Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies

University of Hamburg
August 1–6, 1983

edited by
Thomas Labahn

VOLUME II

ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

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FACTORS OF INTERMEDIACY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICA: THE CASE OF THE ISSA OF THE HORN

Introduction

Western imperialism of the I9th and early 20th centuries was to create the opportunity, however ephemeral, for numerous intermediary groups to operate on the fringes of world capitalism. The Issa of the northern Somali coast were one such group. Based in the arid coastlands and the desert steppe between Zeyla on the Gulf of Aden and Harar on the edge of the Ethiopian plateau, the Issa came to occupy, at least by the mid-I9th century, and perhaps centuries earlier, a structural niche in the chain of communication and transportation that linked the general region of the Horn to overseas markets. The niche was, in essence, the combination of caravan carrying capacity and an organizational reticulum of security, exchange, intelligence, and communication. The niche serviced the export and import trade between the highlands of Harar and Ethiopia beyond and the coast at Zeyla. Through the second half of the I9th century, the niche serviced what appears to have been a steadily expanding trade.

In I897, the French began construction of a railroad from Djibouti, less than IOO kilometers to the northwest of Zeyla. The rail line was to run toward the Ethiopian plateau, and was intended to draw off the bulk of export production of the plateau, and to make firm French influence throughout the Horn. The construction of the railroad and the operation of the line, which reached Dira-Daoua near Harar in I903, presented new challenges to the intermediary role of the

Issa. In the early stages, the Issa appear to have been well situated to benefit from the opportunities of the program of construction. Later, as the railroad moved forward to full operation, Djibouti supplanted Zeyla as outlet for the export of the plateau and the intermediate role of the Issa was transformed toward more marginalized functions within the evolving rail-based export and import economy of the Horn. The period of intermediacy was, for the Issa, over and their structural role in the regional economy of the Horn had passed to the French railway company.

Across Africa, there were many parallel experiences. The actors, materials, and scenery varied, but the general process which flowed from intermediation to marginalization was repeated again and again.[1] Intermediation and marginalization perhaps best define the external surface of much deeper processes of social transformation inherent in the changes in position within a world economy. The intermediate niche is constructed in a social field, through the elaboration of social relationships, the evolution of social institutions, and the articulation of social values. It is the social framework, or better, the processes of its realization, which underpin the group's participation in the wider world market.

Social relationships, social institutions, and social values determine not only to what degree the group as a whole may participate (shaping, claiming, holding an intermediary niche) but also the ways in which segments of the group act as 'forward agents' or 'support units' for group participation as a whole, shaping the recruitment of individuals to different levels and spheres of participation. Such a social framework defines the nature and extent of the distribution of benefits derived from the intermediate role, the framework being seen here as a process of social differentiation and stratification.

For the Issa of the I9th century, the sources available provide us with much less than a satisfactory picture of this framework. Even the literature on present Issa society is poor. Nevertheless, it is possible, perhaps valuable, to explore where we can to see how certain elements of Issa social life and structure were caught up in the structure of intermediacy and which may have varied processually with the transformation to and from intermediacy.

The Geo-political Framework

Zeyla must have played the role of intermediary transit point for centuries, between focal points of imperial civilizations, on the one hand by its communications at sea, and on the other by communications across the desert steppe. Written sources going back to the second century A.D. mention unidentifiable commercial sites along the Somali coast.[2] These sites appear to have had long standing commercial relations with Egypt, Arabia, Persia and India. These traded for goods very similar in character to those traded in the early I9th century at Zeyla, Berbera and the lesser ports of the coast, i.e., gums, resines, ivory, gold, and ostrich feathers.

Specific mention to Zeyla first comes from Ibn Battuta in the I4th century (Trimingham I965:67). Zeyla was then a center of the Musulman Adal Kingdom that variously extended to Harar and Ifat in the interior. The arrival of the British at Aden in I839 saw Zeyla still under the nominal suzeranity of whoever ruled in Moka. Zeyla was farmed out to a governor who paid a fixed sum to the Sherif of Moka for rights to the port and the profits to be made from its trade (Drake-Brockman I9I2:I6).

The era of modern western imperialism and rivalry in the region opened with the British occupation of Aden. The con-

struction of the Suez Canal (I869) and the British occupation of Egypt (I882) brought the Horn to the center of European strategic considerations. At issue were the mainenance and protection of the vital sealines from Europe to the Indies passing by Suez, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (see Robinson/Gallagher I96I; Sanderson I965).
France, Britain's major maritime rival, rapidly expanding in Indo-China and Madagascar by the I880s and I890s, established Djibouti as an independent coaling station in I892. French ships would therefore no longer be at the mercy of British policy by a dependence on coaling at Aden (see Doresse I97I; Deschamps I948). Anglo-French rivalry on the upper Nile (I890s) as well as a concern to make Djibouti a paying venture able to compete with Aden, prompted France to undertake the construction of a railroad from Djibouti to the interior highlands (see Martineau I93I). This of course could not be done without the compliance and indeed active support of Menelik, Negus of Ethiopia after I887.

Abyssinia

The I9th century saw efforts toward the reunification of the fragmented empire. These efforts culminated in the reign of Menelik (I887 - I9I2) as Negus and a shifting of the center of empire to the south. Choa, the southernmost Abyssinian province and fief of Menelik before I887, was spared the dynastic and foreign conflicts that engulfed the northern provinces in the latter I9th century (see Marcus I975; Pankhurst I969).
Choa was thus free to carry out a 'program' of expansion further south against the Galla peoples and Oromo-Galla kingdoms of the southwest beyond the Abai River. The arms that first Italy, looking for support against the Negus Johannes, and later the French, looking for support against

England on the Nile, poured into the Choa of Menelik, enabled Menelik to create the new center of Abyssinian power.
That center was based on the new capital of Addis Ababa, founded in the early I890s, on Harar, occupied in I887 with Egyptian withdrawal, and the conquest of Galla lands, especially the kingdoms of Kaffa, Djimma and Enneria. These last were ancient centers of the slave trade and the production of coffee after Harar (see Beke I843). Communications with the outside for this core of rich productive lands was assured by way of Harar, the coastal steppe of the Issa, with Zeyla as terminus on the sea. Menelik, mindful that the English, as masters of Zeyla after I886, held great leverage over him by this, sought an alternative and balance in the Horn by sanctioning and encouraging the development of Djibouti and its railroad (see Doresse I97I; Sanderson I965; Marcus I975).
The basis for Zeyla's central role in this regional political and economic context was the combination of its geographical position and the privileged relationship it enjoyed with the Issa. The rupturing of the relationship as the Djibouti railroad was extended, reaching Harar in I903, spelled economic collapse for the ancient port. This collapse, and the substitution of the railroad for the Issa as the structural link assuring transport between the coast and Harar, provoked fundamental changes in the Issa way of life.

The Ecology of Commerce

Zeyla, and later Djibouti, sat at the coastal end of a natural corridor to the interior of the Horn. That corridor is formed by a generally flat and gently rising desert steppe. That steppe is one of the most arid regions of the Horn, with an annual rate of precipitation of less than

six inches (see Hunt I95I:chapter V). This extreme aridity sets natural bounds to economic activity.

Sharp geo-physical variations mark the two sides of the corridor. To the northwest lies a geological depression characterized by deep ravines and gullies running parallel to the coast (see Tasieff I970:32-40). To the southeast, a line of high ridges running parallel to the coast separates the flat lands of the Haud from the coast. To the immediate south of Zeyla, the desolate foothills called Guban, rise far more sharply and nearer the coast than those skirting the southern edge of the corridor steppe. The corridor, running southwest from Zeyla, approaches the fertile highlands immediately adjacent to the city of Harar at points much further inland where the change in altitude from steppe to highland is most abrupt (see Hunt I95I:chapter IV). The steppe corridor fans out to the north and northwest of Harar forming the arid plains of Errer, Bilain and Madgalla, themselves bordered on the north by the Afar triangle. The Issa have occupied the steppes and environs of this Zeyla corridor for centuries. By the I9th century they effectively controlled the corridor and participated in its commercial traffic.

The Trade Routes

In addition to the Zeyla corridor route, two other important routes lead to the interior highlands from the coast:

I. The Tadjurah route.

The most northerly started at Tadjurah, including Obock later, crossed the difficult terrain of the ravined lowlands of the Afar before continuing on across the Madgalla plain to the Awash River and there to Ankober in the Ethiopian highlands (see Isenberg/Krapf I843:chapter I and map; Soliellet I884; Vanderhym I896). Tadjurah sat

at the head of a region far less accessible than the steppes of the Issa behind Zeyla. This route involved difficult terrain even for camels and held little general interest for the region's merchants during the I9th century. It did carry a considerable traffic however of special interest. Slave traders and their caravans, the 'merchandise' being on foot, used this route well into the 20th century (see Soliellet I884: chapter "Obock"; Doresse I97I:chapter X; Masson I9I2: chapter XIV).

2. The Berbera route.

The system of routes leading from Berbera to the interior did not, by the end of the I9th century, serve as an outlet for the commerce of the Harari and Ethiopian highlands. One route climbed sharply into the Nogal mountain chain, crossing the mountains through the Sheikh and the Mira passes, then splitting and descending into the flat lands of the Haud and then on to the Webi Shabelle River to the south (see Cruttenden I849:29-76). A branching existed to Harar by way of Hargeysa and Jijiga, but was little used by the last quarter of the I9th century (see British Consular Reports, no. I924). Previous to this the Berbera route had been used by very large slave and merchant caravans from Harar.

The reasons for its fall into disuse, reducing Berbera to an export center solely of Somali products, may not be given with documented assurance, yet logic points to several factors related to European expansion in the area. First, the British anti-slave patrols could more easily block such a large center of general commerce where slaves represented fully half of the exports of Berbera in the first half of the I9th century (see Isenberg/Krapf I843:chapter I; Cruttenden I849:50; Burton I894: vol. II). The effective periodic blockading of all Berbera commerce to put pressure on merchants to halt the traffic

in slaves at the port would force the slave trade of Harar northward. Such was the logic of Cruttenden's recommendations in I844 (see Cruttenden I849:75-76), and such seems to have been the case. It follows that as the trade in slaves from Harar deserted Berbera for Zeyla and later Tadjurah, so did the other trade in goods that accompanied these large caravans. Finally as British sources testify, the ease with which the Berbera passes could be cut by a number of competing clans during times of conflict (see Parkinson I898:I5-48; Newman I902: 373-40I) might serve to reinforce a tendency to abandon this route in favor of the Zeyla-Issa steppe route.

3. The Zeyla route.

Aden, by the second half of the I9th century had become the regional metropole of western interests in the area (see Gavin I975; Marston I96I). As such, European merchants and officials sought the most direct route to the rich highlands of Harar and Abyssinia. For Aden, this lay through Zeyla and the Issa steppes. The Zeyla route offered the advantage of fewer partners to be dealt with in the transportation of goods and a speedier transit time than at Berbera, the latter taking up to 25 days to Harar (see Burton I894:vol. II; Cruttenden I849).

The Zeyla route across the steppes of the corridor via Biakaboba and Gildessa then to Harar, covering a distance of 250 kilometers, could be crossed in I5 days by commercial traffic and 5 by foot messengers (see Burton I894:vol. I; Nahdi-Pasha I883:I65-I66). Gildessa, on the very edge of the steppe and highland nearest Harar, was the inland terminus for the Issa caravans. Beyond Gildessa, the agriculturally productive highlands of the Galla began. At Gildessa, goods were unloaded from the camels of the Issa and onto the mules of the Galla for final transport to Harar.

Commerce

The trade of Zeyla and Berbera are representative of the nature of consumption and production in the Horn generally. During the short period (I892 - I897) at Djibouti before port and rail construction began, commercial traffic at the port was generally analogous to that at Zeyla.[3]

There are two observations to be made here. The first is that a general increase in trade did indeed take place in the closing years of the I9th century. That increase in trade would necessitate an increased involvement of the Issa in the caravan transport business as they entered the hay day of their 'intermediacy'.

The figures available for the period I887 - I904 show an approximate doubling for trade at Berbera, while at Zeyla there is a corresponding three-fold increase. The upswing begins for both ports in I892/I893, marking the general resumption of trade after the terrible effects of drought, famine and rinderpest that swept all of Africa in the early I890s.[4] There are no precise figures for either port before I887, though the British agent at Zeyla in I892 estimated that trade had already doubled in the ten years before records were kept on the coast (see British Consular Reports I892:no. I208).

The curves of total commerce and of exports and imports begin a dramatic fall at Zeyla in I90I/I902. This decline is directly attributable to the entry in service of completed sections of the railroad, camel caravans being organized between the advancing railhead and Harar as early as I900 (BCAF I902:232). The arrival of the railroad at Dira-Daoua (Harar) in I903 completed the destruction of Zeyla's role as key transit port for the interior highlands in favor of Djibouti.

The second general observation pertains to the differing characters of the trade at Zeyla and Berbera. Berbera

operated primarily as an export center for indigenous Somali production. Aden took the vast majority of the trade, importing livestock for its own growing consumption, and re-exporting the skins, gums, ostrich feathers and other products to India, Europe and America.[5] It is most significant that very little coffee was exported from Berbera. Grown exclusively in Harar and in the far interior of the Oromo-Galla kingdoms of Kaffa, Djimma and Ennaria-Lammu, coffee was the single most important export at Zeyla.[6] The export of coffee from Zeyla and not from Berbera marks the essential difference between the ports. Zeyla was primarily a transit point for the commerce of the interior highlands, its exports of local Somali produce such as gums, livestock and ghee (clarified butter) coming decidely second. The almost exclusive exports of ivory from Zeyla in contrast to Berbera illustrate the point further. Originating in the far interior and often collected as tribute by Menelik from his subordinates and the conquered Galla, these large though diminishing exports were the private property of the Negus, the revenues from which helped finance his importation of arms (see McClennan I980).

The nature of imports also reflects this basic difference between the trade of Zeyla and that of Berbera. Cotton goods of all types, but especially American grey shirting, were important to both, yet in widely differing proportions to other imports at each port. At Zeyla, American grey shirting was consistently the largest single import, far exceeding in value those imports destined for local consumption, i.e., rice, jowari (sorghum used as feed for camels) and dates. Indeed the value of other cotton piece goods imported at Zeyla is comparable to those of rice and jowari, imports of dates being last. While some of these cotton goods were destined for local consumption at Zeyla and its pastoralist hinterland, by far the bulk of these imports were destined for the markets of the highlands.[7]

By contrast at Berbera, imports of American grey shirting were generally half the value, if not much less, the value of the same items at Zeyla. This represents the sole consumption needs in such goods of a pastoralist population supplied through Berbera whose numbers were far greater than the Issa and Gadabursi supplied by Zeyla. It was imports of rice and dates that dominated at Berbera, both goods consumed by the Somali pastoralists as supplements to their diet and especially when rains were bad or conditions in the interior otherwise disturbed proper stock management, thus lowering yields of milk and young from the herds of the pastoralists (see British Consular Reports (BCR) no. I468).

The case of jowari, common feed for camels, is illustrative of the kinds of seasonal variations that pastoral Somali production and consumption were prone to. When rains were good and grasses plentiful, the Somali has less need for such back-up support as provided by importations of jowari. In addition, there is more reluctance with such plenty, to slaughter the stock necessary for hides or to export excess stock to the Aden market. Conversely, when conditions were poor, the need for back-up feed for camel herds, both pushed imports of jowari and increased the tendency of the Somali to slaughter and export excess stock, that in turn paid for the imports of jowari, rice and dates (see BCR I892:no. I208,p.9).

It is finally interesting to note that while jowari imports at Zeyla show the same variations as at Berbera, they are somewhat less severe, with total consumption remaining higher than at Berbera at all times (see BCR I892:no. I208, p.9). This may indicate the relative importance of camel herds for the Issa. Herds that may have needed more sustained back-up support, representing not only the bottom line in survival for the Issa as for the Somali in general, but representing a specialization by the Issa in the herding

of male burden camels needed for transport in the Zeyla corridor.

The Ecology of Issa Intermediacy

We have no direct accounts that describe the movement of commercial caravans across the Issa-Zeyla steppe. Rather, the descriptions by travellers of the provision and movement of their smaller caravans is all that is available. The account of Count Gleichen who accompanied the important and large Rodd Mission to Menelik in I897 via Zeyla, Biakaboba and Harar may be the most representative of actual transport conditions for a large commercial caravan.[8]

The caravan was organized by abbans at Zeyla, who provided the camels and attendants for a fee. The camels were rented rather than bought as the attendants, who were exclusively Issa at Zeyla, took more care of animals belonging to them than one bought by the traveller. The traveller was responsible for provisions for the attendants and for extra feed for camels. By insisting on this last point, the Issa as a whole must have been protecting their vital grazing lands against overgrazing by increasing numbers of burden camels crossing the desert steppe.

The caravan generally moved between dawn and noon in order to avoid the intense afternoon heat, averaging I5 to I8 kms a day. The caravans' itinerary followed the availability of water on the steppe, generally to be found in dry shallow stream beds with a little digging. Halts were usually made at such points. It was near such spots as well that unused kraal - circular thorned camel camps - were to be found. These could be used by the caravans for protection at night. If unavailable, the camels were unloaded, the loads stacked in a circle around the sleeping camp, the camels bedded down in a circle around that, and the whole enclosed by a hastily

amassed circular thorn barricade for protection against man and beast. The kraal was necessary at all times to keep out the many lions and hyena that still inhabited the steppe. Thus the caravans moved in stages across the steppe before arrival at Gildessa where Galla mules were substituted for Issa camels for the final leg to Harar, a day or two's march distant.[9]

The most fitting way to approach the social aspects of the Issa participation in the larger economic structure as set forth is through that basis of all pastoral societies, i.e., the range of herd compositions available to that society in a given space and time. The choices for the Issa, as with many other pastoralists of the Horn, were largely between camels and sheep and goats.

Sheep and goats are the basis of domestic survival, always held by the domestic encampment, and concentrated along with the domestic groups in those areas having permanent wells during the two dry seasons of the Somali year. The sheep and goats are as dependent on daily watering and feeding as the women, children and elders who make up the domestic encampment. Camels on the other hand are less dependent on water, able to go weeks between watering if need be, while eating the low shrub (mimosa) that is the only feed available in the desert steppe during the dry season (see Lewis I96I: 57-89).

Camels are herded by groups of young men and boys of a same agnatic group, having private rights or corporate responsibility for the maintenance of the herds, and grouped in temporary encampments called hero. Numbering between 5 to 20 hero ranges widely over the desert steppe in the dry seasons in search of pasture and water. Because of the extreme aridity of the steppe and the short distances involved for the Issa back to the permanent wells, Issa camel herds would have made circuits that focused on watering at these per-

manent wells and grazing elsewhere. Should camels be kept close to the wells in the dry seasons, serious overgrazing of limited resources would endanger the domestic units. During the cooler rainy seasons, camels, able to survive handily on the increased water content of the grasses then available, will require fewer waterings at permanent wells, ranging again wide in the steppe (see Hunt I95I:chapter VII). Thus the cycle of herding that placed the camels in the dry steppe of the corridor during both the dry and wet cycles of the northeast trading monsoon, corresponds well to the eventual transport needs of a commerce dominated by general changes in the monsoon winds.

While camels can go sometime without liquid, men and boys cannot. It is the camel, its milk and in cases of absolute necessity, its meat, that forms the daily sustenance of the youth in the hero. Camels also serve the domestic encampment of the wells, a few milk cows, some burden males and one or two gelded and gattened male camels were continually held by the domestic group for its needs. The bulk of the herd with the hero consisted of young females. It is the female that generally forms the wealth of a herd, representing the source of daily sustenance for the youth, and forming the base for herd renewal and expansion. Males, when not intended either for transport or as studs, are generally slaughtered at birth (see Lewis I96I:57-89; Swift I978:282-285; Bulliet I975:29).

The more arid the land, the more limited the number of permanent wells available, the more the pastoralist will be dependent on those animals, i.e., camels, that survive most easily under these conditions. Accordingly, the more his wealth will be invested in, and be represented by those camels which are, in the last analysis, his insurance against the perils of drought which are recurrent in the Horn (see Swift I978:279).

The Issa, by the I9th century, possessed large numbers of camels relative to their herds of sheep and goats, at least this is suggested by some authors (see Cruttenden I849:49-52; Burton I894:vol.I,p.II9-I25; Hunt I95I:chapter IX). Other Somali, more favored by rainfall levels and larger numbers of permanent wells in the higher ridges of the coastal chain, held fewer camels relative to herds of sheep and goats, and in some cases also possessed significant numbers of horses and even some cattle (see Cruttenden I849: 55-60). These last are never mentioned as having been herded by the Issa.

What seems clear then, is that the Issa were, among the coastal Somali, more specialized in camel herding than these others. As the Issa became more involved in the transport of an increasing commercial traffic across the corridor in the late I9th century, male burden camels would increase in value to their owners. Therefore, as economic opportunity presented itself, the Issa would have increased the numbers of males in the herd, and further differentiated and specialized themselves as camel herders among the pastoralists of the Horn.

The Institutional Mechanism of Issa Intermediacy

The economic link between the Issa and the coastal ports, whether at Zeyla or later at Djibouti, is to be found in the role and institution of abban. The abban was Somali, at Zeyla necessarily of the Issa, who took the affairs, indeed the life of the trader in his hands during the crossing of the maritime steppe to Gildessa. This he did for a predetermined fee. It would have been impossible to make the crossing from the coast to the interior without the services of an abban. He arranged procurement of camels and men necessary to transport a trader and his goods. The abban

was the intermediary between the 'foreigner' and the Issa met in route. He was responsible for any trading done both in port and along the route between the trader and the Issa. He negotiated the giving of 'gifts' to those whose protection might be necessary for safe passage. As such, the abban was ultimately responsible for the life of the 'foreigner' and thus responsible for the payment of receipt of compensation termed for the Somali, 'bloodwealth' or diya should that become necessary (see Burton I894:vol. I, p.63-69; Lewis I962:370).

The abban role is closely associated with the institution of magan, the protection of non-agnates, including strangers, living among a particular agnatic group or travelling through their territory. Magan, as an institution, constructs formal relations between an agnatic group and strangers, and further, in situations of conflict resulting from a breach in protection or sanctuary, establishes a basis for more organized cooperation among groups that are not agnitically related.

The basis of all relations based on magan is to be found in the system of negotiated treaties or contracts called heer. On the primary level, heer linked several small domestic agnatic groups to one another for the corporate maintenance of camel herds, which formed the basis of all wealth. Cooperately, herds are jointly owned by the several agnatic groups joined by heer for the purposes of protection and the proper stock management of herds. A common brand is used by the agnatic groups thus joined in heer, called a diya brand (see Lewis I96I:72-74 andI6I-I74; and I962:367).

Such cooperately linked agnatic groups were responsible for the actions of their members vis a vis other such groups. That responsibility gives rise to further negotiated heer among such cooperate agnatic groups for the payment and collection of compensation should a tort arise involving

members of two different groups. That compensation is known as diya for the most serious crime of murder, thus giving rise to the term 'diya-paying group' to designate agnatic camel herding groups cooperately linked for the payment of diya, and of stock management.

Lewis leads us to believe that heer obligations were passed down and may indeed have developed the character of social custom for groups related to an abban or his diya paying group (see Lewis I96I:I6I and I93-I95). We should not be surprised that many travellers mention that abbans tended to be the same people engaged time and again (see Vanderhyme I897:I84; Swayne I895:359-360). In addition, it would appear that the role of abban was passed from father to son (see Burton I894:vol. I, p.5I; Maunier I908:785). This suggests that abbans and their descendents or affiliates may have formed a recognized group among the Issa that might be called the nuclear of a distinct class. To follow the suggestions of Eric Wolf (I956:I075), abbans may be viewed as economic and social 'brokers', "For they stand guard over the crucial junctures or synopses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole."

Abbans, through the general operations of magan, provided the possibility for transit across the Issa controlled Zeyla corridor. Through their individual contractural arrangements by heer, to specific agnatic diya paying camel herding groups, abbans provided the 'means of transport' for travellers and goods across the Zeyla corridor. Through a system of widely ramifying heer arrangements among diya paying groups, the economic benefits of participation in the market as transporters and specialized herders by some, could be redistributed to the Issa as a whole.

Djibouti and the Issa

Once the decision had been taken in Paris to occupy and

develop Djibouti as regional rival to Aden, French activities at Djibouti were aimed
- at expanding regional wide production in the highlands;
- on focusing the flow of that production on the new port.

Key to both goals would be the construction of the Djibouti - Harar (Dira-Daoua) - Addis Ababa railroad.

During the period I892 - I897, before construction of the line began, the Issa served the new port as transporters just as they continued to do for the ancient port of Zeyla (see BCAF:Nov. I895). Initial construction of the line further intensified Issa participation in the regional economy as transporters, while laying the ground work for their eventual transformation and marginalization.

The line of construction chosen between Djibouti and Dire-Daoua, for a distance of 3II kms, run along the northern edge of the Issa controlled steppe corridor. As the line progressed, the Issa were first called upon to provide carriage of such items as could be loaded on camels for use at the construction sites along the line. These items might include water, food and amenities for the work crews as well as materials to be used in actual construction such as fire wood or coal, oil canisters, stone, lumber and lighter iron and steel equipment (see BCAF: Nev. and Dec. I899).

Though it is certain that the Issa participated in the construction effort as 'carriers', it is less certain to what extent they actually labored in the work crews along the line. There are indications that the French contracted for significant numbers of laborers on the Aden market (see BCAF I902 supplement:48-5I), and thus that Indians would have made up a good portion of that labor.

As the line advanced and new wells were sunk along the line for the use of mobil foundaries during construction and later for the use of the trains' engines that required water for their steam generators, the government and the 'Compagnie' encouraged the Issa to settle near and use these

wells for their herds of camels and sheep and goats (see Deschamps I948:79). It is significant that the French did not encourage the Afar to do the same.

The French, long aware of the rivalry between the Afar and the Issa, signified their policy of reliance on the Issa for the advance of the line and its security by the construction of a line of forts to the north of the railroad line for the express purpose of marking a separation between the two groups (see de la Rue I939:I8-I9). The railroad would thus be operated within lands solely occupied by the Issa.

It must be presumed that once the rail line was sufficiently advanced, it would pick up more and more of its own needs for the transport of materials used along the line of construction. While thus lessening Issa effort in the direct needs of the line's construction, the line's advance provided a new opportunity for the Issa as transporters. Due to financial difficulties that beset the 'Compagnie' from the outset, the 'Compagnie' began as soon as I900/I90I to organize camel caravans between Harar and slowly advancing line (see BCAF I902 supplement:48-5I). In addition, the government of the Cote francaise des Somalis (CFA) instituted a prohibitive tax structure at Djibouti that penalized camel-borne commerce arriving directly in Djibouti in order to force such commerce onto the rail line as it advanced towards Harar (see BCAF August I903:259).

The astounding jump in exports between I900 and I90I from the port marks the inauguration of Issa camel traffic linking the advancing line to Harar. The value of exports in francs in I900 was just under 700.000. By I90I, the value of exports was close to 7.000.000 francs.[10] It will be remembered that I900/I90I also marks the beginning of the collapse of the trade at Zeyla. The near doubling of exports for Djibouti in I903 over I902, marks the final joining of Dira-Daoua by direct rail to Djibouti. The rising figures for

I904 and I905 represent the final absorption by the railroad of the commercial traffic once carried across the corridor by the Issa. By I905 the value of exports was over I8.000.000 francs.

The effect on the Issa of the arrival of the railroad at Dira-Daoua must have been dramatic. The production of Harar was now loaded directly from Galla mules onto the cars of a train that made the trip daily with passengers and goods. The financial loss to those abbans and diya paying camel herding units that had most participated in the transport business and had thereby increased herds of male burden camels, must have been considerable. Presumably the Issa would have been aware of this in advance and thus must have prepared alternatives.

It was to the expanding operations and activities of Djibouti that many Issa must have turned in order to escape an inevitable rise in unemployment for many no longer employed in the transport business. The success of French efforts to attract the Issa to the new permanent wells of the rail line is attested by many travellers taking the train (Blundell I906:529; Deschamps I948:48-50). This must be viewed as evidence of a shift in herding strategy towards more sheep and goats and fewer male burden camels as would be expected. Conditions were in fact ripe for the entry of the Issa into the business of producing such stock for consumption at Djibouti and Aden. Certainly the rail authorities did all they could to encourage such production early on in order to get traffic onto the faltering line (see BCAF I902 supplement and I905 supplement).

Still, the redistribution of herding emphasis away from male burden camels towards more she-camels and sheep and goats could only absorb so many. Presumably others would 'go to the port' as had long been usual for the Somali in general. It has been widely recognized that the Somali often took work on ships and abroad through the Aden labor market,

only to return later with his savings to buy herds and retire to the homeland and relations (see Lewis I96I:32). It is therefore likely that the same thing happened with regard to the growing labor market of Djibouti.

Deschamps (I948:50) mentions the Issa abbans as having become shopkeepers for the commercial houses of the Greeks and Armenians. Other Issa worked in the menial services of the town, its railroad yards and port, alongside other Somali and Arabs that gravitated to the port. Important transient elements of Issa 'bedowin' came in from the steppe to visit relations, and carry on business selling livestock or brush for firewood (see Deschamps I948:66-67; de la Rue I939:I5-I7).

The proportion of increasingly sedentarized Issa as compared to those remaining in the pastoral sector is impossible to say from these sources. The extent to which elements of the Issa became only partially settled, returning intermittantly to the interior and allowing a brother or kin to enter service in town through a web of agnatic and cooperate diya group relations needs to be studied. Those Issa at work in town might earn the money to buy a flock of sheep, goats and she-camels, that would be held by diya relations in the interior, only to return to the interior and hand his job over to a relation.

In this way, activity at Djibouti may have served to protect and stabilize a pastoral economy that was faced with a dramatic shift in the terms of its participation in the wider regional economy. Djibouti operated then as a safety valve for excess Issa population that in former times would have been employed in the transport business or forced further afield onto the labor market at Aden.

FOOTNOTES

I A sampling of such examples is found in Bohannan/Dalton (eds.) I962.

2 Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, cf. The Cambridge History of Africa, vol. I, p. 373. For a wide-ranging discussion of other evidences for a much older relationship, cf. Toussaint (I96I).

3 Bulletin du Comite d'Afrique Francaise (BCAF), I90I supplement, p. 72-74. The articles in this journal are generally anonymous and untitled.

4 BCR (I892:no.I208). Vanderhyme gives a chilling description of the effects of those years at Addis Ababa in Le Tour de Monde (I896).

5 BCR (I90I:no. 2742, p. 6). Confirmation of this pattern is to be found in the comments of virtually all the BCRs.

6 Based on figures from BCR nos. I208, I305, I5I4, 2384, 2545, 2742, 2948, and 332I.

7 BCR (I897:no. I924, table B; and I900: no. 253I, p. I4)

8 see Gleichen (I898), cf. appendix B "Composition of Caravan on leaving Zeyla".

9 see Gleichen (I898), appendix C "Itinenary of the Road"; Vivian (I90I:65-66); Burton (I894:65,90,93-I07).

IO Figures from BCAF supplement I90I, p. 72; supplement I902, p. I83; Juin I903, p. I92; Mars I906, p. 79; Juin I906, p. I67.

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