garad in Amharic/Ge'ez is a Cushitic title for a leader used by a number of medieval Muslim kingdoms in Ethiopia such as Hadiya, Adal and other southern Muslim kingdoms. It is also used to this days among east cushitic speakers like Hadiya.

⁵⁴ Shihabadin, *Futu al-Habasha*, p. 170.

⁵⁵ Ibid.,p.9

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the wife (including the later wife he married in Bali) of the Imam with no other generic term that shrouds the biological relations. On the other hand, he frequently mentions the followers and soldiers of the Imam as companions and equestrians. Given these range of scattered evidences, one can suspect the presence of biological relation of different personalities mentioned in the *Futuh* while these names are unequivocally stated in the type of relation they have with the Imam. It is also interesting to observe that while there are lots of individuals whose fathers' names were 'Ahmed', the *Futuh* does not make any mention of these names associating with the brotherhood of the Imam except two- Mohammed bin Ibrahim and Garad Abun Ibrahim.

2.4. The Harari Tradition

One other tradition worth discussing in relation to the Imam Ahmed's family genealogy is the Harari. The genesis of Harari identity was related with *Shaik* Abadir of the Qadriyya order from Yemen. According to Braukamper, *Shaik* Abadir arrived in Harar between 1216-1220.⁵⁷ He was regarded as the creator of the Harari genesis. Another Harari tradition narrates that the Harari arrived in their present-day settlement from Hamasen (in Eritrea) during the time of Emperor Dawit I (1382-1413).⁵⁸ From both of these traditions, we can deduce that the formation of the Harari identity was a phenomenon predated by the Harla, with whom they had some kind of ethno-cultural affinity in at least material culture.

Braukamper gives a clue that Imam Ahmed belonged to the Harari saying that "Among the Harari subgroups, the *Malasay* and *Gaturi* were already existent in the old documents."⁵⁹ However, we have discussed the issues of the *Malasay* in this work.

In any case, there are sources that relate Imam Ahmed with the Harari. Ewald Wagner, for instance, concurs that Imam Ahmed belongs to the Harari. In his *The genealogy of the later Walasma sultans of Adal and Harar*, Wagner discusses the genealogy of the Sultans of Adal and Harar based on the genealogical tables of Walasma dynasty compiled by René Basset and Enrico Cerulli.⁶⁰ But, it would be difficult to accept that all of the names stated in the list of the Sultans belong to the Harari ethnic group, for we have sources that the formation of Harari as a separate ethnic identity was a later phenomenon as compared to the establishment of the Walasma dynasty in 1285.

More importantly, in none of the genealogical trees he presented for the Walasma family, did Imam Ahmed appear as a legitimate Walasma sultan of Adal or its

⁵⁷ Ulrich Braukamper, "Notes on the Islamization and the Muslim Shrines of Harar Plateau" In *proceedings of the second international congress of Somali studies*. Thomas Labhan (ed), Vol II (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 1983), p.146.

⁵⁸ Ulrich Braukamper, *Islamic history and culture in Southern Ethiopi: Collected essays*, p.35.

⁵⁹ Ulrich Braukamper, *Islamic history and culture in southern Ethiopia: Collected essays*. P. 36

⁶⁰ Ewald Wagner, "The genealogy of the later Walasma sultans of Adal and Harar" In *proceedings of the eleventh international conference of Ethiopian studies*. Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst and Taddese Beyene (Eds). Vol.1 (1994), PP. 135-146. To construct the genealogical table, Basset depended on the *Futuh Al Habasha* while Cerulli relied on the Walasma chronicles. Hence, the discrepancy in the genealogical table arose because of the different sources they used.

successor, Harar. Instead, Imam Ahmed and his successor, his sister's son, Nur Ibn Mujahid, were religious leaders, who shoved and pushed the legitimate secular rulers of the Walsama dynasty into the background. Indeed, the Imam had never been termed as Sultan while he could have seized that position had it not been for the question of legitimacy. Between 1518-1559, the sultans of the Walasma dynasty were only puppet kings who no longer influenced politics.⁶¹ They were either dependent on the religious faction in Harar or were vassals of the Christian emperor. But the dynasty continued ruling and no one ever dared to remove the puppet Sultans who were legitimate to the throne. The problem with Wagner's work is that he does not tell us which ethnic group is legitimate and this makes it difficult to identify the rulers' ethnic background. As to the Imam Ahmed, even the *Futuh* does not resolve this perplexing matter.

2.5. The Religious Tradition

It is common in Ethiopian religious discourse and traditions to exaggerate the deeds and activities of some famous people, be it in the Christian or Muslim sources. It is also a common practice to trace the genealogy of these men to holy places, saintly figures and families. The Muslim sources associate Imam Ahmed with an Arabian family and highly praised his 'jihad'.⁶² But we do not have any concrete historical evidence to claim Imam Ahmed was an Arab.

A careful look at the *Futuh* clearly demonstrates that the writer was biased towards the Muslim side. For instance, this could be expressed by phrases like "May the most High God have mercy upon him"; when a Muslim died, "He died a martyr's death", and when a Christian died, phrases like "May the cure of God be upon him", "God cast his soul quickly into Hell" etc.⁶³

This same line of narration is also observed in Christian sources. The Ethiopian Christian sources often produced and narrated stories which are/were nothing less than fictitious under the auspice of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. It is also a common practice to see exaggerated deeds of the Muslim army when their military forces were engaged in a war against the Christian soldiers.⁶⁴ One of the materials written in Amharic and worth mentioning is a book produced by Daniel Kibret, entitled *Ya bete kirstian maragawoch* (Sources for the Ethiopian [Orthodox] Church). According to Daniel, Ahmed Gragn was the issue of a Coptic priest and a Muslim woman called Shemsia who went to Dabra Libanos to submit tribute to the monastery. The story goes that the priest spent the night with Shemsia and early in the morning he went to the church mistakenly taking her scarf with him. By the time he arrived in the Church, the priests realized that he had slept with a Muslim woman and beat him to death. As to Shemsia, she returned to Harar pregnant with *Gragn*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The Imam's war was not a Jihad-as both Muslims and Christians fought on both sides. Those Christians who were evicted from their *rist* right joined Ahmed's army, the Argoba clan-the Shagura fought Ahmed's army.

⁶³ Shihabadin, *Futuh al Habasha*, (See for example on pages 10, 30, 44, 59 and many more).

⁶⁴ Paul, Henze, *Layers of time*, P. 86. One tradition says, for example, that nine out of ten Christians were forcefully converted to Islam.

Gragh was then born and repeatedly scorned by his relatives, as he was fatherless. He asked his mother who his father was and she told him that he was beaten to death by the Christians. Then, *Gragh* grew in vengeance and all what he did was to avenge his father's death.⁶⁵ This line of narration is a deliberate distortion of the identity of the Imam. At the heart of the argument runs that Imam Ahmed became invincible because he had Christian blood in his veins or at best it entails that there is/was no hero from the Muslims.

Taklatsadik Mekuria, however, does not agree with this Christian tradition. By taking *Tarika Nagast* as his source, he argues that Imam Ahmed was the son of Ibrahim, who was a Muslim from the Sultanate of Adal and his ancestors were all Muslims.⁶⁶ It is clear that Imam Ahmed's ancestors were all from the Muslim sultanate in north and eastern Ethiopia and what Taklatsadik Mekuria argues seems plausible.

3. Conclusions

The ethnic identity of Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Gazi is difficult to establish. It is shrouded with legend and myth which are not substantiated with firm historical evidences. Sources at hand are both scanty and fragmentary. It is, thus, difficult to sew together these fragmentary documents and it may seem like a daunting task.

However, based on available meager documents, it has been tried to show that Imam Ahmed was an ethnic Balaw on his father's side and an Afar on his mother's side. The former is arguably based on the evidence that weighed *Gragh's* paternal ancestry to be more convincing. As far as the later is concerned, attempts have been made to present a number of arguments that are adequate to conclude that Imam was of maternally an Afar. But in the evidences that discuss his Afar connection, no concrete linkage is established with his paternal side while the Balaw tradition could at least offer paternal relation. If, then, Imam Ahmed was a Balaw in his paternal side and if we accept that the Imam had an Afar connection, due to his maternal ancestry, Imam Ahmed was a Balaw because genealogy is counted based on the paternal clan identity in most societies found in the horn of Africa.

Yet, the Somali and the Afar composed the bulk of Imam Ahmed's army. In bringing together a huge army, Imam Ahmed used his charismatic power and ability to organize a multiethnic force. This ability was reinforced by his leadership skills which were characterized by participatory approach to his lower level military generals and even to individual fighters. Besides, he used the technique of a marriage alliance by which he secured the support of a large number of the Somali contingents from the different Somali clans like the Darod, Ogaden, Marhan, etc.

⁶⁵ Kibret, Daniel, *Ya batekirstain marajawoch* "Sources for the Ethiopian [Orthodox] Church". (Addis Ababa: Mahberqidusan, 1999), p. 7. The amount of annual tribute *Gragh* is said to have paid to King Libna Dingil appears somehow exaggerated. The source speaks of 700 white horses, 50 golden dogs, 30 carpets, 1000 candles, 2000 cattle, 3000 fattened goats and sheep. It would be easy to surmise that *Gragh's* war could also be precipitated by this staggering amount of tribute.

⁶⁶ Mekuria, Teklatsadik, *Ya Gragh warara*. (Addis Ababa: Birhan ena Selam Printing, 1967), p. 168.

Thus far, I do argue that this paper could provoke scholarly discourse on the hitherto unaddressed aspect of Imam Ahmed, including a new look at the existing sources on the same subject. Hence, the thesis would have a modest contribution by instigating new interest in the subject.

4. Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Professor Michael Jervese of the Toronto University for his encouragement to consider the first draft for publication and the anonymous readers and editors for their comments on the draft.

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