

# Across the Red Sea: Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire in Diplomatic Transition (1500s–1800s)

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This article studies how relations between Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire developed, from fighting during the 16th century to working together in the 19th century. It shows how the events taking place in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, disputes related to religion, and ambitions to expand by nearby empires led to clashes between the Christian Ethiopian Empire and the Muslim Ottoman-backed Adal Sultanate. Following this, the discussion considers how those interactions came to be practical diplomacy, with Sultan Abdulhamid II's time seeing the Ottomans interact more with Ethiopia as a result of European actions in the region. Beginning with an analysis of the strategic importance of Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire in the context of global trade and power dynamics, the study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on a rich array of primary sources. Diplomatic relations take center stage as the research examines the agreements, alliances, conflicts and key personalities that shaped the course of Ethiopian-Ottoman relations.

Based on chronicles from Ethiopia, documents from the Ottoman Empire, and accounts from the Western, the article explains that rivalry and common interest both shaped Ottoman and Ethiopian relations. It further explains Northeast African politics and places the historically imperfect Ethiopian-Ottoman relationship in a larger context of Christian-Muslim diplomacy and global rivalry during that time period.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia–Ottoman Relations, Red Sea Geopolitics, Islamic–Christian Diplomacy, Horn of Africa History and Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of the interactions between the ancient Christian Empire of Ethiopia and the emerging Ottoman Empire in the 16th-19th centuries, and on the other side the Red Sea was more of a game of intrigues, vicissitudes, and a complex relationship. The two powers were not at all mutually independent, as the sea route of the Red Sea was closely tied to both and could even be seen as a point of rivalry in political and religious domination. It was the era of the diplomatic shift during which, in the constantly fluctuating geopolitical environment, the two empires alternated between direct confrontation, tenuous peace and surprising alliances, whilst at the same time competing with internal issues and with the emergence of other actors on the international scene. Their contacts also provide a rich perspective on the wider history of East Africa, Middle East and transitional global order in this formative era. (Orhonlu, 1996)

Historically, people have mostly framed the connection

between Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire as a religious conflict and an imperial rivalry. Ethiopia's contacts with its Muslim neighbors were originally diplomatic in the 16th century, when Ottoman fleets appeared on the Red Sea and fought a war against Ethiopia with the Adal Sultanate. The conquest of places like Massawa and Suakin by the Ottoman Empire, with its help to Muslim states, rendered Ethiopia's position and religion unsafe. However, with the rise of European colonial powers that threatened both sides, Ethiopia and their Muslim accomplices were forced more than ever to talk and negotiate. (zewde, 2001)

The piece is divided into four chapters and reports on this diplomatic pre-history. It begins by establishing why the Red Sea was a major thoroughfare for trade in the 16th century. The second explores the effect of the Ottoman-Adal alliance on the sovereignty of Ethiopia. The third chapter takes on the 17th and 18th centuries, where there were less direct confrontations between the Ottomans and Ethiopia, and communication was approached differently as well. The last chapter centred



on Abdulhamid II's rule, speaking about how the Ottomans got increasingly involved in Ethiopia as a result of European imperial pressure. Drawing on data from the Ethiopian royal chronicles, Turkish records and European travel accounts, this article demonstrates how diplomatic links between the two empires evolved in response to shifts in political, religious and trade concerns. By including many different perspectives in the story, we see a more complex picture of the past, and we correct the mistakes where Eurocentric scholars dismissed or overlooked the central roles of African and Middle Eastern people in gradational consolidations of international politics in the 1600s.

## **Chapter I: Geopolitical Context of Northeast Africa and the Red Sea Region in the 16th Century**

In the sixteenth century, there were important reforms in the political structures of northeastern Africa and the Red Sea. It was a world in which the Ottoman, the Portuguese and the Safavid empires competed fiercely for control of the vital sea routes and local authorities, or used force to seize it. The Red Sea, by connecting the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, was at the heart of imperial strategy. (Pankhurst, 1997 pp,112-115) Massawa and Tigray were Historic highways to the Red Sea and Ethiopia's influence was becoming increasingly felt as rivalries among the countries around the sea began to take form. Sultan Selim I added control south of the Red Sea to the Ottoman Empire and over these ports he extended Ottoman control in 1517 by occupying Egypt through ties between the Ottomans and Egyptians (Özbaran, 1994, p. 120). The Ottoman Empire had its fleet on the Red Sea the reasons were military and religious issue.

They attempted to safeguard the Mecca pilgrimage routes and to challenge Portuguese activities in the Indian Ocean using such well-known admirals as Hadim Suleiman Pasha and Piri Reis (Hess, 1970). With these changes, Ethiopia had both hazards and new opportunities. The Ethiopian highland kingdom had always fought the Islamic sultanates on its border; now, with the Ottoman Empire suddenly at its doorstep, it had a far greater challenge in its path (Trimingham, 1965). Due to Ottoman support for the Adal Sultanate, the following year several Catholic missions were sent to Ethiopia with Portuguese diplomats, including Cristóvão da Gama, as well as members of Portuguese missionaries, presided over by the Patriarch of Ethiopia (Shihab ad-Din Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Qadir, 1897 pp, 58-62). Ethiopia was thus plunged into a broader struggle between Christian and Muslim empires.

Consequently, the geopolitics in the Red Sea influenced neighboring countries and pulled Ethiopia into the wider battles between Christian and Muslim forces across many continents. Similarly, the Horn of Africa played a crucial role in a war involving African kingdoms, Middle Eastern, and European powers. Due to multiple Muslim states to its east and south, as well as Ottoman influence on its shores, Ethiopia struggled with greater isolation

(Deresse, 1967). Even so, it remained strong through the use of its rugged mountains, the influence of Orthodox Christianity, and maintaining friendships with distant allies.

In the 1550s, the Ottomans took Massawa, which was presented as safeguarding Muslim pilgrims and merchants, and so stopped Ethiopia from directly trading with Red Sea ports. (Özbaran, 1969.45-87).

Bahir Negash's administration made Massawa part of Christian Ethiopia, until the Ottomans took it over and ruled it with their own garrisons and administrators. This new strategy for controlling its coastline affected Ethiopia's economy and relationships with other countries for a long time. In the Habesh Eyalet (Province of Abyssinia), the Ottomans assigned the beylerbeylik military-administration to Suakin, so Massawa was included, as was the Dahlak Archipelago later on (Peacock, 2012, pp. 35-37).

Nevertheless, Ottoman authority over the rural regions was not very strong. Their power was usually limited to the coast, and any attempts to conquer the highlands were stopped by Ethiopians. Leaders in Ethiopia, such as Emperor Galawdewos (r. 1540–1559), began to negotiate with Europeans in order to address the possible threat of the Ottoman Empire, thereby placing Ethiopia in the system of early modern world diplomacy. (Budge, 1928)

In brief, geopolitical matters in Northeast Africa and the Red Sea region in the 16th century involved countries with overlapping territorial aims, fights over the sea, and conflicts due to religion. Being strategically located, Ethiopia played a major role in the rivalry between the Ottomans and the Portuguese for control of the Red Sea. Ottoman expansion put Ethiopia in a tough position, but it also led to Ethiopia's first steps in foreign diplomacy, which would develop further down the line.

## **Chapter II: The Ottoman–Adal Alliance and Early Conflicts with Ethiopia**

The 16th century began just like the past century had ended, with the Ethiopian-Adal War, a period of numerous armed conflicts between Christian Ethiopia and the Muslim Adal Sultanate in the Horn of Africa, including the Ethiopian–Adal War and the Battle of Shimbra Kure . The Ottomans were strong on the Red Sea coast at the time and both the Muslim rulers and the Ottomans sought to attack and weaken Christian Ethiopia. Ethiopians on the other hand enjoyed one of the most disastrous chapters of their history: the cooperation between the Ottomans and the Adal Sultanate and then with Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (Ahmad Gragn). (Sven Rubenson, 1976.,p44)

In the 1520s, Imam Ahmad fought the Ethiopian Empire out of sincere religious motivation and also strategies for power. With the help of cannons, firearms, and smart military personnel from the Ottomans, Imam Ahmad was able to lead Adal forces to win many battles against Ethiopia and take control of important areas, including challenging the capital city. As a result of these advancements, the Christian empire turned to Portugal

and, by doing so, brought in European powers to balance the situation created by the Ottoman-supported Muslim army. (Shaw, J. M. 2021).

The Ottomans were involved in the conflict mainly for strategic reasons, not only to serve Islam. The Ottomans hoped that helping Adal would give them more clout inland and damage Christian Ethiopia as well as its allies from Europe. The presence of Ottoman troops in Massawa and nearby places helped Adal receive logistic and weapon materials while also declaring Ottoman rule over the Red Sea area. Zeila became an important military base for Adal because it was protected by the Ottoman Empire and helped Adal get arms and bring in Arab and ottomans fighters (Özbaran, 1994).

Because of splits among the Ethiopians and their lack of knowledge in firing weapons and using artillery, the military could not respond effectively. Nevertheless, the problem was partially solved when Cristóvão da Gama's Portuguese troops arrived in Ethiopia in 1541. Having guns and experience in fight tactics, these troops played a key part in deciding the outcome of the war. Many bloody battles took place, ending with Imam Ahmad's death from the Battle of Wayna Daga in 1543. (Abir, 1978)

Ahmad Gragn's death did not stop the Ottomans and Adal from continuing to threaten the area. The Ottomans tried to conquer areas north of Massawa and Debarwa, which led to frequent conflicts with local leaders such as Bahr Negash Yeshaq. Strong opposition from the Christians made Ottoman efforts to keep their influence at the Christian-Muslim frontier difficult, which caused many wars and territories that went back and forth. It was in the 1550s that Ottoman soldiers built a fortification in the Debarwa area, but a fight with Ethiopian troops and various challenges caused them to step back. (Erlich, 1994)

At that time, proxy warfare changed the way fighting was conducted in Northeast Africa. Even though the Ottomans did not get involved in major battles inside Ethiopia, they regularly supported Muslims in the area who were against the empire. As a result, they managed to deceive European critics, continue to develop the region, and present their power globally. Although these countries' military was not strong enough to widely occupy the region, they had an ongoing presence that changed the area's power structure for years. (Özbaran, 1994; Tütüncü, 2001). The Ottoman-Adal alliance changed the political landscape in the region. It pushed Ethiopia to adapt its military systems, turned the Red Sea into a significant political divide, and showed the Ottoman Empire's dream of expanding against the rule of Christian African states. Ottomans, Ethiopians, and Europeans would constantly reconsider their diplomatic and military strategies, influenced by the early clashes.

### **Chapter III: The Evolution of Relations in the 17th and 18th Centuries**

After the wars of the sixteenth century, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the manner in which Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire both

communicated and attempted to influence one other changed and increased. And while battles and land seizures continued, leaders of the two former enemies started focusing on cooperation, working together, even managing to conduct, negotiate and settle agreements over their relationships. Both factors at internal and abroad weighed on the transformation of these empires

All that happened in the early 1600s when both of the Ottoman and Ethiopian governments fundamentally changed their foreign policy. Although the Ottomans were also fighting campaigns in other parts of Europe and the Arabian Peninsula, during this period Ethiopia was being consolidated under emperors such as Susenyos (1607–1632). Both Ethiopia and Eritrea also turned to local leaders and allies instead of opposing each other directly in Tigray and the highlands (Yimer & Chekole, 2022).

Emperor Susenyos's choice of Catholicism and his help for Jesuits in 1622 made the Ottomans and nearby Muslim sultanates want to study the situation in Ethiopia. Though they did not join the fighting, the Ottomans remained cautious about the Jesuits since they believed the priests represented Europe's influence in the region. The Ottomans increased the strength of Massawa and Suakin and made an effort to keep their connection with Ethiopia smooth and respectful (Cohen, 2009.).

By the 17th century, people depended on trading to have more interactions with each other. Much of the economic activity in the Red Sea was linked to ivory, gold, and slave trade which were possible in Ottoman ports. Traders from Ethiopia, mostly from the north, would usually reach Massawa using deal arrangements with Ottoman or Beja officials. (Tadesse, 1972)

Even though they were mainly trading, these links required both sides to understand each other for differently than what had happened during earlier wars. The exact influence of the Dahlak Archipelago and Massawa port on geopolitical matters was not settled. Throughout the time, Ethiopian kings tried to manage trade routes and sea areas, though the Ottomans' powerful navy prevented them. Iyasu I (who ruled between 1682 and 1706) as well as several other emperors worked to keep up friendly relations with the Ottomans, sending people to talk about trading, swapping prisoners, and resolving religious matters for Muslims in Ethiopia. These diplomatic acts led to a shift in attention away from conflicts in the early sixteenth century and toward communicating with others instead. (Doğan, S. 2019)

After the 1700s started in Ethiopia, the Zemene Mesafint gave rise to many regional warlords as authority was no longer held by emperors alone. Since the central authority was reduced, people at the local level could engage in both fighting and peaceful partnerships. There were a lot of local diplomacy and border skirmishes in coastal and frontier areas, which were usually out of the imperial centers' control (Abir, M.,1966.)

Bahr Negash, the governor in the northern region, and Ottoman administrators in Massawa are a key case of how relations could shift between Ethiopian officials and



Ottoman administrators in the region. From time to time, these people exchanged goods and messages in diplomacy; at other times, they fought and argued over taxes. Efforts by the Ottomans to conquer higher regions in Ethiopia were stopped due to poor organization and disagreements within the two empires. This brought about a fragile balance in the Red Sea basin, which mostly kept holding by accidental happenings rather than being guided by firm intentions. (Yimer & Chekole, 2022, p. 60)

The time between the 17th and 18th centuries brought big changes to the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Ethiopia. Because of wars and ambitious expansion in the last century, the attitude of leaders shifted so that they worked together more, supported efforts for stability, and used practical diplomatic methods. Since both nations had to face challenges inside and outside, as their suspicion of each other grew, they had to begin formal diplomatic talks in the 19th century. (Yimer & Chekole, 2022, p. 66).

#### **Chapter IV: Diplomacy under Sultan Abdulhamid II and the Late Ottoman Period**

From the late 1800s, the way Ottomans and Ethiopia were connected developed, French and British superpowers were rivaling, the importance of the Red Sea became obvious, and Emperor Menelik II brought renewed strength to Ethiopia. The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II tried to balance his goal of expansion with the duty to defend the Horn of Africa regions. At this stage, Ottoman Empire tried to arrange talks and correspondence with Ethiopia on borders and trade matters.

When the late 1800s arrived, European countries started showing interest in the Horn and Red Sea regions of Africa. Great Britain took over Egypt in 1882, France got Djibouti, and Italy started arming forces in Eritrea in the mid-1880s. Even so, the Ottomans and Ethiopians had different reactions to these changes. Because they feared Europe's expanding influence, the Ottomans were concerned that European nations would take over their territories Massawa and Suakin. Those nations that colonized Ethiopia could control its freedom and also interfere with the country's access to the coast. Although enemies in the past, the two nations teamed up for a particular reason and this is what made them start talking ( Deringil,1998)

The effects of Sultan Abdulhamid II's pan-Islamic policies can be seen in the changed attitudes of the Ottomans about Ethiopia. Before pan-Islamism, the Ottomans saw Ethiopia in religious and strategic terms, but this changed once pan-Islamism became a leading ideology for the empire. Officials from the Hijaz and Yemen were ordered by the Ottomans to stay friendly with Muslim groups in Ethiopia and to avoid triggering disputes along the border. Instead of using force, Ottoman rulers wanted to influence East Africa by developing cultural and religious ties there ( Karpat. 2001)

One of the best examples of this period's diplomacy is in the letters between Sultan Abdulhamid II and Emperor

Menelik II. After Ethiopian success at Adwa against Italy in 1896, Abdulhamid II commended Menelik for the Ethiopian people's success in resisting European imperialism. While there was no formal acceptance of Ethiopia as equal to the Ottoman Empire, this step showed greater respect between the two sides. Menelik accepted to work together on matters such as trade, keeping the region safe, and ensuring the rights of Muslims in Ethiopia. (Sarinay 2001)

Their role became more significant at this time. Since the Ottoman consulate in Massawa was mainly involved in trade, it began sending regular updates on Ethiopian politics and what European countries were doing nearby. In response, Ethiopian officials talked to Ottoman agents to make sure that pilgrims, merchants, and envoys could travel safely. Even though the two empires had different ambitions, their ways of negotiating kept tensions in check and encouraged understanding between them. (Yimer and Chekole 2022, 55)

Even so, the Ottomans were wary of Ethiopia's plan to regain control over the Red Sea coast area. The Ottoman Empire tried to avoid irritating Italy because a few Italian soldiers were still in Eritrea, even though the Ottoman navy's influence in Massawa was nearly gone by the 1880s. Such uncertainty in borders sometimes made things difficult with Ethiopia, especially as Menelik needed access to the sea for his nation's growing empire. (Ahmed, 1985, p. 89)

As Menelik II ruled in Ethiopia, the country was undergoing modernization. Building national projects, getting firearms from other nations, and participating in diplomacy in Europe and the Middle East raised Ethiopia's status in the international community. Menelik sent missions to Istanbul and welcomed Ottoman representatives in Addis Ababa to talk about trade, safety, and the people traveling to Mecca. The Ottomans hoped to give support to Muslim groups in Ethiopia and strengthen their support in the battling regions of the Horn of Africa (Tepedelen, K. 2007). At the beginning of the 20th century, the two nations' relationships became stable. Either side's preparation or ambition showed that it was likely to start a violent war. The countries advanced their goals by using talks, important actions, and signals that were not spoken. In the late 19th century, these two countries proved they were able to react calmly to world events.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The fact is that Ethiopia's diplomatic relationship with the Ottoman Empire is characterised by two phases in which they were in cooperation at one stage and in conflict at the other. The seeds of the Red Sea conflict were sown in the early 16th century through cautious diplomatic exchanges in which both empires vied for control of the Red Sea region. Although Ottoman expansionist and conquering ambitions clashed with Ethiopia's defence of its sovereignty, Ottoman and European powers sometimes allied with each other against Portuguese incursions, as in the "Ethiopian-Adal war".



The treaties and embassy missions analysed show that Ottoman policy shifted throughout the 18th century from direct military intervention towards more diplomatic relations. Ethiopian diplomacy also adapted by balancing Ottoman pressure with coalitions of local powers and other regional powers.

The study underlines the important role played by foreign actors, notably the Portuguese and Egyptians, whose competing interests further complicated the Ethiopian-Ottoman equation and the political map of the Red Sea.

The article offers a contribution to the historiography of early modern Northeast African diplomacy, moving beyond classic militarist accounts to stress diplomacy and statecraft. By focusing on the observed diplomatic junctures, the complex interplay between imperial designs and local actors that contributed to moderate emerging dynamics in regional stability, and historical development are highlighted.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between Ethiopia and the Ottoman Empire in the period from the 16th to the 19th century first involved conflicts and then moved to careful collaboration. Although the Ottoman Empire had alliances with Adal Sultanate in conflicts near the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, at the start, the pair's connection was influenced mostly by fighting and religious differences. Nevertheless, over time, the relationship transformed into more structured and practical exchanges once both countries noticed they had similar geopolitical interests in battling European growth and safeguarding the area. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the empires got a chance to adjust their methods in the region as they faced pressure from both within and outside the region. Although they did not interact often, the period set up conditions for better diplomatic relations with less hostility and more awareness between the countries. Although there was no war, this situation allowed both Muslims and Christians from these countries to live together and understand each other better.

Following the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th century, relations between countries shifted in a new way. Sharing the same objectives because of their different situations brought them closer. Meanwhile, exchanging greetings and messages of goodwill, as well as cooperating as consulates, showed that countries respected the standing and validity of one another. Abdul Hamid's time as sultan came with many challenges, and yet he made efforts to keep his region under control, and honor Ethiopia's independence and manage borders without conflict. Basically, the development of the Ethiopia-Ottoman ties displayed the wider features of diplomacy between Africa and the Middle East during imperial times. Both countries relied on their tradition, religion, and modern interests when making foreign policy. The fact that Ethiopia could avoid colonization by relying on clever diplomacy with both Ottoman and European peers made it stand out as an unusual independent African nation. In the same way, the Ottomans were able to alter their relations with Ethiopia

and show they had diplomatic skills during a time of empire retreat. As a result, we can see that diplomacy in Northeast Africa is much more detailed than we might have thought. It reveals that Islamic empires and Christian kingdoms had diplomatic and strategy-based dealings along with their conflicts. The way Ottoman-Ethiopian relations developed is a proof that sharing ideas among different cultures is possible in times of religious and imperial tensions.

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